ARTHUR SEYMOUR SULLIVAN

BY FLORENCE A. MARSHALL

CONTAINED IN

FAMOUS COMPOSERS

AND THEIR WORKS

1891

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This biography and critique was written by the respected composer, conductor and writer Florence A. Marshall for a large scale effort entitled “Famous Composers and Their Works” published in 1891. This places the biography before Sullivan’s death in 1900. Sullivan had already completed the twelfth of the fourteen Gilbert and Sullivan operas, “The Gondoliers” in 1889; also his grand opera “Ivanhoe” in January 1891. Still to come was the successful light opera with libretto by Sydney Grundy, “Haddon Hall” in 1892; also the final two Gilbert and Sullivan operas, “Utopia Limited” in 1893 and “The Grand Duke” in 1896.

Florence Ashton Marshall (nee Thomas) was born in 1843; she studied music at the Royal Academy of Music in London. She married businessman, writer and music collector Julian Marshall in 1864 and had three daughters. Florence Marshall is most remembered for her two volume “Life and Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.”

Florence Marshall wrote many articles about English music of the period, including “Music and the People” in 1880 and “Music and the Masses” in 1892, both appearing in the periodical “The Nineteenth Century.” The dates of these two articles, written twelve years apart, fall within what is sometimes called “The English Musical Renaissance.”

Arthur Seymour Sullivan, the most widely and popularly known of living English composers, was born in London on the 13th of May, 1842. His father was bandmaster and chief professor of the clarionet, at Kneller Hall, the English military school of music. Arthur Sullivan's musical gifts were, from the first, unmistakable. Speaking at the Birmingham Midland Institute in the year 1888, he says of himself, "Music has been my incessant occupation ever since I was eight years old. All my energies, all my affections, have been bestowed upon it, and it has for long been to me a second nature." He was twelve years old when (in 1854) he entered the Chapel Royal as a chorister, and Mr. Helmore, precentor at the time, bears witness to the sweetness of his voice and the sympathetic beauty of his singing style. Young as he was he had already written several anthems and vocal pieces, of which at least one was published.

In 1856 he was elected to the scholarship just founded in memory of Mendelssohn, the most valuable musical prize in the United Kingdom. Without leaving the Chapel Royal choir (to which he continued to belong for another year), he entered the Royal Academy of Music, and studied there for two years under Sterndale Bennett and that most genial of musical teachers, Mr. (afterwards Sir John) Goss. In 1858 he was sent to the Leipsic Conservatory, where he remained for more than three years. His chief instructors were Plaidy, Hauptmann, Richter, J. Rietz and Moscheles. During his sojourn in Germany he wrote the "incidental music" to Shakespeare's "Tempest," which, first performed at the Crystal Palace in April, 1862, not long after his return to England, achieved an immediate and pronounced success, and launched its composer at once in the musical world of London. Until 1867 he was organist at the Church of St. Michael's, Chester Square; subsequently, till 1871, he acted as musical director to St. Peter's, Onslow Gardens. He first organized the band (since so successful) at the Brighton Aquarium. For some years he held a professorship of harmony and composition at the Royal Academy. He conducted the Glasgow Festivals for the seasons 1876 and '77, and the Covent Garden Promenade Concerts under Messrs. Gatti's management in 1878 and '79. Besides this he was principal of the then newly established National Training School for Music at South Kensington, from 1876 to 1881, when pressure of work and multiplicity of engagements obliged him to resign. He is now member of the Council of the Royal College of Music, which took the place of the National Training School. He conducted the Philharmonic Concerts of London for the years 1885, '86 and '87, and the Leeds (Triennial) Festivals in 188o, '83, '86 and '89. He is an admirable and masterly conductor, achieving the best results with the minimum of outward and visible effort.

Sir Arthur Sullivan was knighted by the queen on May 15, 1883. The honorary degree of Mus. Doc. had been conferred on him by the University of Cambridge in 1876, by that of Oxford in 1879. At the Paris International Exhibition of 1878 he was British Commissioner for Music, and was decorated with the "Legion d'Honneur." He also bears the order of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha.

The above crude list of facts and dates gives some idea of Arthur Sullivan's external activity. Apart from musical authorship his life has not been marked by great outward events; it has been chiefly passed, or at least has had its centre, in London.

Kind-hearted and keen-witted, full of genial humor and infectious vivacity, never at a loss for a *bon-mot* or a repartee, he is, and no wonder, a universal favorite. Eminently endowed with that *savoir-vivre* which enables him to adapt himself to his surroundings, he has always been especially welcome in those extremely exalted circles which by reason of their very exaltation are (to put it mildly) exposed to the danger of dullness. Boredom and Arthur Sullivan could not long exist together. At the same time this spoiled child of society is a true-hearted and devoted friend, and has always excited warm attachment in those who know him intimately. The present writer can speak from personal knowledge of the affection borne him by his old teacher, Sir John Goss, and loyally shared and returned by him, and that long, very long, after their relation as master and pupil had ceased.

His true biography is in his works, for he is one of the very rare musicians who have succeeded in making not only their fame but their living by their compositions. He has never been a public performer, and never a teacher for longer than he could help. From the pupils' point of view this is perhaps to be regretted, as, when he did teach, his hints and remarks were of the nature of principles rather than rules, and were acute and enlightening beyond any ordinary dry lesson. Perhaps for this very reason they were only suitable to special pupils. But teaching was always pain and grief to him; he shirked as much of it as he could, and finally abandoned it altogether. For the history of his compositions we must go back to 1862, the year of the production of the "Tempest" music. After this came the cantata "Kenilworth" (words by Chorley), written for the Birmingham Festival of 1864, and, in the same year, the music to a ballet, "L'Ile Enchantée." The next of his important works was, unhappily, a failure. This was the opera "The Sapphire Necklace," killed, as so many operas have been killed, by an utterly undramatic *libretto*. The music of this opera was subsequently absorbed by the composer in other works.

The year 1866 saw his symphony in E and the concerto for violoncello and orchestra (neither of which have been published), and the fine, effective concert overture "In Memoriam," in which the organ bears a part; written in memory of his father, to whom he was warmly attached and whom, at this time, he had the misfortune to lose. The overture to "Marmion" was written in 1867. In this year it was that Arthur Sullivan accompanied his friend Mr. (now Sir George) Grove on the celebrated exploring expedition to Vienna which resulted in the discovery of Schubert's MS. music to "Rosamunde," a discovery compared to which, in musicians' eyes, that of the northwest passage is insignificant and uninteresting. In 1869 he wrote a short, but very popular oratorio for the Worcester Festival, entitled "The Prodigal Son." In 1870 the lovely "Overtura di Ballo" for Birmingham. In 1871, for the Annual International Exhibition at the Albert Hall, the cantata "On Shore and Sea" (words by Tom Taylor). In 1872 the grand "Festival Te Deum," on the occasion of the Prince of Wales's recovery from dangerous illness. His most important oratorio, "The Light of the World" (the words of which were selected from the Bible by himself), was produced in 1873. For the Leeds Festival of 1880 he wrote the oratorio or sacred cantata "The Martyr of Antioch"; for that of 1886 "The Golden Legend," one of the most popular and deservedly popular works of its class that ever was penned.

Even these do not nearly exhaust the catalogue of Sir Arthur Sullivan's vocal and orchestral compositions apart from opera. He wrote, between 1871 and 1879, incidental music for three more of Shakespeare's plays. These are the "Merchant of Venice" (musically the most successful and best known of the three), "The Merry Wives of Windsor," and "Henry VIII." In 1888, the overture and incidental music to "Macbeth" was added to these. His songs are very numerous, and some of them have achieved an enormous popularity. It is rather unfortunate for their composer's fame that those of them which have met with the widest acceptance are by no means always the best, but there is some quality, even in the inferior specimens, which recommends them to singers; they are always grateful to sing, and, in spite of any objections to be urged against them, effective with audiences. Among them, however, are to be found songs of the highest beauty, such as "Orpheus with his lute," "O Fair Dove," "Arabian Love Song," "Birds in the Night," this last an attempted adaptation of the "Lullaby" in "Box and Cox," but this belongs properly to a different category. Mention should also be made of "The Window, or the Songs of the Wrens," a "Liederkreis" or series of songs written for music by Tennyson, and set by Sullivan in 1871.

Besides these, Sir Arthur Sullivan has written a large number of hymn tunes, one or two of which have become almost classical, and several anthems, services, part-songs, etc., of varying degrees of merit, but all meritorious and some excellent.

We have reserved for separate enumeration the dramatic works through which, more than any others, Sullivan is known, not only in England, but all over Europe, in Australia, and in America. To these we now return.

In 1867, he made a new departure by the production of "Box and Cox," a musical setting of F. C. Burnand's adaptation of J. Madison Morton's evergreen farce. The brightness and spirit of the piece, the beauty of the music and its strangely piquant contrast to the comical, indeed farcical words, were a new thing in English opera, and not only caught the public ear at once but captivated musicians as well. Unique of its kind, as then it was, its admirers little anticipated the large class of works it foreshadowed; works which have exceeded it in popularity, but will never obliterate the memory of this rare little piece, their original prototype. It was followed by "The Contrabandista," a short opera which was produced at the St. George Opera House in December, 1867, and deserved more success than it had.

In "Thespis, or the Gods grown old," produced in 1871 (but not published), Sullivan may be said to have met his fate, for the words of this extravaganza were by Mr. W. S. Gilbert. "The Zoo," "an original musical folly," and the popular extravaganza "Trial by Jury" (W. S. Gilbert), were both produced in 1875, and were, musically, of the very slightest construction, written for theatrical performers of no musical or vocal pretensions to speak of. With admirable skill and cleverness did Sullivan adapt himself to the incapacities of his interpreters. A large share, however, of the original success of "Trial by Jury" was due to the inimitable impersonation of the Judge by Sullivan's brother Frederick, whose much-regretted early death happened not long after. The effect produced by these slight pieces clearly indicated the vein of success only waiting for the right persons to work it, as soon as singers who could move about on a stage, or actors with some power of singing could be secured. "The Sorcerer" was the first of the long series of comic operas in which the names of Gilbert and Sullivan were, in the public mind, to be as indissolubly connected as the "Two Kings of Barataria." To them was now added an *impresario* of audacity and genius, Mr. D'Oyly Carte, and, it should also be mentioned, an artist who for very long filled the chief comic part in each opera with unrivalled cleverness, Mr. George Grossmith. "The Sorcerer" had a first run of one hundred and seventy-five nights, and has since been revived.

But it was eclipsed by its successor, "H.M.S. Pinafore," produced in May, 1878, which ran for seven hundred nights with a success of enthusiasm rarely if ever equalled. Many causes contributed to this; its nautical theme was one eminently calculated to take every class of Briton by storm; its wit and fun were irresistible; its sayings, its turns of phrase, became proverbial in an almost maddening degree, and to each of them was attached a musical counterpart which seemed a very impression of itself. The music, full of spirit and sparkle, was not better than much which has succeeded it, but, like the humor of the piece, it had then the fascination of novelty.

How anything could be expected to succeed after "Pinafore" is hard to understand, but "The Pirates of Penzance" (produced April, 1880) did succeed, and deserved to do so, for the music is certainly superior to that of "Pinafore." This was followed, in 1881, by "Patience," a happy and humorous skit on the prevailing affectations of the so-called aesthetic craze, which had a long and brilliant run. In 1882 came "Iolanthe, a fairy opera," in 1884, "Princess Ida," an adaptation of an old farce of Mr. Gilbert's on the story of Tennyson's "Princess," and in 1885 "The Mikado," the success of which in London rivalled the "Pinafore" fever. In this case a large part of the opera's immense popularity was directly and justly due to the charming *mise-en-scène*. In a Gilbert and Sullivan opera managed by Mr. D'Oyly Carte, nothing short of perfection is looked for in the way of stage decoration and stage management, but this was ultra-perfect, a feast to the eye. The fashion for everything Japanese was at its height, and found its apotheosis in this opera.

By this time, however, the peculiar vein of Gilbertian humor was getting a little worked out. The next piece, entitled "Ruddygore, an entirely original supernatural opera," was constructed on somewhat different lines, and was a kind of burlesque melodrama. In spite of its splendid staging it was no great success, either in England or America. "The Yeomen of the Guard," which followed it (in 1888), had more pretensions to the name of an *opera*, though a light one. It had a good overture, which no one listened to, and some charming numbers, side by side with others of quite inferior merit. The finale to the first act, and the delicious "singing farce" for duet and chorus, "The merryman and his maid," — the most gracefully ingenious conceit that ever came from the pen of author or composer, — claim a special word of mention. But the bulk of Gilbert and Sullivan supporters were no longer the musical and artistic folk who had delighted in "Box and Cox" and gauged the respective merits of "Pinafore" and "The Pirates." The joint authors had appealed more and more to the great mass of theatre-frequenters, who go, more often than not, in the expectation of being outrageously amused by quips and quiddities, and stimulated by stage accessories. This public decided, — and not altogether wrongly, — that the "Yeomen of the Guard" was neither one thing nor the other; too trivial for an opera, too serious for a farce. It ran for a considerable time, but certainly created no *furore*.

People began to say that "Gilbert and Sullivan" was "played out." But that people were at fault in this was speedily made clear on the production (Dec. 9, 1889) of "The Gondoliers, or the Two Kings of Barataria." As a piece of extravagant fun it could hardly be excelled, while musically it was equal to its predecessors, and its style shows some variation on theirs. That this farcical operetta and the grand opera "Ivanhoe," produced in public little more than a year afterwards, should be so nearly contemporaneous, seems little short of a marvel.

As a musician, Sullivan belongs to the classical school which succeeded Mendelssohn. But he may be said to trace his musical descent, through Goss and Attwood, to Mozart, and the older Italian masters whose atmosphere Mozart breathed. His own individuality is very marked, but he has more real native affinity with the composer [Mozart] of "ldomeneo," "Cosi fan tutte" and the "Requiem" than with that modern school which is a nineteenth century graft on a Bach stem. Still, he is essentially a child of his time. A born musician and a clever man, no dreamy idealist, but thoroughly practical, thoroughly capable in matters of art, apprehending and assimilating all the tendencies in the life of society around him, and knowing how to turn them all to account, his ideas have their foundation in the actual, and music is, in his hands, a plastic material, into which he can mould anything. His mastery of form and of instrumentation is absolute, and he wields them without the slightest semblance of effort. His taste is, as far as culture goes, unerring; his perceptions of the keenest; his sense of humor infectious and irresistible. Within certain limits his adaptability is wonderful. Within certain limits, we repeat, for his musicianly instincts are always paramount, and in his wildest sallies of opera-bouffe he never betrays them. His slightest pieces have a certain *cachet* which denotes the master. If his invention were as manifold and unlimited as is his power of dealing with his materials, if he had as much variety as versatility, it is hard to say what he might not achieve.

It follows naturally enough from this that the style he adopts for comic opera is the mock-heroic, which excites amusement by the suggestion of the most serious treatment in juxtaposition with ludicrous situations. In this style, indeed, he has no equal. It has won for him an immense popularity, for the ear of musicians and musical people appreciates the serious treatment, and the general public, musical or not, appreciates the ludicrous situations, while the style being *in itself* what all are more or less familiar with, the context only being changed, there is none of the trouble incidental to the recognizing of an altogether new thing. Yet this very popularity has its drawbacks. The serious works of a composer who has long been addicted to this mock-heroic style are almost sure to call up the memory of his comic works. Such a composer is like some popular comic actor, who, standing up to make a serious speech, convulses his audience by the mere words "Ladies and Gentlemen."

Do what he will, everyone recalls his features, not as they are, but as he has exhibited them, reflected, as it were, in the bowl of a spoon! All sentiment, in these Gilbert and Sullivan operas, leads up to a "sell" of some kind; and now, wherever we meet the sentiment we instinctively distrust it; we have learned to count on the sell. Yet this is, after all, what holds in its hand the secret of success. The spirit of mockery is rampant in this nineteenth century, and nothing is judged worthy to live which has not passed unscathed the universal ordeal. Does anything appear to be good? Turn on the bull's-eye of "chaff" and see whether it stands the scrutiny. And if it stands it not, then let it go down into oblivion and be seen no more. The *fin de siècle* [late nineteenth century] world divides itself into burlesquers and those who are burlesqued, and Sullivan has chosen to double the part [play both parts]. For this he has paid a price; how heavy, it is even now too early to pronounce.

But how beautifully he can fill what may be called the original, i.e. the classic *role*, may best be apprehended through his own travesty of it. The germ, and indeed more than that, of all that was to come, was contained (as has been already remarked) in "Box and Cox." In all this work there was not a weak number. The mock-Handelian song "Yes, yes, in those merry days," with its old-fashioned roulades of imitative scales; the exquisite lullaby lavished on Box's wretched rasher of bacon and which forcibly suggests the concatenation of pearls and swine; the long, breathless, dramatic recital of Box's preparation for the fatal leap from the cliff, — which he never took, — all these considered as pure music are beautiful, nor can Sullivan possibly improve on them in their own style when he wishes to produce a *bona fide* specimen of that style. They were worthy of a better *raison d'être*. But when Sullivan sits down to be serious, he does not always succeed so well as when he sits down to counterfeit seriousness.

The choruses in the later works are a new development, and deserve especial mention. Here the composer displays most happily his command of resource and contrivance; scientific methods are skilfully applied in the handling of the lightest themes; the artistic touches laid on with so light a hand that the workmanship disappears, and only the general effect remains to strike the hearer. These choruses abound in examples of the ingenious contrasting and interweaving of different themes, different rhythms and *tempi*; combinations such as Gounod and Verdi have made famous in the concerted pieces of their serious operas, and executed with a skill not inferior to theirs, only in this case the composer has deliberately expended it on works which, from their very nature, must be ephemeral.

As instances of this happy skill, it is enough to cite here the interwoven chorus and duet in "The Pirates of Penzance," "The glass is rising very high," and the immortal policemen's chorus in the same opera, "When the foeman bares his steel," with the simultaneous strains of the soloist "Go, ye heroes, go to glory." Is it possible to do anything better than these? Or, in a rather different way, see the first chorus, or chain of choruses in the "Gondoliers." In this opera occurs a little duet for soprano and tenor, "There was a time," which deserves to be ranked with Box's "Lullaby." It has the ring of a Tennyson lyric in its tender grace, its note of passionate regret; more Tennysonian by far than the setting of the Laureate's song-cycle "The Window." How Sullivan could bestow a little gem like this on so extravagant a comedy, in which, indeed, it goes for nothing, is hard to imagine. His worst enemy could scarcely, one might say, have played him a more knavish trick than to insert it where it is. But what could his best friend do for a composer so ready to give himself the "happy despatch" more deftly than anyone can do it for him?

In the "Gondoliers" Sir Arthur Sullivan would seem to have aimed, and not unsuccessfully, at a style more light in itself than that of his other operas, and to have avoided the pseudo-classic. This is partly due, no doubt, to the imitation of popular Italian *canzone*. But there is another force in operation which must counteract any radical change now in the character of his works of this description. When he and Mr. Gilbert took each other "for better, for worse," it was a union fruitful for some time in the most brilliant results, but tending in the long run to a certain sameness. There is a limit to topsy-turveydom, which is reached when the surprise consequent on joke, absurd situation or daring paradox is only surprise at — being surprised! But it seems too late to change now; too late, at least, for the musical party to the contract. They have tried divorce, but it did not work; at any rate the public thought not, and they have come together again. Their features have grown alike, and either one of them recalls, and always must recall the other. No composer can set Mr. Gilbert's quaint conceits without sliding surely and rapidly into the Sullivan vein. As for Sullivan, he may set whose comic libretti he will, but his audience will hear Gilbert through it all; every cadence, every turn of phrase suggests the Gilbertian "sell" waiting round the corner. And when it does not come, every one will be disappointed, including those who sometimes speak disrespectfully of it when it does come. He is unlikely indeed to find another comic librettist of Mr. Gilbert's genius and high literary skill. Equally improbable is it that Mr. Gilbert could find a second Sullivan. The taste, wit, fancy, the perfect workmanship, and rarer than all in an English musician, the knowledge and comprehension of stage requirements, — to find these gifts united in a composer who does not mind adapting them all to the limitations of opera-bouffe companies and of ordinary theatrical audiences, is uncommon indeed.

Among Sullivan's serious works the "Golden Legend" is that which has the strongest hold on popular favor. Nor does it in the least recall the comic operas. The music with which it clothes Longfellow's imaginative poem is full of picturesque and varied beauty, and effective in the highest degree. No better instance could be quoted of the classic simplicity which characterizes its composer's style; his pure harmony, lucid and melodious contrapuntal writing; his restraint in the use of his materials; not an unnecessary touch anywhere, nothing done for mere meretricious effect. With singers, both soloists and chorus, this work will always be a great favorite.

The overtures "In Memoriam" and "Di Ballo" are perfect specimens of Sullivan's orchestral writing. The last named might be taken as typical of its composer's special characteristics at their best in his application of classic form and contrivance to the airiest and most romantic of dance-tunes. No verbal description can convey an idea of the grace of its interwoven themes or the charms of its instrumentation. The work has a fascination which is all its own.

Sir Arthur Sullivan's last great work, the grand opera of "Ivanhoe," came as a surprise to some who feared that, after his long series of comic operas, it was too late for him to strike out successfully a new and higher dramatic line. It was written for the opening of Mr. D'Oyly Carte's Royal English Opera House, in January, 1891, and was played every night until the closing of the theatre for the summer vacation. If it did not make the success of the house, it at least solved, more nearly than any other work of the kind has done, the seemingly hopeless problem of a serious English opera, at once good in itself and dear to the public. Its music is noble and of great beauty. In its continuity the composer complies with the conditions of modern opera, while he never relaxes his hold on melody and form, but does not allow them (excepting perhaps in one instance) to assert themselves in the old conventional way. The part of the Jewess is beautiful throughout, and that of the Templar full of dramatic force. These parts found ideal representatives in Miss Macintyre and Mr. Eugene Oudin respectively, while the singing of Mr. Ben Davies in the part of Ivanhoe is a thing not to be forgotten. It seems a pity there is no overture; the lovely little orchestral introduction to the third act is a mere suggestion which makes the absence of a more important instrumental prelude all the more tantalizing. If the permanent popularity of this opera was not quite as great as was due to its high qualities, — its attractive subject, good libretto and worthy stage-mounting, — the causes are perhaps not far to seek.

There are other operas, even better and greater than "Ivanhoe," which yet might not pass the ordeal to which it was subjected. It is doubtful whether "Don Giovanni," the "Nozze di Figaro," "Fidelio" or "Lohengrin" would have continued, in London, to draw crowded houses, at high prices, if continued nightly for five or six months, without any change of programme, by a double company of most unequal merit, constantly shuffled like a pack of cards, so that the audience could not choose beforehand which cast they would hear. Perhaps "Faust" is the only opera of which the popularity might stand this test.

"Ivanhoe," in its music as in its subject, realizes the idea of a thoroughly English opera, by the clearness and directness of its methods of appeal, and the absence of anything abstract or speculative. It has not eclipsed nor even rivalled its composer's popular "hits" in other lines, but it has every claim to be considered his *chef d'oeuvre* up to the present time. Yet there is much in it and in other works, that points to a possible dramatic success not yet achieved by him, but surely to be hoped for, if life and health are granted him. One imagines a ball-scene to the strains of an "Overtura di Ballo," a night-scene in some old German town where the bells, as in the "Golden Legend," tell their weird tale; some uproarious supper-scene to the barbaric accompaniment of the chorus "Let us eat and drink" in the "Prodigal Son," love-passages like the duet "In such a night as this" ("Kenilworth"); all these call up visions of possibilities as yet unfulfilled.

Sir Arthur Sullivan, at the present moment, reminds some of us of the figure of Garrick in Sir Joshua Reynold's famous picture, where the great actor is represented as undecided whether to yield to the appealing charms of Tragedy or of Comedy. Like Garrick, Sullivan has till lately cast in his lot with Comedy, but, while preparing to depart with her, he turns, as Tragedy lays her warning hand on his arm, with a laughing, helpless apology to her. It would seem, though, just now, as if our composer's heart was more and more drawn towards Tragedy, in whose steps he half instinctively follows, while ever and anon he casts a backward look of tearful regret towards the receding familiar figure of Comedy. [See next page.] To which of them will he next throw the handkerchief? Only time can show.

David Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1760-61.