

Music on the Stage



8. Whitechapel & West End

November 6, 2024

8. Whitechapel & West End

THE SONG ON THE COVER WAS PUBLISHED IN 1885. In the same year, Gilbert and Sullivan premiered what would be the most successful of their 14 collaborations, *The Mikado*. The second hour of the class will be devoted to it: its inspiration, its purpose, its topical relevance, and the problems of presenting it today.

In the first hour, though, we shall try to put the piece into context, looking at the full spectrum of music and the stage in London, focusing on 1885 but extending before and after that date. We shall find a musical nation faced with a restricted selection of classical concerts. We shall find opera lovers in a city where most opera companies were short-lived. We shall see much of the desire for theatrical spectacle being answered by large-scale Shakespeare productions and that British tradition, the Christmas Pantomime. And we shall sample the melodrama, variety acts, and sing-alongs that were the nightly fare of music halls in more working-class neighborhoods. *rb.*

A. Content and Context

London theatre in 1885, a brief introduction.

Sullivan: *The Mikado*, "The sun whose rays" (Valerie Masterson)

Ware: "The boy I love is up in the gallery" (Jenny Coulson)

B. The Classical Scene

The unstable fortunes of professional music and opera in 19th-century Britain, contrasted with the powerful tradition of amateur music-making and choral singing.

Sullivan: *On Shore and Sea*, brief excerpt

Video: Huddersfield Choral Society in Vienna (newsreel, 1958)

Video: Huddersfield Choral Society in Leeds (flashmob, 2020)

Balfe: *The Bohemian Girl*, "I dreamt that I dwelt" (Claudia Boyle)

C. Theatre, High and Low

From Sir Henry Irving's elaborate Shakespeare productions in the West End to the mixed fare of the Penny Gaffs in the East, theatre in 19th-century London covered an immense range, and most of it involved music. We shall concentrate, however, on two more middle-of-the-road genres: the Christmas Pantomime and the Victorian Music Hall.

Mackenzie: Entr'acte for Irving's *Coriolanus* (1890)

Daly: scene from *Under the Gaslight*

Documentary on Penny Gaffs, opening

Pantomime: *Jack and the Beanstalk*, excerpt

BBC Television: *The Good Old Days*, routine by John Inman

D. Gentlemen of Japan

Impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte extracted 14 comic operas out of Gilbert and Sullivan. The most successful of these was *The Mikado*, written under pressure in 1885, at a time when the two were barely on speaking terms. After some clips from *Topsy Turvy*, Mike Leigh's 1999 film about

the genesis of the opera, we look at the use of its supposed Japanese setting and enquire into the topics of authenticity and relevance. We shall watch scenes from the following:

Mike Leigh: *Topsy Turvy* (1999; Jim Broadbent, *Gilbert*)

Gilbert/Sullivan: *The Mikado* (D'Oyly Carte 1966; John Reed, *Ko-Ko*)

Gilbert/Sullivan: *The Mikado* (BBC/PBS 1983)

Gilbert/Sullivan: *The Mikado* (ENO 1987, revived 2015; Richard Suart, *Ko-Ko*; Jonathan Miller, *director*)

Michael **Balfe** (1808–70, *Irish composer*), Augustin **Daly** (1838–99, *American playwright*), Richard **D'Oyly Carte** (1844–1901, *English impresario*), William Schwenk **Gilbert** (1836–1911, *English playwright*), Augustus **Harris** (1852–96, *English impresario*), Alexander **Mackenzie** (1847–1935, *Scottish composer*), Arthur Seymour **Sullivan** (1842–1900, *English composer*), James McNeill **Whistler** (1834–1903, *American painter*)

The course website is www.brunyate.com/MusicStage
I will always respond to mail at rogerbrunyate@gmail.com