A Note on Gilbert by Sullivan

by

Jeffrey Kresky

The first thing I have to decide upon is the rhythm, and I arrange the rhythm before I come to the question of melody.

<div align="right">

Arthur Sullivan, explaining his method
of composition to his biographer,
Arthur Lawrence, in 1899.

</div>

If, say, Offenbach, had set the following verse of W.S. Gilbert:

> A wandering minstrel I –
>   A thing of shreds and patches,
>   Of ballads, songs and snatches,
> And dreamy lullaby!

I think he would have used the rhythm of Ex. 1. For this is the present rhythm and metre of the verse. Arthur Sullivan, however, casts the words to the rhythm of Ex. 2.[1] That is, he follows the suggestion of the verse-rhythm for the first, third and fourth lines but fractures the one-to-one regularity of music on words by beginning the second line (at "A thing") too soon and then stretching it (at "shreds") in the middle. The result is a pleasing new shape for the four-line unit (a shape itself then established as a regularity *for the song*).

Ex. 1

Ex. 2

---

[1] I omit attacks that occur within the melismatic treatment of syllables, as these do not affect the timing of stresses. Thus   is represented

Gilbert's operetta verse is almost always strictly regular, both in line-length and internal line-rhythm as well as in rhyme scheme. Sullivan, indeed, often sets these verses with the "singsong" rhythm directly copied from the verse (complete with expected pauses at the ends of lines: poetic trimeter, for example, becomes four-beat-measured music, each fourth beat empty until the pick-up that may begin the next line of poetry); but, with significant frequency, he works as he does in the foregoing *Mikado* example, counterpointing the rhythm of the verse against a new regularity in the music. The result is refreshing but also subtle, for the patterning of verse lurks *under* the more directly experienced unfolding of the music.

Some results of this kind of "counterpoint" can be seen in an example of straight poetry. If Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* is "performed" – that is, read naturally, even if only in the mind's ear – it comes out like this:

> That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
>   Looking as if she were alive.
> I call That piece a wonder, now:
> Frà Pandolf's hands Worked busily a day,
> and there she stands.

(where each "line" is read steadily to the end, with a pause before moving on). In this reading, the rhymes seem to occur at uneven or random times:

> That's my last Duchess painted on the *wall*,
>   Looking as if she were alive.
> I *call* That piece a wonder, now:
> Frà Pandolf's *hands* Worked busily a day,
> and there she *stands*.

But in fact those rhyming words are evenly spaced: for lurking just under the "sung" surface of the performed version of the poem is the poet's regularity of line-length (and thus rhyme appearance, since the rhyming words conclude these lines), as of course indicated clearly by the original form of the lines printed on the page. If in the following, the italicised syllables are artificially stressed and the end-rhymes forcibly accented, the underlying rhythm (lacking only regularity of beat *contents* but yet with the rhyme occurring every four "beats") is revealed. A forced pause at the ends of lines 2 and 4 will further clarify the matter:

> *That's* my last *Duch*ess *paint*ed on the *WALL*,
> *Look*ing as *if* she were a*live*. I *CALL*
> *That* piece a *won*der, now: *Frà* Pandolf's *HANDS*
> Worked *bus*ily a *day*, and *there* she *STANDS*.

The result of the hiding of one rhythm beneath the other is, I feel, a counterpoint in the verse itself. In naturally read form, the rhyming words appear like Christmas tree lights or blinking stars randomly dotting the field. It is even surprising to discover – albeit with great force, denying the run-on feature constant throughout – that such a regularity actually times the appearance of the rhymed words.
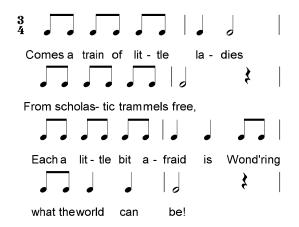
I believe Sullivan achieved a similar result with Gilbert's verses and that this characteristic of their joint work keeps it fresh and light. Several one-to-one songs will go by, the rhythm of Sullivan's music duplicating that of Gilbert's poetry, and then an exception will occur in which the song has of course the regular pattern of its own (for such is the general style within which this *genre* exists: as opposed to the *surface* of the Browning poem, which aims at no rhythmic patterning but only at normal English prosody), but this pattern is different from that of the verse that is simultaneously – in fact *thereby* – presented.

Later in *The Mikado* the following verse occurs:

> Comes a train of little ladies
> From scholastic trammels free,
> Each a little bit afraid is,
> Wondering what the world can be!

The regularity of the verse (each line has the same scanning, except that lines 1 and 3 have an extra unaccented last syllable) is treated by the composer in a way related to the above and particularly typical of him. The first three lines are set "straight" (again, to within melismatic elaboration within poetic feet: the first six quavers below are actually six pairs of slurred semiquavers), but the fourth is altered (see Ex. 3). Here, the fourth line ("Wondering…") is begun "early" (hence my inclusion of that word at the end of music line 3); this yields a run-on effect, which is then compensated for by the stretching of the final syllables ("world" and "can" should be quavers if the verse-rhythm were copied exactly for all four lines). Again the result is a breaking of the singsong pattern, the final rhyme seeming not to occur at the right time (although it does in fact sound in place, the contraction and stretch having just balanced each other out).[2]

Ex. 3

[2] In consulting the remaining three stanzas of this chorus, one will find Sullivan inventive in the large in a way just analogous to his in-verse flexibility. All four stanzas are word-metrically the same; but for stanza 2 he invents a counterpointing rhythm different from that of the first stanza; stanza 3 he sets only according to the poetic timing (uniquely for this song); and then stanza 4 seems to replicate the first stanza but is then stretched far out of shape even in terms of all the foregoing: a not atypical cadential device for him. Thus the strict and unchanging verse-rhythm beneath is expressed (or concealed) by a *progressing* counterpointing rhythm in the music; and the suggestion of a full return in the setting of the final stanza adds yet another level of shape over the poem.
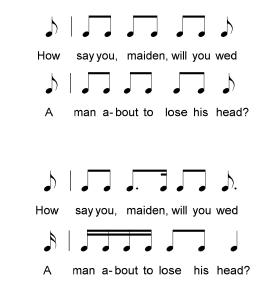
Often, indeed, Sullivan does make the rhyme come too soon or too late:

How say you, maiden, will you wed
A man about to loose his head?

In straightforward poetic reading of this couplet from *The Yeomen of the Guard*, "head" and "wed" appear after equal amounts of verbal time (see Ex. 4). But in Sullivan's setting the second line is compressed (see Ex. 5)[3] so that the word "head" occurs a beat earlier than expected (according to "verbal time"). *This* pattern then becomes the musical norm for the song, a constant counterpoint to the underlying verse structure (but again, as so often with Sullivan, itself varied as the song unfolds).

Ex. 4

How   say you, maiden, will you wed

A   man a-bout to   lose his head?

Ex. 5

How   say you, maiden, will you wed

A   man a-bout to lose   his head?

Sometimes the rhyme occurs regularly in the music but the space between rhyme points is subjected to a contortion not found in the verse rhythm (and then maintained for the song). In *H.M.S. Pinafore* the following verse occurs:

A many years ago,
When I was young and charming,
As some of you may know,
I practised baby-farming.

The timing and placement of musical stresses fully agrees with the verse, as represented below, where the *x*s are placed to show the succession of regularly spaced music beats (a hand clap at each such point while reciting the verse evenly will produce the flow of the music):

---

[3] I have represented this at twice the notated score speed, for easy comparison with the previous example.

	_x_		_x_		_x_		_x_
A	man-	y	years	a-	go,		
	_x_		_x_		_x_		_x_
When	I	was	young	and	charm-	ing,	
	_x_		_x_		_x_		_x_
As	some	of	you	may	know,		
	_x_		_x_		_x_		_x_
I	prac-	tised	ba-	by	farm-	ing.	

But six operettas later, in *Ruddigore*, the same verse-plan occurs:

<div align="center">

Sir Rupert Murgatroyd
His leisure and his riches
He ruthlessly employed
In persecuting witches.

</div>

This time, however, the composer places the musical stress (again regularly spaced in time and regularly filled) as follows (where the lines of words are shown according to music-measured groupings, which this time do not correspond to the printed lines of verse):

	_x_		_x_		_x_		_x_	
Sir	Ru-	pert	Mur-	ga-	troyd	His	lei-	sure
	_x_		_x_		_x_		_x_	
	and_____			his	rich-	es		
	_x_		_x_		_x_		_x_	
He	ruth-	less-	ly	em-	ployed	In	per-	se
	_x_		_x_		_x_		_x_	
	cu_____			-ting	witch-	es.		

If claps are made at each _x_, regularly spaced in time, the effect will be achieved. In both the *Pinafore* and *Ruddigore* examples, the rhyming words occur on the third of each four-grouped musical beats. But in the latter case, lines 2 and 4 begin "soon" and are in consequence stretched (the _x_s without new syllables). The sense of compression and expansion, again established as the norm for the song, once again synchronises with but counterpoints against the regular text - which, for me, is thereby enlivened and enriched.

There are indeed examples of more thoroughgoing invention of musical rhythm against verse-rhythm in these works: I think immediately of "Were I thy bride" from *The Yeomen of the Guard* or "So please you, Sir, we much regret" from *The Mikado*. Anyone familiar with these songs will have to read the text resolutely "straight", from the printed libretto alone, in order to be quite surprised by the extremely different but of course completely typical simplicity in the pattern of the underlying verse. For perhaps one out of every half-dozen songs of Gilbert set by Sullivan, the combined surface resembles that of *My Last Duchess*: a blend of two harnessed patterns presented in a single unfolding. For me, this particular feature contributes to the raising of Sullivan's Gilbert-inspired music above that of other composers of similar style and bent.