

Christopher Gillett | 11 May 2015

Christopher Gillett on Gilbert & Sullivan



ENO's *The Pirates of Penzance*, Joshua Bloom, Alexander Robin Baker and ENO Chorus © Tristram Kenton

What do you MEAN, you've never seen a G&S opera? Tenor Christopher Gillett is amazed by the new generation of classical music fans who have no idea what all the G&S fuss is about. Is there any hope for this venerable British tradition?



Last year I went to see some friends star in *HMS Pinafore* in Bath's Theatre Royal. After the show we were all sipping pints in The Garrick's Head next door when a well-dressed couple in their early 30s approached my friends and praised their performances. They'd loved it, especially as they had '*never seen any Gilbert and Sullivan before.*'

Never seen any G&S? How is this possible? When I was their age, everyone I knew had *been* in a G&S operetta, not just *seen* one. G&S was a fundamental part of growing up, like conkers and acne. At my all-boys school I played, in annual succession, a Sister/Cousin/Aunt in *HMS Pinafore*, Pitti-Sing in *The Mikado* and the Judge in *Trial By Jury*. At university it was *Pinafore* again, but this time I got to do Ralph Rackstraw and there were actual girls in the cast, which was a major bonus.

So, have Britain's most successful ever musical-theatricals slipped off their perch? Are they too fogeyish for the 21st century? Possibly. But it's worth pondering that no other librettist-composer partnership in history has ever been recognised solely by their initials, with a brand name no less: 'G&S'.



Apparently very few schools do G&S any more, and a quick email survey around the many university G&S societies revealed that the vast majority of students who join have had no previous experience of G&S at all. When schools perform music-theatre these days they do musicals, and a child with a penchant for the theatre will more likely pick up a microphone and belt out Lloyd Webber than pull on tights and sing some Sullivan. If children do know any G&S, it's more likely to be as a consequence of watching [The Simpsons](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDUdYG1NgbU) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDUdYG1NgbU>), or [Family Guy](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMUOi1Q2cPo) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMUOi1Q2cPo>) (or, for grown-ups it could be [Star Trek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKFMWhxJask) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKFMWhxJask>) or [The West Wing](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ygs-olomyM) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ygs-olomyM>)).

I'm sure ENO is hoping Mike Leigh's new production of *Pirates of Penzance* will have a similar pull to that of *The Mikado*, which has been drawing full houses and making ENO a sizeable amount of money for nearly thirty years. *The Mikado* (returning yet again in November) has managed to find an identity of its own – so much so that many serious G&S fans have no time for it. (Its director Jonathan Miller's candid dismissal of G&S as '[boring, self-satisfied English drivel... UKIP set to music](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-news/7934762/Sir-Jonathan-Miller-says-Gilbert-and-Sullivan-is-Ukip-set-to-music.html)' (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-news/7934762/Sir-Jonathan-Miller-says-Gilbert-and-Sullivan-is-Ukip-set-to-music.html>), probably hasn't helped). (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-news/7934762/Sir-Jonathan-Miller-says-Gilbert-and-Sullivan-is-Ukip-set-to-music.html>)



The fact is, there are no professional singers who can make a living any more doing just G&S.

The fact is, there are no professional singers who can make a living any more doing just G&S. Not even my old friend Richard Suart (ENO's stalwart Ko-Ko), who told me: 'In the old days, if you were a G&S singer, you did nothing but. We can't do that. I don't do that. I'm associated with G&S, but it's quite different from doing [Birtwistle \(/uk/learn/composers/harrison-birtwistle/\)](/uk/learn/composers/harrison-birtwistle/)'s *Punch & Judy*, which I also do. In 1988 I did the first performances of Turnage's *Greek* during the middle of a D'Oyly Carte tour of *Iolanthe*. I sense that this is a black mark in certain G&S quarters.'

Meanwhile, hardcore G&S devotees continue to congregate every year in Harrogate at the [International Gilbert & Sullivan Festival \(http://www.gsfestivals.org/\)](http://www.gsfestivals.org/), and its professional touring company – geared to the traditions of the old D'Oyly Carte Opera Company – hits the road this autumn.

I hope G&S can slough off its fusty image and survive the struggle for a happy place in the national conscience. It's far too good not to. With any luck, there'll come a generation of new directors and conductors who haven't had the off-putting experience of sitting through a terrible amateur production or a crusty professional one, and they'll breathe new life into it.

As Richard Suart says: 'G&S is in intensive care, but it isn't dead.'

Read more of [Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs\)](/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs). The tenor's own blog is [christophergillett.co.uk \(http://christophergillett.co.uk\)](http://christophergillett.co.uk).

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