

H.M.S. PINAFORE

The Savoy Opera  
with  
Walter Hyde & Harry Dearth

In the summer of 1903 the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company left London to tour. At this time the record industry was in its infancy. The pioneering Gramophone & Typewriter Company was supreme. But soon it would receive a serious challenge, particularly in Gilbert and Sullivan recording, from one of its newer rivals, the Odeon Company.

In 1904 Odeon introduced the first double-sided records. In 1905 they claimed to be pressing their records in a new material called "Empedite". *We are not stating too much if we say that the quality of our records is absolutely perfect...* and by 1906, Odeon's new releases were listed directly beneath those of the Gramophone & Typewriter Company in *Talking Machine News*, an early trade magazine. So, when the D'Oyly Carte Company returned to the Savoy Theatre in December of 1906, both the Odeon and the Gramophone & Typewriter companies had recognized the recording opportunities that this presented.

The D'Oyly Carte began its engagement with *The Yeomen of the Guard*. They were planning to present *The Mikado* in the spring of 1907, although this production was eventually banned because of the State visit of Prince Fushimi. Nevertheless, in May, October, November and December of 1906, the Gramophone & Typewriter Company issued, a few discs at a time, the first "complete" recordings of *The Mikado*; and, in December 1907, *The Yeomen of the Guard*. "Complete" might not pass the Trade Descriptions Act today; *The Mikado* lacked its overture and seven numbers, and *The Yeomen of the Guard* was minus four numbers and the greater part of both finales.

These sets were awkward to handle. Not only were they bulky, being on seventeen and nineteen single-sided records respectively, but the sets contained ten and twelve inch records. [A German *Die Fledermaus* included twelve-, ten- and seven-inch discs, with album pages to match.] They were sung by a group of contracted artistes sometimes referred to as the Sullivan Operatic Party, and included such recognised singers such as Peter Dawson, Eleanor Jones-Hudson, Amy Augarde, Ernest Pike and Stanley Kirkby. George Baker, whose recording career began in 1909, has related how singers would frequently walk into the Gramophone Company studios in the early days of recording, pick up a sheet of music which they had never seen before, and immediately record it "off the line". Many sides in the early Gramophone & Typewriter Company sets sound as if they had been recorded in precisely this way. Often verses were cut to suit the maximum time per side, though sometimes verses were repeated if a side seemed too short. When a chorus was required, one singer per vocal line was often all that was

provided, and one soloist was often called upon to sing more than one character in an opera.

A much more systematic approach to G & S recording was undertaken later in 1907 by Russell Hunting and Louis Sterling, two American émigrés with considerable recording experience. They had formed an English company, Sterling and Hunting, Ltd., which produced and distributed records for Odeon. Sterling and Hunting, perhaps anticipating a revival of *H.M.S. Pinafore* in 1908, produced a series of excerpts from it on eleven cylinders, in September and October of 1907. The cast of this set included Walter Hyde, Harry Dearth and the "Sterling Operatic Chorus", a singing ensemble of sixteen.

*Experts have hitherto expressed the opinion that it is impossible to effectively record choruses on the Phonograph, but experiments undertaken by Mr. Russell Hunting led to the discovery of a system by which perfect results may be obtained, and once again "Sterlings" have proved their superiority over all other makes, in the magnificent records of Gilbert and Sullivan's "H.M.S. PINAFORE" which are now published.*

So ran the brochure that was issued with the cylinders.

*A large body of operatic artistes was specially trained for several weeks, with the result that both solos and choruses from this celebrated work are reproduced with a fidelity which is simply marvellous...*

Whilst it is unlikely that the singers rehearsed for "several weeks", it is clear that Sterling and Hunting were inviting comparison with some of the more casually recorded sides in the Gramophone Company sets. [The company ceased to be involved with typewriters at the end of 1907.]

Two months after the release of the cylinder set, and in time for the Christmas market, Sterling and Hunting issued their recording of *H.M.S. Pinafore* on discs: "*The Complete Opera in Art Album--50 shillings*",

*H. M. S. PINAFORE is comprised of ten Double-Sided ODEON Records made by WELL-KNOWN ARTISTES. These are supplied in Art Album, in which is also insetted a removable Portrait Study of the Principal Artistes, a "de Luxe" Souvenir telling the story of the Opera...*

The Odeon *H.M.S. Pinafore* was one of the earliest attempts at glamour packaging in the record business.

*As the value of the records alone is 50s., it will be seen that the Album, etc., is supplied FREE OF CHARGE. Although the records may be purchased separately, only purchasers of Complete Set are entitled to the Album...*

At a price of 50 shillings [10 records @ 5/-], the complete *H.M.S. Pinafore* was indeed a bargain compared to the prices of 65 and 75 shillings which the Gramophone Company was asking for their single-sided sets of *The Yeomen of the Guard* and *The Mikado*.

Like the cylinder set, the Odeon discs boasted a "full operatic chorus and orchestra", and a cast which included Walter Hyde and Harry Dearth as Ralph Rackstraw and Captain Corcoran. Hyde and Dearth were well known singers in the first decade of the 20th Century. They would be considered "crossover artists" today, that is, in the sense that they performed both popular and more serious music as required. Walter Hyde, who went on to an important career in opera and oratorio, was appearing in musical

comedy in 1907, specifically *Miss Hook of Holland* with Isabel Jay, and *Three Kisses* with Walter Passmore. Harry Dearth was a well known concert and ballad singer who made many records for the Odeon and Gramophone companies. The London comic Willie Rouse was added to the cast as Sir Joseph Porter, but little remains of his career outside of two early records for the Zonophone Company with the intriguing titles: "At the seaside" and "Let her drown", and (years later) "Alleged humour at the piano".

Good as these singers were, however, no member of the Odeon cast appeared in *H.M.S. Pinafore* at the Savoy Theatre the following year. Prior to the first world war "original cast recordings" were scarcely known. In the early days of the gramophone, songs from London shows were usually recorded by members of a record company's "stable" of recording artists. Frequently these singers would go to see the operettas and musicals in the West End, and then imitate the singers whose songs they were performing on record. A D'Oyly Carte touring company presented *H.M.S. Pinafore* at Hammersmith, Holloway, Deptford, Clapham, Croydon and Peckham in February and early March of 1907, where the Odeon artists could have seen it.

Messrs. Hunting and Sterling felt that it was important to claim authenticity of the performances on their recording, for they took pains to point out that *Every record is made under the personal supervision of Mr. Russell Hunting*. While the January 1908 issue of *Sound Wave* ungrammatically assured the public that *The list of artistes is every whit as brilliant as if the opera were being given at the Savoy instead of in one's own home*.

The Odeon Company wanted to make sure that the public believed that their G & S recordings were in every way superior to those of the Gramophone Company.

The Odeon cast may not have boasted artists like Henry Lytton, Richard Temple, or Leo Sheffield, but the Odeon singers were confident, idiomatic, and, as the advertising was careful to point out, well rehearsed. They produced a recording the Odeon Company could be proud of. And proud they must have been, for within a year, they issued a "complete" recording of *The Mikado* in the same format with a substantially similar cast, with the important substitution of Walter Passmore as Ko-Ko.

However, a fine product is not always a guarantee of success. Despite the high quality of the early Odeon recordings, it would appear that they did not sell terribly well, because of their extreme scarcity today. While odd sides from the Gramophone Company sets turn up continually in junk shops and modern collections, the Odeon sets are hardly ever met with. It is one of the anomalies of record collecting that the very best performances are sometimes the rarest. It is also one of the happier characteristics of the electronic age that if only one copy of something survives, it can be made available to the world.

John Wolfson

The orchestrations for this recording were arranged for the acoustic recording system on which strings reproduced poorly, but wind instruments very well; and a number of songs have been transposed downwards. The recording is virtually complete, lacking only the overture and "A British Tar"; the latter perhaps omitted as the music, at any rate

the refrain, is sung again in the first act finale. There are inconsistencies between the cast list and the labels: "Kind Captain" is sung by Deadeye, but the label has Alfred Cunningham; and the Boatswain's "Englishman's Song" is sung by Harry Dearth. It seems, from the matrix number, that side 20 had to be re-made; it has been suggested that a substitute sang Willie Rouse's part. The 1907 cylinder set of *H.M.S. Pinafore* is available on Symposium 1267.

Acknowledgements: On behalf of collectors Symposium Records thanks John Wolfson for making available this extremely rare, perhaps unique set, together with the illustrations in the album. Thanks are due also to Paul Lewis and Adrian Tuddenham for assistance with the production.

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