

The GILBERT & SULLIVAN

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2012 NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY OF AUSTIN

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Libby Weed



At a recent meeting of the board of directors, **Reba Gillman** told the rest of us about a book entitled *A Most Ingenious Paradox* by Gayden Wren. Hearing her words as we closed our meeting, we all felt a surge of renewed purpose as she encouraged us to remember that we are promoting something well worth preserving and sharing with the world when we spread the good word about the works of William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan to our community and when we produce our musicales and grand productions.

I got on my computer and ordered a copy of the book, published in 2006, and I'd like to tell you a little about it. Wren, the entertainment editor for The New York Times Syndicate, is a playwright who has produced two works based on G&S themes. He opines that while the G&S operas were written well over a century ago, and while they were regarded even by their creators as merely light entertainment, they have emerged over the century-plus of their existence as something far more significant. Wren describes these fourteen operas as "the world's most popular body of musical-theater works" and makes the bold claim that they rank second only to Shakespeare in the history of English-language theater.

Most books written about Gilbert and Sullivan have focused on the authors, but this one is a detailed examination of the fourteen operas. We all enjoy G&S shows for their lovely tunes, clever dialogue, and lively lyrics, but Wren holds that it is the timeless themes underlying the characters and stories themselves that are the key to the operas' endurance. He believes it is because these works speak truth about humanity and society that they appeal to audiences as powerfully now as they did in the 1800s. I think he might have something there.

You might enjoy finding a copy of Wren's book and reading it for yourself. I know you will enjoy attending our next musicale to hear Anna Russell and some of our leading singers and actors parodying these remarkable parodies. And I am very confident that you will look forward to our Society's premiere production of one of the fourteen operas, *Princess Ida*, next June.

Joining Made Easier

You can now pay your membership dues or make donations online. Visit www.gilbertsullivan.org and click on "Join Us" and you will see our new easy-to-use online payment page. If you are not a member, you can join the Society as well. We hope that members find this convenient. Of course, if you prefer, you can continue to make payments by mail.



Sunday, November 11, 3 pm

Worley Barton Theater at Brentwood Christian School
11908 North Lamar (see map on page 6)

Join us for a special event as we screen the beloved and hilarious "How to Write Your Own Gilbert and Sullivan Opera" by singer and comedienne Anna Russell. Recorded in 1984, this classic satire is still fresh and funny as ever. No true lover of Gilbert & Sullivan can dare miss this parody that reveals some of the standard elements of all Gilbert & Sullivan operas in a hilariously entertaining fashion.

Following the video will be live musical performances which illustrate the satirical points brought forward in the video. **Janette Jones** is the producer. The singers will include **Kate Clark, Patricia Combs, Andy Fleming, David Fontenot, Russell Gregory, Rosa Harris, Daytha Hulion, Angela Irving, Leonard Johnson, Jeffrey Jones-Ragona, June Julian, Robert L. Schneider,** and **Jennifer Tullis.** **Jeanne Sasaki** will be the accompanist.

This Musicale is based on an entertainment called *Parody of Parodies*, devised and produced by Glen Gordon for the Valley Light Opera of Amherst, Massachusetts.

For more information on Anna Russell, see Rafe's column on page 4.

Please bring munchies to share!

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Opening Musicale: Soprano Songfest

by Reba Gillman



At Saint Matthew's Episcopal Church at 3 pm on Sunday, September 9 – our friends are gathering, over 130 strong, for the first G&S Musicale of the new season, and what a treat is in store for them! **Janette Jones** has put together a delightful show: a *Soprano Songfest*, cleverly using the many associations and connections, with

some of our favorite singers performing. Sopranos: **Carol Brown**, **Tamsen Cohagan**, **Patricia Combs**, and **June Julian**; Gentlemen: **Arthur DiBianca**, **David Fontenot**, **Holton Johnson**, and **Robert L. Schneider**; Orchestra well represented by our Lady High Pianist, **Marti Mortensen Ahern**, at the piano.

President **Libby Weed** gave us her usual enthusiastic welcome and turned the proceedings over to Mistress of Ceremonies Janette Jones, who said "I know all too well the fate of the Contralto in G&S operas. It seems I spend all my time running after men who want nothing to do with me. But the Sopranos in G&S, be they Lyric, Dramatic, Coloratura, or Mezzo, fare much better. They have men fawning all over them. ... Just let the word get out that the sopranos are singing and we have the men lining up to be there. Like these guys – claiming to be just standing around," and the music began. The gentlemen sang "Standin' on the Corner" (*The Most Happy Fella*, by Loesser). Tamsen responded with "The sun, whose rays are all ablaze With ever-living glory, Does not deny His majesty – He scorns to tell a story! ... I mean to rule the earth, As he the sky – We really know our worth, The sun and I!" (*The Mikado*). Next June stepped up to sing the beautiful "My Lord, a suppliant at your feet I kneel, Oh listen to a mother's fond appeal! Hear me tonight! I come in urgent need – 'Tis for my son, young Strepthon, that I plead! ... He Loves!" (*Iolanthe*). Robert, as her husband, the Lord Chancellor, who thought she had died and left him a widower, sang a song from earlier in the opera, "The Law is the true embodiment Of everything that's excellent" (*Iolanthe*).

Janette said, "Our next major summer production will be *Princess Ida*, set in medieval times. ... Let's hear from one of the professors at the all-women's university as she explains how these women feel about men, which should prepare us for the merriment in store." Patricia, as Lady Psyche, sang "A Lady fair of lineage high" (*Princess Ida*); Carol as Princess Ida sang "I built upon a rock, But ere Destruction's hand Dealt equal lot To Court and cot, My rock had turned to sand!" (*Princess Ida*). Then David sang a song from a Broadway musical also set in medieval times. As King Arthur, he sang about the difficulty men feel as they deal with women: "How to Handle a Woman" (*Camelot*, Lerner & Loewe).

June, a true soprano and dedicated performer, has beautifully performed the role of Iolanthe, which is written for lower voice. She now sang the soprano role of Josephine as she struggles with her lot in life, "Sorry her lot who loves too well, Heavy the heart that hopes but vainly, Sad are the sighs that own the spell, Uttered by eyes that speak too plainly; Heavy the sorrow that bows the head When love is alive and hope is dead!" (*H.M.S. Pinafore*). Life can be troublesome even for sopranos, but Tamsen then took on whatever came up with a charmingly flirtatious flair (Bill Hatcher especially caught her eye) as she sang, "Art is Calling for Me" (*The Enchantress*, Herbert &

Smith). Next, Arthur came on stage, playing a flageolet and singing sadly, "Oh, my voice is sad and low And with timid step I go – For with load of love o'erladen I enquire of every maiden, 'Will you wed me, little lady? Will you share my cottage shady?' Little lady answers 'No! Thank you for your kindly proffer; ... Yet I must decline your offer – I'm engaged to So-and-so!' ... [flageolet solo] ... Every maiden in the village is engaged to So-and-so!" (*The Sorcerer*). As a contrast came the next scene in which Phoebe, who does not want to marry Wilfred [Head Jailor and Assistant Tormentor] falsely woos him in order to steal his keys and release the prisoner, Colonel Fairfax. Patricia sang "Were I thy bride" (*The Yeomen of the Guard*). And then to the wonderful scene in which Frederic encounters Major-General Stanley's bevy of beautiful daughters and Holton sings "Oh, is there not one maiden breast Which does not feel the moral beauty Of making worldly interest Subordinate to sense of duty? Who would not give up willingly All matrimonial ambition, To rescue such an one as I From his unfortunate position?" with the ladies singing along – "No, not one!" (*The Pirates of Penzance*). Enter Carol as Mabel, singing "Poor Wand'ring one," flirting her head off, enticing Frederic, but never yielding; Holton ever hopeful, responding but not rewarded; Carol tossing off the coloratura, and her sisters chiming in. A magnificent conclusion with the gentlemen singing "There is Nothin' Like a Dame" (*South Pacific*, Rodgers & Hammerstein) putting the final seal on the joys of the afternoon. And then it was time to sing "Hail, Poetry" (*The Pirates of Penzance*), David, company, and audience – "There is music, does anyone need it?" David stepped forward to sing the part of the Pirate King, but Patricia rudely pushed in front of him and sang the part – mezzo-soprano. A last minute improvisation – fun, fun, fun! Then "Now to the banquet we press, Now for the eggs and the ham! Now for the mustard and cress, Now for the strawberry jam!"

That's a hard piece and the audience roaring with laughter didn't help. Fortunately the cast sang out confidently, and so we ended with happy chatter as we gathered in the lobby to sample the munchies.

Arthur DiBianca, Janette Jones, and the GSSA Production of *Patience* Nominated for B. Iden Payne Awards

The B. Iden Payne Awards Council has announced nominations for the 2011-2012 Season Awards. Our 2012 Grand Summer Production of *Patience* received 3 nominations in the Musical Theatre category: **Outstanding Production**; **Arthur DiBianca** for Outstanding Lead Actor; and **Janette Jones** for Outstanding Featured Actress. Congratulations to Janette, Arthur, and the entire cast, crew, and orchestra! Winners of the awards will be announced on Monday, October 29, at 7 pm at the new Topfer Theatre at Zach.

Wand'ring Minstrels

The Wand'ring Minstrels of the Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin presented their show at Brentwood Christian School on Monday, October 15, and are preparing a concert in Lago Vista (Villa Antonia) on January 8, 2013 as part of the Twilight Concert Series.

Contact **Robert L. Schneider** (bigdaddymusic1@gmail.com), or see our website (www.gilbertsullivan.org) for further details or to schedule the Wand'ring Minstrels for your next event.

Soprano Songfest Musicale

photos courtesy Steve Schwartzman

see more at gilbertsullivan.austin.smugmug.com



“I’m Not Making This Up, You Know!”

by Ralph MacPhail, Jr.



My title, which is also the title of Anna Russell’s autobiography, comes from the English comedienne’s signature routine: her hilarious explication of Wagner’s “Ring” cycle. But I’m pressing her famous declaration into service here to provide some background to the November 11 Musicale.

I first heard of Anna Russell in high school, when a friend, who knew of my enthusiasm for Victor Borge, introduced me to “The Queen of Musical Parody” by lending me one of her long-playing records. It contained neither “The Ring” nor “How to Write Your Own Gilbert & Sullivan Opera,” but I remembered this recording in the mid-1960s when the lure of the Savoy operas beckoned, and I read *of* this routine, which (I read somewhere) evidently enraged the blue-haired ladies of London’s Gilbert & Sullivan Society after it was recorded in 1953.

I found the LP as a newlywed while in the Army in Baltimore: *Anna Russell Sings! Again?* (a sequel to *Anna Russell Sings!*), and listened to it many times while making a transcription of every very funny word. The routine makes fun of mostly *H.M.S. Pinafore*. It is set in New York among the social elite, “The Great 400,” and the characters include a patter baritone named Clodbelly Bunion (“The Rich Tycoon”); the lowly-status tenor, John Smith, who’s in love with the socialite Pneumonia Vanderfeller; and a former nursemaid (named “Dandelion”!) who mixed up some babies a many years ago and thus straightens the road to true love for the tenor and soprano at the end. While telling the tale, Miss Russell makes fun of patter songs (with an obligatory encore!), tenor arias “in 6/8 time, accompanied on a stringed instrument,” sweet English soprano warbling, a madrigal, a revelatory plot-resolving contralto number, and finally a finale—where “everyone has a little sing, with a free-for-all at the end.” The result was that I ended up with a typescript, and also memory of every word of the routine. I also located a copy of *The Anna Russell Songbook*, which contained most of the music. (It’s missing “The Madrigal.”)

In 1983, I directed a production of *Patience* at Barksdale Theatre outside Richmond, Virginia, and one of the delights of the 12-week run was a post-show cabaret about every four weeks in which the

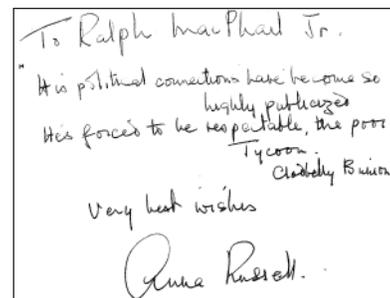


company would entertain one another after the show. We had men wearing aesthetic maidens’ costumes and wigs singing songs from *Patience* using high voices, serious opera arias, folk songs. I even did my magic show at one. But for one of these cabarets, I decided to press A. R. into service, and with Alice’s help dressed up in drag (wig, dress, stockings, shoes—complete with my then-signature handlebar moustache!), and with a box full of hats, lip-synced the G&S routine with the 1953 LP recording providing the audio.

Just a year later, I learned that Miss Russell would be appearing at the Kennedy Center Opera House in Washington, D. C., as a part of her “First Farewell Tour,” but before I could make a reservation, the performance was sold out. We made the three-hour drive anyway, Alice, Alexander, and I, “on spec,” hoping to get standing-room admission—which we did. She was wonderful, telling her audience that some of them knew the routines better than she did, so if she had any memory lapses, to just yell out the next line! During the intermission, a mom, dad, and little daughter left, and we three MacPhails slipped down into their seats. She started off the second half with “How to Write Your Own Gilbert & Sullivan Opera.”

After this memorable evening, I wrote Miss Russell a fan-letter, confessing to her that I’d lip-synced the G&S routine, and asking an autograph quotation from it for my scrapbook to go with my original Gilbert and Sullivan letters. After four months, including one address correction (her agent’s address in the KenCen program was incorrect, so I had to find a Manhattan phone book at the college library), I received a thick envelope from—Australia. The “Anna Russell” of the return address was hand-written (an autograph!). Inside was a two-page, hand-written letter, explaining the delay. She also wrote, “It certainly doesn’t bother me that you ‘lip synced’ the G&S. I have seen people lip sync lots of my numbers over the years, but never the G&S. I should very much like to have seen that.”

She continued: “My retirement is becoming a bit of a laugh. I started my ‘World Farewell Tour’ last Nov in San Francisco, & it keeps evolving before me much faster than I am getting it done. As you see I am now on the Australian lap with 16 concerts next month & they keep adding new bits in the gaps. At this rate I’ll go up at 96 in spontaneous combustion in Minsk.” After a bit more airy persiflage, this wonderful lady signed off: “The best of luck with your productions in the future. Sincerely, Anna Russell.” (A second autograph!) And the third page contained the requested quotation (which is reproduced here)—and autograph number three.



Since receiving this envelope, I’ve often thought that if she always treated her fans the way she treated me, it’s no wonder she had such a successful career for over three decades on the concert stage.

Anna Russell almost made it to 96. She died in 2006, shortly before her 95th birthday—but in Australia, not in Minsk.

Janette and Co. will, at the next Musicale, show the routine Miss Russell recorded in Baltimore in 1984 just days after we saw her at the KenCen. Janette will be joined by some well-loved Austin Savoyards to demonstrate just what Anna Russell is making fun of. The script, which I secured from friends at the Valley Light Opera in Amherst, Massachusetts, was originally devised and produced by Glen Gordon.

You’ll *really* get a kick out of it. And I hope you enjoyed my story. Truly, I didn’t make it up, you know!

MEMBERSHIP FORM

We encourage you to join our Society. If you are a member, please check your membership renewal on the top of the mailing label. If expired or near expiration, your membership needs to be updated! To correct your address, renew your membership, or become a member, complete this form, and mail it to us with your check, payable to "GSSA", or call to join (512) 472-4772 (GSSA).

Please check a membership category:

- Individual** (\$20-\$29)
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I'd like to volunteer. I'm interested in:

We are proud to list our members in our programs, but if you would prefer NOT to be listed in our programs, please check here:

Notice of Elections

The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin will elect a board of directors at its Annual Meeting on Sunday, January 6, at 3 pm. The nominating committee includes **Reba Gillman**, Chair; **Larry Shepley**; and **Pat Turpin**. Please contact Reba at (512) 327-2277 if you wish to volunteer to serve on the board or to nominate someone else. Definitely mark the date for this important meeting on your calendar, when we will hear a brief report on the year's artistic and fiscal activities, will elect the board, and will enjoy some group G&S sing-alongs led by maestro **Leonard Johnson**. It will be a wonderful way to brighten a January afternoon.

GSSA Music Director Jeffrey Jones-Ragona in "The Yule of Cool!"

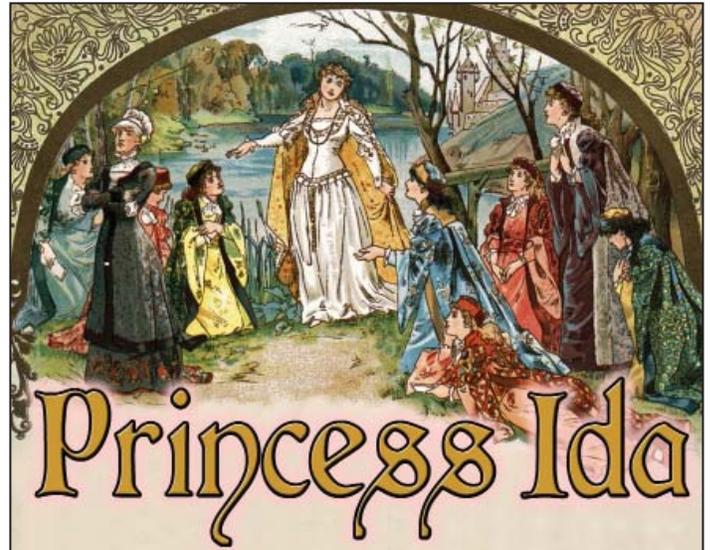
Jeffrey will lead the Capital City Men's Chorus in a concert devoted to Holiday Jazz, including jazz-era favorites like Billy Eckstine's "Christmas Eve" and Vince Guaraldi's "A Charlie Brown Christmas" as well as classics re-cast in jazz style (Dave Brubeck, Charlie Parker, and many other jazz greats). The guys will be joined by a 4-piece combo for two performances at University Baptist Church (22nd and San Antonio) on Saturday, Dec. 8, at 7:30 pm and Sunday, Dec. 9, at 4 pm. Tickets and more information at ccmcaustin.org

Send Us Your News!

The next newsletter should arrive near the end of the year; the deadline for submissions is December 5. Please send your news to news@gilbertsullivan.org. Thanks!

Armstrong Moving & Storage

is the official moving and storage company of The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin. Many thanks, Armstrong!



Auditions for *Princess Ida*

Auditions for our summer 2013 production of *Princess Ida* will take place from 10 am to 6 pm on March 2, and 3 pm to 6 pm on March 3 at Genesis Presbyterian Church at 1507 Wilshire Boulevard. Look for more details in future newsletters.

NEWS of our MEMBERS

Ted and Marti Mortensen Ahern (Dudgeon) announce their marriage on August 3, 2012. Ted moved to Austin from Charlotte, NC in August 2011. He is an accountant, and comes from a musically-minded family. He sang together with his seven siblings for church meetings and other events while growing up in Southern California. Ted's daughter, Beth, received a minor in music (organ, piano) degree from College of Charleston (SC) in May 2011.

Many of our G&S singers were recently featured in Spotlight on Opera's *Aria by Request* concert. These included **Andy Fleming**, **Jasmine Haghghatian**, **Daytha Hulion**, **June Julian**, **Ariel Rios**, and **Brittany Trinité**. **Cindy Sadler**, who runs the Spotlight on Opera program, played Little Buttercup in our 1989 production of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, while she was a student at the U. T. School of Music.



Top line of mailing label is date when your membership expires.

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2012



See details on page 1!



Coming Events

- Nov. 11 "How to Write Your Own G&S Opera" Musicale (see p. 1)
- Jan. 6 Annual Meeting and Musicale
- March 2-3 *Princess Ida* Auditions (see p. 5)
- March 10 "Sir Arthur Sullivan: The California Connection" Musicale
- May 5 *Princess Ida* Preview Musicale
- June 13-23 *Princess Ida* summer production

The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin

Since 1976, we have been spreading the joys of G&S through

- Annual Grand Productions
- Educational/Community Outreach
- Musicales
- Musical Scholarships
- Newsletters
- Holiday Season Shows

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The Society holds nonprofit status under 501(c)(3) of the IRS code.

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