

SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1267

GILBERT & SULLIVAN AND THE EARLY RECORDING INDUSTRY

In a fascinating cultural coincidence, the rise of the recorded sound industry and the performance history of Gilbert & Sullivan operas intersect. The enormous popular appeal of the Savoy operas ensured that they would be among the first musical works immortalized in the new medium of recorded sound. For more than one hundred years, new leaps in technology inevitably have been promoted by records featuring G & S. The construction of the first phonograph and the première of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Sorcerer* occurred within days of each other, during the last half of November 1877. Six months later came *H.M.S. Pinafore*, the team's first international success. Had the development of recorded sound proceeded with a regular, consistent pace, resembling that of productions of new Savoy operas, we might today be able to hear reasonably complete reproductions of the works by the artists who created them. Unfortunately, the search for perfection in the phonograph industry was slow. Thomas Edison, the inventor who had demonstrated the concept of recording sound on a sheet of tin foil wrapped around a cylinder, soon became distracted by a new interest - that of developing electric light. By leaving his invention in a form that lacked the ability to make permanent records, it was inevitable that others would take up the problem. In a few years, Alexander Graham Bell and his associates began experiments that led to recording on wax cylinders and finally, recorded immortality became possible. With Edison rejoining the creative search, once his competitive instincts were stirred, a satisfactory hard wax cylinder was available by 1888.

In that year, Arthur Sullivan made one of the earliest extant recordings at a dinner party, two days after the première of *The Yeomen of the Guard*. [However, it should be noted that the authenticity of the surviving artifact has been questioned.] At about the same time, Emile Berliner produced his first gramophone, a talking machine that used discs instead of cylinders. By the mid-1890s, although the recorded sound industry was established, years of further research were needed to develop it beyond the primitive. The tonal range and quality that could be captured in recordings needed improving, record duplication processes needed developing, and markets for the product needed cultivating. In those early days, when records were no more than about two minutes in duration, excerpts from Gilbert & Sullivan were featured prominently, some sung by artists who had studied and performed under the authors. For now, brief snatches of famous songs would have to do; complete or even semi-complete performances of the operas were not yet practical. It would take 30 years from the date of its invention for the phonograph to begin fulfilling its potential in the area of home entertainment; 40 years before the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company would begin to sanction a series of complete recordings of the operas; and 50 years before the recording process, now electrified, began to give reasonably faithful reproductions of the vocal and instrumental forces undertaking these recordings.

By 1907 technology was becoming tamed, industry standards were becoming established, and musicians were becoming more trusting of the still-flawed, but improving talking machines and records. Cylinders were still a commercial force, but competition from

discs was intense. Every sign pointed towards the end of cylinder records as a viable industry medium, with discs supplanting them. Two people who still had faith in the medium of cylinders were Louis Sterling and Russell Hunting. Both men, émigrés from the United States to England, were veterans in an industry still quite young. In seeking their fortunes in Great Britain, they boldly set out to conquer the market. Sterling resigned his post at British Zonophone and formed his own company, the Sterling Co., Ltd., in late 1904. By February 1905 he had formed a partnership with Hunting to manufacture cylinder records. Sterling was the financier; Hunting was recording director. It was, apparently, an equal partnership; the name of the company was changed to the "Russell Hunting Co., Ltd." but the records were called "Sterling Records".

"Complete" recordings of operas suddenly became hot commercial items. The Gramophone Company, for example (via its Italian affiliate), published sets of *Il Trovatore* and *I Pagliacci*. At about the same time, the Russell Hunting Company recorded a "complete" *H.M.S. Pinafore*; and Pathé recorded a "complete" *The Yeomen of the Guard*. These, as well as other similar projects, were relative commercial failures; the records were too expensive, the artistic value too variable, the recorded sound too unkind (particularly to the orchestras), and the artists themselves too ordinary. Whilst well-established companies, such as Pathé, could survive their early failed gambles, the ambitious Hunting Co./Sterling Record combine soon foundered. Cylinders were doomed, and the *H.M.S. Pinafore* cylinders were withdrawn after only one year. Pathé re-issued four of them for a time on their disc system, but theirs was not a standard cut and neither the *Pinafore* re-issues nor their own *Yeomen* set sold well. The result is that both are extremely rare today.

THE RUSSELL HUNTING CO. *H.M.S. PINAFORE*

Until quite recently, all that was known to have survived of this set were the two Pathé discs on which four parts were preserved in transcribed form. On 16th May 1999 Roger Wild announced at a meeting of the Sir Arthur Sullivan Society that ten of the eleven original Sterling cylinder records in the set had been discovered. At last it was possible to hear most of this pioneering series. Because we are now so removed from the living memory of how the operas were performed in 1907, these recorded documents have attained a significance not always appreciated. While it is true that neither Gilbert nor the D'Oyly Carte organization supervised these recordings, both *Pinafore* and *Yeomen of the Guard* were revived in London under Gilbert's direction almost simultaneously with their release. There was already a performing tradition, well known to the public, associated with these two famous operas. We may assume that the performers also were keenly aware of the tradition and, to a large extent, followed it. There are, however, dangers in assuming too much as to the reliability of these records as documents. The accompanying band is what was then called a "military band", not to be mistaken for a pit orchestra as heard in the theatre. Strings are completely absent and the orchestration is significantly rearranged, both out of necessity (certain instruments recorded better than others and there was a limit to the size of an instrumental ensemble that could be put within the reach of a recording horn) and at the caprice of the person(s) doing the arranging. Both the dynamic range which could be recorded by the

acoustic system and the frequency spectrum were severely limited. Besides these limitations, the playing of the band and the singing of the chorus are often ragged, even compared with other recorded performances of the period. The soloists often redeem the proceedings. Solo voices were far better served than instruments and choruses by the early recording devices, thus the principals are heard with clarity and they project vitality.

940 "Overture" The Imperial Infantry Band plays a pot-pourri that is neither the Overture nor the Introduction to the opening chorus. There is some virtuosity in the playing which suggests that the occasional rough ensemble heard in these records is not entirely the fault of the instrumentalists. The medley consists of "We sail the ocean blue"; "Lets give three cheers for the sailor's bride" (from the Act I finale) and a verse of "When I was a lad". It concludes with the last section of the Act I finale, beginning with the choral variation on "A British tar is a soaring soul".

941 Opening Chorus. The "orchestra" plays the entire Introduction, albeit with skeletal orchestration at times. The chorus, when it comes in, sings not only the entire number, but repeats part of it so as to fill up the cylinder. The Russell Hunting Company gave value for money with its Sterling records.

942 "I'm called Little Buttercup" This cylinder is announced by the artist, as are, apparently, all the solo cylinders. Ada Florence sings her song attractively and winningly. Her diction is commendable, the consonants making their effect despite the difficulties imposed by the recording process. The rubato is more pronounced than that to which modern audiences are accustomed. The instrumental arrangement is so full of added fussy details as to border on the (unintended) comic. The continental rolled 'r's are heard in the singing of every soloist in this set. However unnatural they sound today, they were commonly employed by English-speaking singers in 1907.

943 "A maiden fair to see" This cylinder begins with "The nightingale". So that all the music would fit, there are some abbreviations. Walter Hyde as Ralph sings in a stentorian manner, forte at all times, perhaps because he was told to do so in order to be heard. The chorus sings loudly as well, so their interjections sound crude. Hyde's vocal quality is cultivated and pleasing, although he doesn't sound youthful. He errs in singing "When we have pain and trouble, too, before us" (rather than "sorrow, too"). In the ballad he sings the original words "poor beyond concealing/world of wealth is kneeling" rather than the later revision "denying/sighing".

944 "I am the Captain of the Pinafore" Harry Dearth is a more than satisfactory Captain. He avoids the halt after "fury of a gale" and "occasionally say", but does put a pause at the end of "hardly ever" both times (milking his high note in the process).

945 Sir Joseph Porter's Song. Whoever M. Anderson was, he certainly had a way with this song. He takes it at a good clip, probably so as to fit it all on the cylinder. There is a spoken choral interjection in the last verse which may be unique among recorded versions of this song. Sir Joseph sings, "Stick close to your desks, and never go to sea"; the chorus exclaims, "Well?" and he gives the punch line.

946 Finale Act I This is the missing cylinder, alas. It may only have been an orchestral selection.

947 "Selection from Pinafore" The London Orchestral Band sounds just like the Imperial Infantry Band. In one source this cylinder is described as "Selection Act II", as if it was intended as an entr'acte, but it is announced only as "Selection from Pinafore". It is possible this record was intended to sell as a separate item as well as to be included in the set. Indeed, it includes music from both acts: "Never mind the why and wherefore"; the entrance of the ladies in Act I; followed by "Gaily tripping, lightly skipping"; a snatch from "Sorry her lot" (the portion in the major key) and "He is an Englishman".

948 "Never mind the why and wherefore" Ernest Pike apparently sings the Captain's part, and he is good, with interesting inflections. Walter Hyde as Sir Joseph is quite acceptable as well. Ada Florence fills in as Josephine; her tone is attractive, but she has trouble with her breathing, and has to take the ending down. There is also a tubular bell, which chimes in for each chorus. Russell Hunting must have been showing off the ability to record bells.

949 The Englishman's Song. This cylinder has the entire scene from the Captain's "Hold!" to the end of "He is an Englishman". Assuming the Captain is sung by Harry Dearth and Bill Bobstay by Bernard Turner, we are left wondering who might be the anonymous tenor singing Ralph's part in the duet (by himself; there is no soprano). This tenor (Ernest Pike?) is more appropriate as Ralph than is Walter Hyde, although not quite as finished a singer. Bernard Turner makes the most of his big song, and takes the final two notes up an octave.

950 Octet and Chorus. This last cylinder is of particular interest because it begins with dialogue (probably another example of making certain the cylinder would be filled completely). Beginning with Sir Joseph's "Now tell me, my fine fellow", it gives the essential spoken lines, which lead into the musical number, although the passage is substantially abbreviated. All of the comic aspects are avoided; it is rendered as a straight dramatic scene. The Octet is probably the most successfully recorded music in the series. We do not know who the soprano is, but she is quite up to the demands made of Josephine's music. Walter Hyde is, once again, full-voiced as Ralph. Ada Florence is at her best in her mysterious solo as Little Buttercup. Sir Joseph sounds very much like Harry Dearth (it is difficult to feel much of a sense of continuity in this role, as this is the third Sir Joseph we have heard). As the music progresses one can sense the spontaneity and excitement as the performers bring the ensemble to its climax. The recording of the massed passages is as satisfying as it gets for the period, providing a fitting conclusion.

THE PATHÉ *THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD*

This set has been available for study over many years, although few copies have survived. Musically, it displays somewhat higher standards than the Russell Hunting Company's *H.M.S. Pinafore*; the Band of H. M. Scots Guards is a good one and the vocal standard is high. Pathé's recording process was very variable in quality, in this instance unfortunately, less satisfactory than those of its competitors, and it shows. The chorus often sounds thin and distant. In 1907 it was difficult to record ensembles of eight or more; in this set, they don't sound much more numerous than that. The soloists are heard to better advantage. A good portion of the score is represented, with sufficient continuity of soloists to give some satisfaction as an overall performance of the work. The general effect, though, is uneven. Some tempos are quite slow, others are lively, without much apparent reason. "A man who would woo a fair maid" skips along briskly; "A private buffoon" and "Were I thy bride" are deadly slow. "When a wooer goes a-wooing" is on the fast side and seems entirely miscalculated. Amy Evans, who sings Elsie and Kate, qualifies as a bona-fide Savoyard, she appeared in *Fallen Fairies* as a replacement for Nancy McIntosh two years after making this recording. That she had the necessary soprano credentials is demonstrated. Her voice is not as weighty as some successful Elsies have been, but it works nevertheless. Francis Ludlow has a finer voice than often heard in the role of Jack Point, although his characterization is somewhat uninteresting. Using the band members to call "Encore!", such as occurs at the end of "I've jibe and joke", was a device used to fill the side, rather than a response to a fine performance. Ben Ivor is a neutral Fairfax; solid enough, but lacking the ability to inspire either admiration or dislike for his deeds. Emily Foxcroft has the difficult assignment of singing both Phoebe and Dame Carruthers. She succeeds in altering her focus for each character, most successfully as Carruthers. "When our gallant Norman foes" has the depth and breadth it needs. Bantock Pierpoint sings three parts: Sir Richard Cholmondeley, Sergeant Meryll and Wilfred Shadbolt. He is solid in the ensembles and as Meryll, he does a handsome job as Sir Richard, but is too stolid for Wilfred. This is the first recording of the second verse of couplets for the Yeomen in the Act I finale. That they would be included in such an abbreviated performance is a striking circumstance. The Act II finale is a strange hybrid. It begins with the introduction to "I have a song to sing, o" as played in the first act; then it goes to Jack Point's touching solo, with a choral response; this is followed by Elsie's verse (with "peerly proud/laughed aloud"); then comes a third verse for Point, taken from Act I and in conclusion the end of the finale is sung.

Pathé and their competing companies also recorded other Gilbert and Sullivan operas around this time. These initial efforts came to be considered experiments that didn't really succeed. For a while, the companies stopped trying. Then, The Gramophone Company began its historic collaboration with Rupert D'Oyly Carte, and the magic really began.

BRUCE I. MILLER

The set of eleven cylinders was originally issued in September and October 1907 at 1/- each cylinder, something like £11 the set today. The nine Pathé discs at 4/- per disc, however, today would be about £36 the set. Until recently examples of the discs, less fragile and easier to store, were known, but the cylinders were thought to have been lost entirely. Happily, nine of the cylinder set are now known to exist in two copies and a tenth in one copy.

Sound Wave and Talking Machine Review declared that, "These records of HMS Pinafore (will) please our friends among the phono public."

"Complete" is a word which appealed to collectors then as much as now. This set contained just about one quarter of the music in the opera.

The announcements of the solos are by the artists; the concerted items are announced by Russell Hunting. The start of one announcement is missing on the original.

949 does not appear in any catalogue. No reason is known. If it was in sequence within the set, it might well have contained "Kind Captain I've important information"

Four cylinders were subsequently re-released as Pathé discs:

940 on 77318	
943 on 77682	December 1908
945 on 77729	April 1909
951 on 77726	April 1909

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