

# Gilbert and Sullivan



## Their Legacy and Influence

It's the hot London summer of 1879. *HMS Pinafore*, the fourth collaboration between Gilbert and Sullivan, (G&S) the third for Richard D'Oyly Carte (Carte) and the first under their new three-way partnership is now playing successfully after a slow start due to the hot weather. Following increased interest since Sullivan's introduction of *Pinafore* to the London summer Proms audience, its popularity soars and the musical score soon sells 800,000 copies. Gilbert, and to perhaps a lesser extent Sullivan, are preparing their next production, *The Slave of Duty*, later to become *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Ambitious theatrical agent and now equal partner Richard D'Oyly Carte sails for New York aboard the *SS Bothnia* on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1879 in order to investigate the potential level of interest in America for this new, middle-class musical entertainment, comic opera, and in *HMS Pinafore* in particular. He must have been dismayed and yet encouraged by the fact that on arrival in New York he finds there are eight productions of *Pinafore* already playing around Broadway and six in Philadelphia, none of these to the high standard of the London production. One production in New York has an all-male cast. There is no international copyright and the enthusiasm for *Pinafore* has preceded Carte in these pirated productions. Carte meets with New York theatre owners, perhaps even including theatre owner Oscar Hammerstein I whose organisation owned around 14 theatres in New York at the time. He decides he must take his own English production of *Pinafore* to New York and arranges for it to open at the cavernous 5th Ave theatre in December of 1879.

On his return to England, he and his partners Gilbert and Sullivan, together with Sullivan's musical assistant Alfred Cellier, prepare to take *Pinafore* to New York in the autumn of that year with a skeleton cast, to be supplemented with local American chorus members and musicians. Cellier had been a chorister with Sullivan at the Chapel Royal, the Royal family's private chapel at St James Palace, both boys becoming known to Queen Victoria who was often in attendance. The partnership also agreed that they would work on the next intended production, *The Pirates of Penzance*, with a view to premiering it in New York on the same visit. On arrival in New York harbour, they are welcomed by a fleet of ships rigged out as *Pinafores*. Most were welcoming the arrival of these now famous men, though some, by arrangement of theatre owners, were staging a protest at their arrival fearing the competition to their own productions.

And so, the English *Pinafore* opened at the 5th Ave theatre on the 1st of December 1879 with Gilbert appearing in, and directing, from the chorus. Principal parts were played by American soprano Blanche Roosevelt and emigrant Irish tenor John Clark who had imaginatively re-named himself Snr Broccolini.

The English production was received enthusiastically in New York and during the month of December they performed it daily whilst at the same time rehearsing with much the same cast for the premiere of *Pirates*, in order to open it on the 31st of December 1879. This was an enormous and tiring task, especially for Sullivan who conducted the orchestra for the performance whilst working to finish and rehearse the musical score of *Pirates*, the job made more difficult because of the fact that he had left his musical sketch of the second act back in England. It had to be rewritten with much of the score, which is still held in New York's Morgan library, in the hand of Alfred Cellier. They also re-used a chorus from *Thespis*, their very first collaboration written in 1871 as a Christmas entertainment for the theatre manager of the London Gaiety Theatre manager John Hollingshead. This is the only music of *Thespis* that survives, the suspicion being that Sullivan destroyed the rest of the score, as either he was already unprepared to be associated with such form of musical entertainment or that he was otherwise dissatisfied with his efforts.

The overture to *Pirates* was only finished and rehearsed on the morning of opening night, but it was enthusiastically received and consolidated G&S's reputation in the USA.

Encouraged, Carte now summons Helen Lenoir, (the previous Helen Black who had been an actress on Carte's books but who now was a valuable assistant in his office) to come to New York where she would supervise the formation of four touring companies who subsequently toured with *Pirates* at over 100 venues in America in the first half of 1880. It must have been a huge logistical undertaking, but it was to prove what a valuable asset Helen was to become within the organisation. Nobody could have known then the even greater role she would later play in the entire future of Carte's theatrical and hotel empire, and in his life personally. (She had in fact been handed the job of securing the English copyright of *Pirates* in the absence of Carte when she supervised an under-rehearsed, one-off performance in Paignton on 29<sup>th</sup> December before her subsequent departure to New York).

On the trio's return to England, attention was now given to the next production, *Patience*. This satirised the English aesthetic movement, represented in particular by Irish playwright

Oscar Wilde who became the model for the poster of the opera. Adding yet a further string to his bow, and preparing the USA for the forthcoming *Patience* at the same time, Carte sent Oscar Wilde on a tour of the USA in order that American audiences would be familiarised in the aesthetic movement before the eventual transfer of a production for a U.S. tour in 1882.

The partnership of Gilbert and Sullivan was now a fully established force in the USA.

The next twenty years would see the births of a generation of future American composers and lyricists who would influence the development of the musical theatre on Broadway over the next 40 years and beyond. These included such composers as Jerome Kern (*Showboat* and more), Irving Berlin (later of *Annie Get Your Gun* and much more), Cole Porter (*Anything Goes*) Richard Rodgers (no introduction needed) and Frederick Loewe (*My Fair Lady*). Also born in the same era were lyricists Oscar Hammerstein II, Yip Harburg, Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Alan Jay Lerner, Johnny Mercer and others. The majority of these composers and lyricists had a Jewish immigrant background. Johnny Mercer said, "*We all come from Gilbert*".

England around the same time sees the birth of Noel Coward, later generally accepted as 'The Master' of the British musical theatre in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and others such as Vivien Ellis and Ivor Novello. Coward records, "*The lyrics and melodies of Gilbert and Sullivan were hummed and strummed into my consciousness at an early age. My father sang them, my mother played them....*"

Thereafter into the next generation, Richard Rodgers was to become the inspiration for such composers as Andrew Lloyd Webber and Hammerstein II would become the teacher and mentor to Stephen Sondheim who, until his death in 2021, advanced the musical art-form both musically and lyrically. The dynasty was established.

New York was a melting pot of nationalities in the early years of the 20th Century and all of those mentioned earlier would learn their future theatre music careers under the influences of the operettas of Lehar and Romberg, the Yiddish musical theatre and the new African-American phenomenon which became ragtime. However, they all acknowledge the influence of G&S on their musical and theatrical education. Moreover, these influences would remain throughout the world of musical entertainment throughout the 20th century. But what are these influences?

Firstly, they filled the gap between grand opera, most frequently sung in Italian, and the bawdy music hall. This had been Carte's original vision. Importantly it also introduced the fusing of words and music into a complete presentation of a story. One can compare this to the reviews, follies or musical hall entertainments which were largely to show off the talents of the individual stars, rather than telling a complete story. Now, the lyricist and the composer are seen as one complementary unit - not just WS Gilbert and Arthur Seymour Sullivan but Gilbert and Sullivan, or even G&S.

Because the songs told vital elements of the plot or story it is the first time that the lyrics even take on an importance over the music. It also meant that the lyricist attained much more influence and importance in the production. Compare this to opera. Though many can name the operas and the composers of European opera, such as those of Mozart, Rossini or Verdi,

the names of their lyricists are hardly known except by the few, and in such opera the music takes priority over the words, many people in fact not perhaps even understanding the Italian they are listening to at all.

In the case of G&S, and in the majority of musicals or musical plays since, the words and lyrics are important to the understanding of the plot, the lyrics normally being written first with the composer having to provide suitable music, arrangements and rhythms to meet the requirements of the lyricist. Is it perhaps for alphabetical or pronounciational reasons that the Gilbert's name is normally mentioned first, or because of his age seniority (Gilbert was six years older than Sullivan), or does it represent the new importance of the contribution of the lyricist?

Hearing and understanding the lyrics are vital to following the plot and whilst some singing techniques sometimes require a slight mispronunciation of the words to enhance the quality of the voice, Gilbert was not prepared to let any technique mask the clarity and understanding of the words.

This is not to underestimate the skill of Sullivan to achieve this. Not only must he ensure that the words are clearly heard, but he must also find the sense of joy, humour, comedy, ghostliness or even tragedy that is required to meet the demands of the story. Sullivan it seems had a special talent to enable him to do that, having previously written in various styles. He was often forced to simplify the structure of the music to fit the delivery of the words. For example, in many songs each word or syllable is often sung on a separate note, many in two or four-time, whereas the composer might otherwise try to be more imaginative.

In the G&S works, because the words reveal vital elements of the plot, most of the songs are 'plot songs' as opposed to what is often termed 'performance-songs', the latter not vital to the plot but added for the audience's enjoyment of the show or as a means of gaining an opportunity for a scene change or similar. Sullivan also made full use of the chorus in emphasising a song, using an 'echo' or 'response' technique with the chorus often repeating a line sung by the principal.

Sullivan's talents to meet all these requirements are perhaps under-appreciated by the musical establishment. Bear in mind his musical education was that of a future classical composer, the style seen in his early, pre-G&S works. It is notable that where the needs of the lyrics give him more freedom and scope, Sullivan could still call upon his more classical musical nature, as perhaps demonstrated in *The Gondoliers* where such freedom was given to him in order to satisfy his desire to write better music, a freedom that was to temporarily save their fractured relationship at that time.

Beyond the influences of the lyrics and music, the G&S comic operas moved the musical play art form forward in other ways.

More than ever before, the scenery, set and costumes were now to play a more important role, providing a feast of pleasure to the eye as well as to the ear. Gilbert, who had become the director of the productions in addition to writing the plot and lyrics, was extremely diligent in ensuring that the set, scenery and costumes were authentic, accurate and truly

representative. For instance, for the production of *Pinafore*, he had travelled to Portsmouth to study the structure and rigging of *HMS Victory* as a model for the *Pinafore* set. He had the naval costumes made by a naval tailor in Portsmouth. Similarly, he used authentic Japanese costumes in *The Mikado* (some consequently too small for the English figure!) and had the female cast members trained in the proper use of their fans. He made models in the form of small wooden blocks to represent the cast on- stage so that it was predetermined how the positioning would be set before rehearsals began. This additional role as director further enhanced his importance to the productions over his musical partner.

It was also largely G&S who created the now well-trodden and established form of the musical play, along the following structure.

- Overture: The opportunity for the audience to settle.
- The opening: Where are we and at what time in history?
- Boy meets girl: About to travel an uncertain path to their probable future together.
- The subplot: Meet the characters who add a further dimension, and possibly some comedy or light relief to the unfolding of the main plot.
- The main plot and the subplot develop:
- The interval is reached at a point of despair, confusion or uncertainty:
- The interval:
- A 'performance song' or chorus to bring us back or remind us where we have reached:
- Further development of the main plot:
- Further development of the sub-plot:
- The zenith of difficulty, misunderstanding, confusion or despair:
- The plots unwind and resolve:
- The ending- perhaps in happiness or perhaps in tragedy:

Not all musicals of course stick to this path.

A further theatrical development in the Gilbert plots arises from the introduction of current social issues, political satire or social commentary, a theme taking up in the other ground - breaking 20th century musicals that were to follow, such as Kern's *Showboat* (themes of race, gambling and abuse), and Bernstein's *West Side Story* (racial and social tensions)

Gilbert's writing also introduced phrases that have become a permanent part of the English language: 'Let the punishment fit the crime': 'I have a little list': 'Never? Well hardly ever' and 'Short sharp shock'. These phrases have been used in many contexts especially in a political and parliamentary context. Conservative MP Peter Lilley used 'I've got a little list' from *Mikado* in a commentary about "sponging socialists".

The operas have also been quoted in legal rulings and opinions including in the U.S. Supreme Court and they have been the subject of postage stamp issues and cigarette cards.

Together G&S created what is commonly known as The Patter Song, a song sung at speed with difficult and perhaps repetitious lyrics, the most famous being '*I Am The Very Model of a Modern Major General*' from *The Pirates of Penzance*. This song and others have been often parodied, perhaps most famously by Tom Lehrer in his 1960's parody, *The Elements*. The 21st century has seen the development of Rap, (Rapid Poetry), which is the modern equivalent of The Patter Song.

There are numerous references to the operas, individual songs or to the composer and lyricist in popular culture, including Pink Floyd's "*The Dark Side Of The Moon*", *The Flintstones*, *Blackadder Goes Forth*, 1981 film *Chariots of Fire*, fantasy movie *Peter Pan*, *The Muppet Show*, *Doctor Who*, *The Two Ronnies* 1973 *Christmas Show*, and the musical show, *The Producers*. In advertising, references include US department store Gimbels in 1879 ("*We are the very model of a modern big department store*"), Campbell's Soup, Guinness stout and Terry's Chocolate Orange.

Popular 1970's singer Gilbert O'Sullivan took his name as a pun on G&S

Current musical education for the budding composer or songwriter usually contains a teaching of Gilbert and Sullivan particularly in the USA, and more than one hundred years after the deaths of G&S there are still around 150 G&S performing societies in the UK, around 100 in the USA, 40 in Canada and a similar number in Australia. The G&S comic operas have been translated and performed in most European languages.

The modern equivalent of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company still exists, though now in a much-reduced form and in the UK there is a three-week G&S festival held in Harrogate and Buxton each summer. Similar festivals exist in other English-speaking countries.

In England there is an active Gilbert and Sullivan Society, as well as the individual Gilbert Society, and Sullivan Society.

G&S is unusually popular amongst the male population. It has been said by more than one enthusiast that it was their mothers that took them to the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, but that it was their fathers who took them to their first G&S productions. One reason for this is the fact but most of the interesting leading roles are those of males, perhaps reflecting the fact that Gilbert was seen to be somewhat chauvinistic in what, after all was a chauvinistic society at the time.

Finally, any acknowledgement of the influence of G&S should not forget the role of the third partner, Richard D'Oyly Carte who was first to see the demand for this new middle-class entertainment and who did so much to develop the interest all over the world and whose family continued to do so into two further generations. The D'Oyly Carte Trust remains today and continues to financially support amateur productions of the operas.

## The Gilbert and Sullivan Relationship

These two remarkable men were never made to be natural friends. Gilbert, who was the senior by six years, had a leaning towards military and naval matters and had a military bearing, perhaps as a result of his father's service as a naval surgeon. He was a strident, opinionated young man who never did get on with his mother. He had found it difficult to find his niche in life, having been a civil servant and a somewhat unsuccessful barrister before becoming a successful playwright, writer and illustrator. All his poetical work is published as *The Bab Ballads*. He was already a successful poet and playwright before teaming up with Sullivan and he always displayed an outstanding wit, sense of humour and a leaning towards the supernatural. He was sceptical and critical of the establishment.

*Mr Gilbert, is Bach still composing?*

*No madam, as a matter of fact he is decomposing!*

Sullivan on the other hand was from a musical family of Irish descent. He was an easy-going and pleasant young boy with an early talent for music and the keyboard, his talent becoming apparent as a chorister at the Chapel Royal. His early musical upbringing was through exposure to church and military music and was further enhanced by his classical musical education in London and in Europe. He was a likeable and sociable young man with a love of fun, good food, the opposite sex and for the good life. By 1875 had become an established musician in a variety of styles and in classical and church musical genres in particular.

Through the encouragement of Richard D'Oyly Carte they successfully brought their different skills together which provided each with the source of income that they otherwise might not have enjoyed.

Sullivan however was to become a servant to the plot and lyrics which he resented since he, and Queen Victoria, had bigger and more serious ambitions.

Gilbert was often overbearing, a disciplinarian and had an eye for detail. As we have seen he expected the words to be given priority over the musical form which gave rise to some resentment, the relationship to come under further strain by Gilbert's over-use of his recurring themes of topsy-turvydom and the supernatural.

Sullivan suffered ill-health as a relatively young man, and his sickness hampered him throughout his life. This, his lifestyle and his continued pursuit of music in other spheres made him sometimes unreliable and late with the musical score. Sullivan got on much better with

Carte than did Gilbert, and there were frequent disputes over money between Carte and Gilbert in which the latter felt unsupported by Sullivan. It was a relationship that survived and was patched up because of the mutual need of each for a reliable source of income. Their relationship ended in bitterness and division by the time of Sullivan's untimely death in 1911 at the age of 58. Gilbert was travelling abroad at the time of Sullivan's death and did not attend the funeral.

## Finale

More than 120 years after the height of their success, and in spite of the development of the musical theatre into modern new musical genres, the impact and influence of Gilbert and Sullivan is still very apparent around the world today, in the musical theatre and in popular culture more generally.



*G&S Themed Wallpaper and a 'Little Maids' Toothpaste Advertisement*

Jim Stebbings  
March 2022