

**NAXOS**

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Sir Arthur

# SULLIVAN

## The Gilbert and Sullivan Overtures

including:

The Mikado

The Pirates of Penzance

HMS Pinafore

The Yeomen of the Guard

The Gondoliers

Iolanthe

Royal Ballet Sinfonia

Andrew Penny

£/W

## Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900): Overtures

The twelve overtures included in the present recording could not better illustrate why the music of Arthur Sullivan, though very much of its own time, has survived so gloriously the changes of musical taste of the last hundred years. There is little doubt that Gilbert's witty, satirical libretti proved a more effective stimulus to Sullivan's creativity than any lofty Victorian text or Biblical subject would ever do. Sullivan poured some of his very best music into the Savoy Operas and with the financial acumen for which he was well known extracted these overtures to provide independent concert works and further support for his expensive life-style.

His partnership with W.S. Gilbert was so successful that the name Sullivan is now rarely mentioned by itself. Even his instrumental music, as in these overtures, is often casually referred to as *G. and S.* This was certainly not the case during much of Sullivan's lifetime, when he occupied an elevated position in the British musical establishment and was among the leading figures of Victorian England.

At the time England was described by some abroad as 'the land without music'. In retrospect this seems a harsh judgement. The Victorians, whether conscious of this pejorative description or not, seemed unconcerned that their musical life was dominated by Austro-German music and Italian opera. Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Spohr, Mendelssohn, Rossini and Meyerbeer formed the staple diet of the concert-going middle classes. Amongst living composers Mendelssohn in particular occupied a special place in the affections of the British, from the Queen herself down to the members of the most provincial of choral societies.

In his earliest works, incidental music to *The Tempest* and the *Symphony in E (The Irish)*, Sullivan was undoubtedly heavily influenced by Mendelssohn, a trait that was variously deemed by the critics to be both a fault and a virtue. Far from hampering his career, this

enabled him relatively early in his career to achieve a uniquely popular position in English musical life. Someone who could sound so like their beloved Mendelssohn yet had a British name was an irresistible combination. By the time he was thirty Sullivan, son of a military bandmaster and professor at Kneller Hall, was conducting his own music in the country's most fashionable concert-halls and achieving a successful hearing abroad. It may have been the ease with which he achieved this celebrity and the time that he needed to put aside for his social life, or perhaps the weighty responsibility of being seen as England's answer to the German and Viennese masters, but Sullivan soon withdrew from large-scale symphonic composition to channel his talents into the light operatic works that have lasted so well. Not that he deserted other musical forms entirely. His good business head ensured that throughout the rest of his life there was a steady stream of shorter pieces that would be assured of wide circulation as printed music; solo songs and part-songs, anthems and services, hymns and a few massed choral works for ceremonial occasions or large musical festivals. A real renaissance of English music was to occur toward the end of Sullivan's life but he was to have little part in it.

The composition of eleven of the overtures included here spans a period of twenty years, from 1877 to 1896. The much earlier piece *Cox and Box*, composed in 1866, is noteworthy in several ways: the libretto is not by Gilbert and the circumstances of its creation illustrate so well how Sullivan seemed constantly to benefit from good fortune. First devised as a drawing-room entertainment in the home of a well-to-do friend, *Cox and Box* was written at the suggestion of one of the circle, F. C. Burnand, the editor of *Punch*, who contributed the libretto. Sullivan composed the music so quickly that for the first few performances, at which he played the piano there was not even a written out accompaniment. It must surely have been to the

surprise of both librettist and composer that within the next few years the piece had been taken into the professional theatre, to be given several hundred performances. It is quite remarkable that a work born with so few labour pains in mid-Victorian England can still command a devoted audience at the end of the twentieth century.

Sullivan, however, did not, from this point on, enjoy immediate and undiluted acclaim for his operas. In the nine years before *Trial By Jury*, his first acknowledged success with Gilbert, there were to be two false starts, *The Contrabandista* with Burnand again as librettist and the very first collaboration with Gilbert, *Thespis, or The Gods Grown Old*, both flopped. With the production of *Trial By Jury*, however, a short work written as part of a double-bill with Offenbach's *La Périchole*, the triumvirate of Gilbert, Sullivan and Richard D'Oyly Carte was established. The *Savoy Operas*, named after the Savoy Theatre which D'Oyly Carte built to house them, followed in quick succession, from *The Sorcerer* of 1877 through to *The Grand Duke* of 1896, the first night of each one bringing an

unmissable highlight of the London social calendar.

The present overtures illustrate clearly all those aspects of Sullivan's music that have helped maintain his popularity; the elegance and wit, the fecundity of melodic invention, the dance-like character of many of the songs and his deft, effective orchestration. Perhaps reflecting how much time he had available as he approached each first night, the overtures are not all of similar construction. Some, indeed, are simple *potpourris* of the main tunes of the opera, while in others he has taken the trouble to develop fewer themes to a greater extent, combining them with snatches of others, to reveal his fluent and untroubled technique. A business dispute in 1890 between Gilbert on the one side and Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte on the other effectively ended the partnership, although there were two subsequent unenthusiastic collaborations, *Utopia Limited* in 1893 and *The Grand Duke* of 1896, both of which were more coolly received by both public and critics.

**Christopher Mowat**

## Royal Ballet Sinfonia (Orchestra of Birmingham Royal Ballet)

As the only regularly contracted ballet orchestra in Britain, the Royal Ballet Sinfonia enjoys a full touring schedule, appearing with Birmingham Royal Ballet in its home town, in London and elsewhere and frequently with the Royal Ballet. The Royal Ballet Sinfonia has appeared with many of the world's other leading ballet companies, including Paris Opéra Ballet, New York City Ballet, Australian Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and, most recently, with the Kirov during its London Coliseum season of *Nutcracker*. Concert performances at the Barbican and Royal Festival Hall

in London, Birmingham's Symphony Hall and other major British venues form a regular part of the Sinfonia's work in addition to its commitment to ballet. The orchestra's opera performances include the Royal Opera's acclaimed production of *Turandot* at Wembley Arena. The Royal Ballet Sinfonia's recent recordings include video soundtracks to Birmingham Royal Ballet's *Nutcracker*, *Coppélia* and *Hobson's Choice* and CDs of English string music, the film scores of Richard Addinsell and *The Ladykillers*, music from the Ealing film Comedies.

## Andrew Penny

Andrew Penny was born in Hull and initially studied the clarinet at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, where he also worked as conductor of the Opera Unit. The newly established Rothschild Scholarship in conducting led to study with Sir Charles Groves and Timothy Reynish and work as assistant with Richard Hickox and Elgar Howarth. Winner of the prestigious Ricordi Prize, he achieved a major success with the Vaughan Williams opera *Riders to the Sea* at Sadlers Wells Theatre in London. Andrew

Penny subsequently studied with Sir Edward Downes and made a number of radio recordings in Holland and Britain. He has conducted regularly for both the Naxos and Marco Polo CD labels, recording principally with the RTE Concert Orchestra and National Symphony Orchestra in Dublin. There have been other recording engagements in Australia and in Kiev, while in Dublin he is recording a cycle of symphonies by Malcolm Arnold. His recordings have won considerable critical acclaim both in Europe and America.

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SULLIVAN: The Gilbert and Sullivan Overtures

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STEREO

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Sir Arthur  
**SULLIVAN**

(1842-1900)

## The Gilbert and Sullivan Overtures

Royal Ballet Sinfonia

(solo oboe: Alaster Bentley)

Andrew Penny

DDD

Playing  
Time  
69:41

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SULLIVAN: The Gilbert and Sullivan Overtures

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<b>1</b>	<b>Cox and Box</b>	2:41
<b>2</b>	<b>The Sorcerer</b>	5:15
<b>3</b>	<b>HMS Pinafore</b>	4:13
<b>4</b>	<b>The Pirates of Penzance</b>	7:18
<b>5</b>	<b>Patience</b>	5:27
<b>6</b>	<b>Iolanthe</b>	7:18
<b>7</b>	<b>Princess Ida</b>	3:58
<b>8</b>	<b>The Mikado</b>	8:04
<b>9</b>	<b>Ruddigore</b>	6:45
<b>10</b>	<b>The Yeomen of the Guard</b>	5:16
<b>11</b>	<b>The Gondoliers</b>	6:56
<b>12</b>	<b>The Grand Duke</b>	5:25

Recorded at St James's, New Southgate, London  
on 15th, 20th and 21st January, 1997.

Producer: Philip Lane Engineer and editing: Antony Askew  
Music Notes: Christopher Mowat

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Cover Illustration: Two Very Fanny Japs at the Savoy.  
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