

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Operetta

Arthur Sullivan

William S. Gilbert

Patter song

## OPERETTA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 12 Cutting Things Down to Size

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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It was in order to make up a double bill with *La Périchole*, one of the later operettas of Offenbach, that a London theater manager, Richard D'Oyly Carte, commissioned a tiny one-acter from Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), a graduate of the Leipzig Conservatory who was then serving as principal of a newly opened music academy called the National Training School (now the Royal College of Music). The libretto was by William S. Gilbert (1836–1911), then a staff writer for *Fun*, the Victorian equivalent of *Mad* magazine, who specialized in skits that burlesqued standard operas of the day.



fig. 12-8 Poster for the New York premiere of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*.

Gilbert and Sullivan had already collaborated several years earlier, quite unmemorably, on an Offenbach-style comedy called *Thespis; or, the Gods Grown Old*, and had given no thought to future collaborations. *Trial by Jury* (1875), the result of their chance commission from D'Oyly Carte, marked the beginning of the most stable and successful operetta team in the history of the

genre. Most unusually (and uniquely for Gilbert and Sullivan), this half-hour farce about a jilted bride's lawsuit, an outrageously biased jury, and an incompetent judge was a through-composed work, with recitatives instead of spoken dialogue, and was conceived frankly as a spoof of Italian opera. The most elaborate number, "A Nice Dilemma," is a very skillful caricature of a Donizettian *largo concertato*, the sort of showpiece ensemble described in chapter 1.

With *The Sorcerer* (1877) the pair hit their stride, producing the first of eleven two-act operettas (plus one in three) with spoken dialogue, and with *HMS Pinafore; or, The Lass That Loved a Sailor* they achieved an unprecedented hit for an English operetta—indeed for an English work of any kind since Handel's day. So successful was the steady stream of operettas they produced over the next dozen years that D'Oyly Carte built a special theater, the Savoy, to maintain the whole Gilbert and Sullivan canon in repertory. Its patent on the "Savoy operas" lasted until 1961, canonizing not only the repertory but also its traditions of performance in a fashion that Gilbert and Sullivan would no doubt have taken delight in spoofing had they lived to see it.

Both *The Sorcerer* and *HMS Pinafore* continued the manner established in *Trial by Jury* of aiming pointed barbs at specific operatic (and not only operatic) targets. The most conspicuous object of parody in the former, predictably enough, was Weber's *Freischütz*. In the latter, the basic premise—mistaken identity due to an exchange of babies by a befuddled nanny—was borrowed from the much-ridiculed libretto of Verdi's *Il trovatore*. The occasional accompanied recitatives in *Pinafore* exaggerated the mannerisms of Handel's oratorios, and the elopement scene alluded to in its subtitle took off on the one in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*.

*Pinafore's* popularity bridged the Atlantic Ocean, which actually made a problem for Gilbert and Sullivan when American companies began "pirating" it—that is, performing it without authorization from the publisher and without paying royalties. They retaliated by mocking the marauders with an operetta called *The Pirates of Penzance* (the American equivalent might be *The Pirates of Coney Island*), and opened it in New York to establish copyright there. *The Pirates* contains Gilbert and Sullivan's most specifically directed operatic spoofing.

*Il trovatore* comes in for another round of friendly abuse, with a crashing parody of its "Anvil Chorus" sung as the pirates purportedly sneak noiselessly onstage ("With Catlike Tread"). The situation, too, joshes *Trovatore*, which contains an abduction scene in which a chorus of hidden warriors actually sing about their silence. The part of the tune that is actually closest to the Verdian model has become independently popular as "Hail, Hail, the Gang's All Here," a song that has long been propagated in oral tradition throughout the English-speaking world (Ex. 12-14a). In addition, the ingenue soprano, Mabel, sings a lilting waltz song modeled on those found in contemporary French "drames lyriques" like the famous ones in Gounod's *Faust* (Ex. 12-14b).

Chi del gi - ta - no i gior - ni ab - bel - la?

(transposed)

Come, friends who plow the sea, Truce to na - vi - ga - tion, Take a - no - ther sta - tion!

**ex. 12-14a Giuseppe Verdi, "Anvil Chorus" (*Il trovatore*, Act II) / Sir Arthur Sullivan, *The Pirates of Penzance*, "Come, friends who plow the sea"**

(Siebel)

Fai-tes-lui mes à - veux, Por - tez mes voeux! Fleurs é - clo - ses près d'el - le,  
Di - tes - lui qu'elle est bel - le, Que mon coeur nuit et jour Lan - guit d'a - mour!

(Mabel - rebarred)

Poor wan - d'ring one, Tho' thou hast sure - ly strayed,  
Take heart of grace, Thy steps re - trace, Poor wan - d'ring one,

**ex. 12-14b Charles Gounod, “Faites lui mes aveux” (*Faust*, Act II) / Sir Arthur Sullivan, *The Pirates of Penzance* “Poor wand'ring one”**

The pièce de résistance, however, is the so-called Chorus of Policemen, summoned by Mabel and her father the Major-General to capture the pirates. It is actually a more complicated number than its title would suggest. Besides sporting solos for three characters, it is the first Sullivanian “double chorus” of a kind that became a standard feature in the Savoy operas. (Its most relevant antecedent was a double aria for the two blind title characters in Offenbach's *Les deux aveugles*, but Offenbach himself had a famous precedent in Berlioz's “dramatic symphony,” *The Damnation of Faust*, which Sullivan certainly knew.) First there is a chorus sung by one sex (in this case the policemen); then there is an ostensibly contrasting chorus sung by the opposite sex (in this case the Major-General's numerous daughters); and finally there is their unexpected (but of course eventually not only expected but eagerly anticipated) contrapuntal montage. The policemen confess their reluctance to expose themselves to danger; the maidens vainly seek to raise their morale with a promise of posthumous fame. The ensuing impasse produces a common operatic situation: the “extended exit” in which the action about which all are singing is impeded by the singing itself. (Again, the classic prototype is found in *Il trovatore*: Manrico's famous cabaletta “Di quella pira,” in which an urgent mission of rescue is delayed for the sake of his high Cs.) The maidens sing, “Go!” The police sing “We go!” The Major-General, somehow standing outside the music and observing its contradiction of the action, sings “Yes, but you don't go!”

Ten years later, at the other end of Europe, César Cui—in an extended, quite humorless essay on the superiority of Russian opera, with its scrupulous realism, to the common run—pointed, among other things, to “choruses that shout *corriam, corriam* [let's run, let's run] but never budge an inch.”<sup>14</sup> The difference was that only Cui seriously thought that such choruses could be dispensed with—or rather, that the distinction between “real” and “musical” time could be erased. Only Cui thought that renouncing the distinction between the “heard” and “unheard” music of an opera—the music the characters hear as music and the music only the audience hears as such—would be progress. By having his Major-General fail to make this distinction, Sullivan parodied not so much the failure of composers as the failure of obtuse listeners who cannot reconcile themselves to the most crucial of all operatic conventions.

Thus there are two ways (at least) to mock a convention. One can do it like Cui, with an eye toward its abolition; or one can do it like Sullivan, as a wry acknowledgement of its value. Cui's implication is that excessive indulgence of musical values can rob opera of its dramatic viability. Sullivan's is that excessively literalistic attention to dramatic values can rob opera of its *raison d'être*, its very reason for existence.

Finally it comes down to one's attitude toward the status quo, “the way things are”—a matter that goes far beyond the esthetic. In a startlingly rancorous critique of Gilbert and Sullivan, the English philosopher Michael Tanner, writing in 1991, protested the continuing popularity of their work after a century's heavy use, accusing them of practicing and perpetuating “that fatally English

device of flattering an audience into a sense of complacency by presenting what they take to be satire but is actually no more than affectionate endorsement of the status quo, shown in all its lovable absurdity.”<sup>15</sup> Their seeming mockery of the British class system, of nepotism, of gender inequality, or whatever else they seemed to oppose, in Tanner's view, was in fact a covert preservative.

There is no denying it. But it is not a peculiarly English vice. It is typical of art in any stable and affluent period of social history, when established authority and power are sufficiently secure to condone, and even encourage as a social steam valve, a certain amount of friendly caricature, which only encourages toleration of the inequities or abuses it exposes. Precisely the same was true of Offenbach and Strauss. In Offenbach's case the matter was a little poignant, in fact. There were always a few critics around who were sufficiently lacking in humor to take his cynicism for serious subversion, or at least for liberalism; he threw on their abuse. But as soon as the society he ostensibly mocked was overthrown (in the aftermath of the disastrous 1870 war with Prussia) and replaced by a more liberal régime, Offenbach's irreverence no longer seemed amusing. He declared bankruptcy in 1875, the very year in which defeated France accepted a republican constitution.

Victorian England underwent no such upheaval. Economically it went from strength to strength; the optimism of its social elite knew no bounds; and the popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan reflected that cheerful mood. Their work can seem, in its combination of surface reformism with underlying conformism, something like a classic expression of “Victorianism.” Perhaps its most telling symbolic manifestation was the way in which Gilbert and Sullivan eventually began burlesquing not only the foibles of the upper classes (and of standard opera), but even their own mannerisms as endearingly absurd institutions to be teased indulgently.

Take the “patter song” for example, which the *New Grove Dictionary* aptly defines as “a comic song in which the humor derives from having the greatest number of words uttered in the shortest possible time.”<sup>16</sup> It is usually sung in Savoy operas by the “comic baritone,” a stereotyped role that is usually marked by pompous ineptitude and/or lechery. In *The Pirates of Penzance* that role is filled by the Major-General, whose patter song, “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General,” a list of all the superfluous intellectual baggage he carries around in place of military expertise, is the archetype of the genre. Its only rival is “When You're Lying Awake,” the Lord Chancellor's virtuosically ridiculous recitation of a trivial nightmare in *Iolanthe* (1882).

Patter songs were in themselves parodies of a standard *opera buffa* technique that went all the way back to Pergolesi and his contemporaries in the early eighteenth century, and that technique was itself a parody, translating the virtuosity of *opera seria* coloratura into the virtuosity of speedy enunciation, chiefly for bumbling basses at the opposite end of the spectrum, both in range and in moral character, from the male and female sopranos who sang the heroic leads. So when, in *Ruddigore* (1887), Gilbert and Sullivan parodied their own patter songs in a patter ensemble, it was a parody of a parody of a parody.

It takes the form of a trio in which the male lead, Robin Oakapple (or as he is also known, Sir Ruthven Murgatroyd), is encouraged by the comic baritone (Sir Despard Murgatroyd) and his sister the contralto (Mad Margaret, whose first entrance had already parodied the Mad Scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*) to solve the dilemma on which the plot turns—and which we need not go into here, for reasons expressed by Sir Despard (and then the rest) at the end of the trio: “This particularly rapid unintelligible patter isn't generally heard, and if it is it doesn't matter”(Ex. 12-15).

Marguerite  
Robin  
Despard

This put - tic - a - tar - ly cap - id un - in - tel - li - gi - ble put - ter is - n't  
This put - tic - a - tar - ly cap - id un - in - tel - li - gi - ble put - ter is - n't  
This put - tic - a - tar - ly cap - id un - in - tel - li - gi - ble put - ter is - n't

gen - er - al - ly heard and if it is it does - n't mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter mat - ter.  
gen - er - al - ly heard and if it is it does - n't mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter mat - ter.  
gen - er - al - ly heard and if it is it does - n't mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter mat - ter.

mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter!  
mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter!  
mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter, mat - ter!

**ex. 12-15 Sir Arthur Sullivan, *Ruddigore*, Act II, “Matter” Trio (“My eyes are fully open”)**

It was a mark of the increasing specialization of composerly types and roles that set in during the latter half of the nineteenth century that there should have appeared specialist composers even for lightweight and “applied” genres like ballroom waltzes and operettas. Hardly any composer of the period could vie with, say, Mozart in versatility (or “universality”). Where Mozart was equally equipped, and equally valued, for writing operas (both comic and tragic), concertos, chamber music, and ballroom music, few of the great figures living a hundred years later could contribute to all of these genres.

The idea of symphonic music by Verdi or chamber music by Wagner is as bizarre as the idea of an opera by Bruckner or Brahms, two of the “symphonists” we shall meet in the coming chapters. And none of these composers ever wrote for the ballroom. The most universal composers of the period were probably Chaikovsky and Saint-Saëns. Both contributed operas and symphonies alike to the standard repertoire (although Saint-Saëns's contributions have somewhat faded from it in recent years), and they were the only ones unless one counts the youthful, once fairly popular *Symphony in C Major* by Georges Bizet, the composer of *Carmen*, written as a school exercise at the age of seventeen and performed only posthumously.

The nineteenth-century tendency toward specialization was much abetted by the widening gulf that set in between “high” and “low” genres in the twentieth, which increasingly entailed the segregation of performers and audiences as well as composers, and a rigid hierarchy of taste that reinforced social distinctions. That hierarchy is already evident in the case of operetta, not so much in the way in which the genre was valued by audiences as in the way in which it was valued by its own specialist composers. The three with whom we are acquainted—Offenbach, Strauss, and Sullivan—all eventually aspired to the higher status of the very genre they spoofed.

Offenbach almost succeeded. At the tail end of his shortish life he was working feverishly on *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (“Tales of Hoffmann”), an ambitious *opéra fantastique* in five acts based on the fantasy stories of E. T. A. Hoffmann, the German romantic writer and music critic. There is good reason to believe that his overwork on this project—which Offenbach saw as his last chance for rehabilitation after the failure of his own theater, and for recognition as a “contender” in the increasingly rarefied category of art—contributed to his premature death shortly before the opera would have been finished. It had to be given finishing touches by another composer, Ernest Guiraud, for its 1881 premiere, and it has undergone much additional modification over the years by a variety of hands. It has, and can have, no definitive version, but it has steadily gained in popularity owing to its attractive music, in particular the barcarolle (“Belle nuit, ô nuit d’amour”; “Gorgeous Night, O Night of Love”) that suffuses the fourth act, set in Venice.

Sullivan's was a sadder story. As his career progressed he found himself under increasing pressure from many (including Queen Victoria herself) to live up to their expectations as the first great English composer in a hundred years. He chafed at the work that brought him success (and pleasure to a wide public) and doggedly applied himself, far less successfully, to the high prestige genres. The highest prestige in England then attached to oratorio, kept alive there since the time of Handel (and later, Mendelssohn) as a national tradition. For summer festivals at Birmingham, Worcester, and Leeds (the last of which he directed for a time), Sullivan wrote six oratorios, the most successful being *The Golden Legend* (1886), after Longfellow's reworking of a twelfth-century German *Minnelied* glorifying noble self-sacrifice and miraculous cures.

At the Queen's own urging, communicated at his knighting ceremony in 1883, Sullivan composed a clanking grand opera, *Ivanhoe* (1891), after the novel of medieval England by Sir Walter Scott. He declared his ambitions, and (perhaps unwittingly) the way they responded to the post-Wagnerian prejudices of the times, in a letter to a prospective operetta librettist:

I think the whole tendency of stage music now is to get rid as much as possible of songs, duets and other *set pieces* and to become as *dramatic* as possible. In all the series with Gilbert, I found a dainty, pretty song was generally a drag and stopped the interest of the public in the action of the piece. It is on these lines that I am doing a *serious* opera now.

But he was not really thinking of the public. He was thinking of his reputation with “progressive” tastemakers. And they betrayed him. Despite a lavish staging by D'Oyly Carte at a new opera house in which he had invested, and although (unlike most of the operettas) it received performances on the Continent (including a production at the Berlin Court Opera in 1895), Sullivan's serious effort was a failure with the critics. George Bernard Shaw was especially cruel, dismissing *Ivanhoe* as “a good novel which has been turned into the very silliest sort of sham ‘grand opera.’”<sup>17</sup> Having failed to establish himself as a contributor to the elite repertoire, Sullivan became embittered. His resentment at what he perceived to be his unfair banishment to the lighter genres—the result of “typecasting”—poisoned the well of his inspiration, and also soured relations with Gilbert. None of the operettas of his final (post-*Ivanhoe*) decade had any success, and the composer died—of bronchitis, not normally fatal—at the age of fifty-eight, feeling he had been mistreated and unjustly forgotten. In retrospect he might be fairly described as an early victim of historicism.

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## Notes:

(14) César Cui, “Neskol'ko slov o sovremeniikh operniikh formakh” (1889), *Izbranniye stat'i*, p. 408.

(15) Michael Tanner, “Singing the Status Quo,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 April 1991, p. 15.

(16) *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 719.

(17) G. B. Shaw in *The World*; quoted in Arthur Jacobs, *Arthur Sullivan: A Victorian Musician* (2nd ed., Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992), p. 335.



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