

# The Sorcerer

## The Crucial Collaboration

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In spite of all the evidence that the 1877 première of *The Sorcerer* had been (in D'Oyly Carte's words) "unprecedentedly successful," Sullivan's recollection at the distance of more than fifteen years was that the reception of the opera had been mixed. In his manuscript of autobiographical notes prepared about 1893 for the use of an early biographer, Charles Willeby, the composer recorded that "the style of the entertainment was so novel, that people did not understand it at first, and the opera was only fairly successful."

In fact, the reviews of the original production were all but unanimous in their extravagant praise of the new opera. (The strongest objections were raised in *The Figaro*, a francophile magazine that was never to accord the Savoy Operas any generosity, the jaded reviewer of which might have been on Ko-Ko's "little list" as "The idiot who praises, with enthusiastic tone, All centuries but this, and every country but his own.") In a chorus of acclamation, the reviewers appreciated not only the quality of the new opera but also the significance of that moment in the history of the musical theatre.

They also reported on the enthusiastic public reception accorded *The Sorcerer*. In his memoirs, the music critic Hermann Klein recalled "the series of tremendous ovations" that accompanied the fall of the final curtain: "I had seldom witnessed anything to equal it, and no one witnessing it then could possibly have dreamt that there was to be a repetition of the same tableau, with the same enthusiasm more or less, every year for twenty years to come."

Indeed, a number of those early reviews suggested that this first earnest collaboration of the men who were already England's most celebrated dramatist and composer was widely viewed as a purposeful attempt to establish a tradition of light opera in England. Not that this had not been attempted in the past: certainly there had been a long and varied tradition of British musical theater, from the plays with songs of the time of Charles Dibdin, to the operas of Michael William Balfe, which were still seen on the British stage, to the pantomimes, extravaganzas and burlesques in which songs were interpolated in comic verse plays. But there was no native tradition to compete either with continental opera or with continental operetta, and it can be said that the British musical establishment was fairly fixated on this circumstance.

One of the figures who early sought to support original English comic opera was Thomas German Reed, whose Royal Gallery of Illustration presented short comic chamber operas from many British composers, including Sullivan, and librettists, including Gilbert. Another was Carl Rosa, impresario of a highly regarded and influential opera company whose repertory tended to the more grand and serious. A third was Richard D'Oyly Carte, the son

of a flautist, music publisher, and instrument maker, who had earlier abandoned intentions as a composer to become a promoter of musical performances and an agent for singers, instrumentalists, actors, and conductors.

Carte's first professional connection with Gilbert or Sullivan came in 1875, when he was employed as the manager of the Royalty Theatre under the tenancy of the soprano Selina Dolaro, whose company was producing a season of French *opéra bouffe* — then extremely popular in London, both in the original language and in translation. To fill out the generous theatrical evenings that were typical of that time, it was usual for the main piece to be preceded and followed by shorter pieces, often more broadly humorous, but generally more simply produced — typically with single sets, small casts, modern dress, and no chorus.

Carte's rôle in the Royalty Theatre company appears to be more administrative than clerical, for it was he who approached and commissioned Gilbert and Sullivan to provide a new opera — *Trial by Jury* — as a companion piece for Offenbach's *La Périchole*, then playing at the Royalty. *Trial by Jury* was not typical of the Victorian "curtain raisers," requiring a full cast, including chorus, and an elaborate set, and featuring a libretto without a single word of spoken dialogue. Its immediate success was to become legendary, and it has remained one of the most popular of the Gilbert and Sullivan series, not least because it has often been paired in performance with many of the other Savoy operas.

But while *Trial by Jury* can be said to have led directly to the rest of the Gilbert and Sullivan collaborations, there are important ways in which it differs from the others — all of which have more highly developed plots, characterizations, and scenic color, and, of course, spoken dialogue — and especially they differ in scale, for *Trial by Jury* is scarcely three quarters of an hour in length.

Nonetheless, this success led Carte to look upon Gilbert and Sullivan as the ideal combination to test the viability of English comic opera. This was no less than the main chance for English operetta. It was unlikely that a more popular or more gifted librettist or composer would appear, and the first test piece had been full of promise. Moreover — and this was no minor consideration — Gilbert and Sullivan had worked together willingly and cordially, they were interested in the enterprise, and each of them approached his craft in an efficient, painstaking, businesslike, and practical manner; in other words, they both were dependable, and dependability was not so common a trait among writers as a manager might wish.

The chief drawback to Carte was that Gilbert and Sullivan's businesslike approach extended to the financial arrangements. In Carte they had an able, dedicated, and honest associate; but they nevertheless engaged in prolonged negotiations before they would consent to write a full-length work. Both Gilbert and Sullivan wrote for a living, not as an avocation, and from early experience each had learned the valuable lesson that writers and composers were vulnerable to exploitation by managers and publishers. In order to profit

from their works they required to be paid a portion of the receipts, and to protect themselves against the risk of financial failure they insisted on a guaranteed minimum advance.

Carte, whose artists' agency was growing successfully (though perhaps not to the extent described in his extravagant advertising brochures), was nonetheless unable to meet their firm demands, until, in mid-1877, he was able to inform the collaborators that he had assembled a company of investors who would produce the opera and guarantee the work's initial run of 100 performances. Carte's partners put up the money, and he served as managing partner. The syndicate was known as the Comedy Opera Company (Limited).

Gilbert chose as the basis of his libretto a prose piece of his own that had appeared the previous Christmas in the newspaper *The Graphic*. Called "The Elixir of Love" — Donizetti's famous opera *L'Elisir d'Amore* would have come immediately to his readers' minds — the story centered around a kindly and idealistic young clergyman, the Rev. Stanley Gay, who wrought havoc among his parishioners by administering to them a "love-at-first-sight-philtre" in order to counteract the prejudices of class with regard to love and marriage. In Gilbert's expanded libretto, the elixir is administered by the idealistic but callous bridegroom and his trusting bride, Alexis and Aline, at their wedding tea party, which is overseen by the kindly but amorously susceptible vicar, Dr. Daly.

The opera was originally to have been produced early in the autumn of 1877, but as late as mid-August Sullivan had not yet begun to compose the score — he had other commissions to fulfill, and he was suffering from the kidney stones that plagued him from time to time throughout his life. Several times delayed, the opera was finally to open on Saturday, November 17th.

Sullivan was to recall "the great difficulty of finding artists who could both sing and act." The resulting cast — which was praised by the first-night critics as almost uniformly excellent — represented both experienced stagers and neophytes. The veterans included Mrs. Howard Paul, playing the part of the elderly Lady Sangazure, mother of the bride-to-be, prototype of the Gilbertian contralto "dame" — a type not present in *Trial by Jury*. It is interesting that no character in *The Sorcerer* is treated unsympathetically — there is no King Gama or Katisha or Sir Joseph Porter. Even the insensitive Alexis and the self-absorbed vicar meet the happiest of ends; and although the same cannot be said of the tradesmanlike sorcerer, John Wellington Wells, he is treated throughout with comical deference and affection. Gilbert already had a reputation for sharp satire and pointed characterization, and for expressing cynical views of social institutions, and several critics remarked approvingly on the comparatively good-natured humor of *The Sorcerer*.

The cast included several other veterans of opera and theatrical companies, including the tenor George Bentham as Alexis and the baritone Richard Temple as Alexis's father, Sir Marmaduke Pointdextre. (Temple was to become one of the Gilbert and Sullivan mainstays,

eventually to create many leading parts including Dick Deadeye and the Mikado.) But it is significant that several of the principal rôles were filled by newcomers to the stage. Sullivan had met George Grossmith — who was to become the most famous of all Savoyards — as an after-dinner entertainer, a “Society Clown” (to use the title of Grossmith’s memoirs) whose one-man programs of original comedy sketches and songs, in which he accompanied himself on the piano, were popular at society drawing-room gatherings. Grossmith had not taken part in stage productions and he had nothing like an operatic voice, and he regarded Sullivan’s call as a golden opportunity: Grossmith’s autograph album preserves conspicuously the letter from Sullivan inviting him to “go on the stage for a time.”

The young Rutland Barrington’s upbringing as the son of a clergyman may have prepared him for the rôle of the vicar Dr. Daly, but his stage career was just beginning, and he might not have been considered if Mrs. Paul had not stipulated in her contract that he was to be offered a part in the new opera as well. (Mrs. Paul had also written to Grossmith, “under any circumstances, and at some sacrifice, do not fail to accept the part of the “magician” in Gilbert and Sullivan’s new play ... it will be a new and magnificent introduction for you, and be of great service afterwards.”) The prospects were so heady for the future stars that on November 5th they celebrated their engagement with after-dinner fireworks in Mrs. Paul’s back garden. (Unfortunately, Mrs. Paul was not to reap the same rewards as her protégés. Her part in *The Sorcerer* was cut down, presumably because her voice did not prove adequate, and she was pointedly omitted from the cast of *H.M.S. Pinafore* in favor of the newcomer Jesse Bond, whose portrayal of the small part of Cousin Hebe was to launch a brilliant career as the favorite Savoy soubrette.)

The syndicate made possible the production of *The Sorcerer*, which ran a remarkable course of 178 performances (to be greatly exceeded, however, by the operas yet to come). One of the four directors was George Metzler, head of the music publishing firm of Metzler and Co. Not surprisingly, Metzler’s presence on the board led to a separate, advantageous relationship between that firm and the partners for the publication of the score and libretto. Metzler’s partner Frank Chappell — not connected with the rival publishing company Chappell and Co., though he was related to the family — was also a director of the syndicate. The third was Augustus Collard Drake, another Metzler officer. The fourth, the most unlikely and ultimately the most difficult, was one Edward H. Bayley, popularly known as “Watercart” Bayley, for the platoon of horse-drawn water tanks bearing his name that sprinkled water on the unpaved London streets in order to keep down the dust.

Carte, the only active partner, had been responsible for attracting the investors and for securing an agreement with Gilbert and Sullivan; it was he who had leased the Opera Comique Theatre, and who had formed the company of artists and was responsible for the management of both the company and the theatre. The other directors, led by Bayley, were motivated solely by the financial reports, and not, like Gilbert, Sullivan, and Carte, by a more enlightened realization that attention to production values was also likely to serve the ends

of profit. It was invariably Carte who mediated between Gilbert and Sullivan and the directors; so when, in mid-1879, during the run of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, his contract with the directors expired, Carte was able to wrest away from the syndicate control of the theatre and the company, and thereafter the operas were produced under his own name — “Mr. D’Oyly Carte’s Opera Company.” It has been this company, albeit through several reorganizations, that continued over more than a century to perpetuate the Gilbert and Sullivan tradition.

*The Sorcerer* may be regarded as the crucial Gilbert and Sullivan collaboration — indeed, as a crucial event in the history of English musical theater. *Trial by Jury* had been a one-off lark, a brief encounter not intended as a lasting business enterprise, so its potential for success was not considered to be predictive of the success of an idea; indeed, it had appeared unexpectedly to the London public, and in fact it had faded away prematurely as a direct result of the illness and death of Fred Sullivan, the composer’s brother, who played the Judge so successfully.

But *The Sorcerer* was widely regarded, in the press as well as by the three collaborators, as a test of the potential for original English opera. The *London Daily News*, for example, reported that “the production of the new opera has been for some time looked forward to with much interest,” and that the result had “fulfilled the most sanguine anticipations.” Had it not been a success, Gilbert, Sullivan, and Carte would likely have gone their separate ways, and the course of musical theater might have been forever changed: it is conceivable that the term “comic opera” might never have been coined; it is certain that the Savoy Operas would never have been created. In *The Sorcerer* we see the origins of many of the trademarks that characterized the entire series: emphasis on choruses and ensembles; musical numbers that grow out of and advance the plot; parodies of theatrical and musical stereotypes; satires on the foibles of society; an insistence on naturalness in acting, singing, and staging; and an absence of broad or crude humor.

But this opera today should not be regarded solely as a precursor to the operas that followed, a harbinger of the Gilbert and Sullivan heyday. The “dear old Sorcerer” (as it was called by a *Punch* writer twenty years after its first production) was revived twice by D’Oyly Carte in the nineteenth century, both times with great success; and when the D’Oyly Carte opera company became a repertory company, *The Sorcerer* was a regular item in the provincial tours and the London seasons alike, until the sets were destroyed in the bombing of London in June 1939. It was a remarkable artistic achievement, a novel and highly entertaining theatrical piece, full of Sullivan’s best music and Gilbert’s best characters, lyrics, dialogue, and plot, whose very name could be depended on to fill a theater. It deserves an honored place in the annals of opera and in the hearts of opera lovers.

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