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## Audition Notes on *H.M.S. Pinafore*

*H.M.S. Pinafore* is one of the three most popular of the Gilbert & Sullivan operas, and its initial success on both sides of the Atlantic in the late 1870s put the musical partnership firmly in the consciousness of the English speaking world. It is a shortish opera by later standards, but its unflagging tunefulness, its delightful humor, its characters and their stories, and its Buttercup's-basketful of now familiar expressions that have entered the English language have all ensured its being kept alive by performing groups: it never fails to delight.

**My purpose here is to provide information for auditionees concerning the auditions and also concerning the characters in the show we will present this summer.**

*H.M.S. Pinafore* is filled with roles that are fun to play, and several of them have serious sides—and challenges--too; the work is familiar to many, and thus deserving (as is all of Gilbert & Sullivan) of careful characterization and effective singing and acting.

**THE CHORUS** is composed of the men: **The Able Seamen (sailors) serving aboard H.M.S. Pinafore** (14 gentlemen, of various ages, idealized seamen in brilliant white uniforms and occasionally dark blue pea Jackets); and the women: **Sir Joseph Porter's sisters, cousins and aunts** (14 ladies, idealized Victorian maidens of various ages, in Victorian finery: millenary designed for traveling).

**Here are brief character sketches**, with a nod of gratitude to the writings of William Cox-Ife, Peter Kline—and a certain W. S. Gilbert\*:

**The Rt. Hon. SIR JOSEPH PORTER, K.C.B (First Lord of the Admiralty) (Light Baritone)**: “The civilian cross that the Royal Navy has to bear.”<sup>1</sup> “The Monarch of the Sea”—but one who's never (no, never!) been to sea. He wants to marry Captain Corcoran's daughter Josephine. Sir Joseph is from humble beginnings, but swaggers about in his Court dress, believing that “A British sailor is any man's equal—excepting mine”<sup>2</sup>—that is, he's a snob and does little to endear Josephine to him. “He is as lacking in a sense of humor as he is in human feeling, and yet he attempts both.”<sup>3</sup> But he's very funny, and invariably endears himself to audiences!

**CAPTAIN CORCORAN (Commanding H.M.S. Pinafore) (Baritone):**

“The Captain is a genuinely attractive man who loves his daughter, respects his crew, and admires his superiors.”<sup>3</sup> He’s the ranking officer aboard-ship and hopes to climb socially if he can get his daughter to marry Sir Joseph. A topsy-turvy version of the usual naval commander, he is polite to his crew, and they return the favor. There is, however, in his past a deep secret that only Little Buttercup knows—until the final minutes of the opera when its revelation leads to the inevitable happy conclusion.

**RALPH RACKSTRAW (Able Seaman) (Tenor):** Rafe is a “simple sailor with an amazing, but quite respectable vocabulary.”<sup>1</sup> He’s in love with Josephine though beneath her in social standing; when she refuses his love, he almost commits suicide by pistol, but Josephine reveals her love, and they plot an elopement that very night. This, however is revealed to the Captain by the dastardly Dick Deadeye, and Ralph is sent to the brig. Buttercup reveals her secret, however, and the two lovers are reunited with “joy [and] rapture unforeseen.”<sup>2</sup>

**DICK DEADEYE (Able Seaman) (Bass):** Although Dick is “able,” he suffers from physical shortcomings, including a humped back, a withered arm, and a dead eye. He is “the villain of the piece,” and not “a popular character,”<sup>2</sup> as he himself admits. He’s “an old, battered, embittered sailor, with a stern conviction of what’s right.”<sup>1</sup> He betrays Ralph and Josephine’s elopement to the Captain. If one listens to what he says he invariably speaks common sense, however cynical—even if it conflicts with our sympathies toward the other characters.

**BILL BOBSTAY (Boatswain’s Mate) (Bass-Baritone):** “The Petty Officer *par excellence*.”<sup>1</sup> Friend of Ralph and respected by his fellow sailors, and is full of good cheer and *bonhomie*. Has a great solo in Act II: “He is an Englishman!” The Boatswain hangs out with the Carpenter’s Mate.

**BOB BECKET (Bass-Baritone or Bass): (Carpenter’s Mate):** Friend of Ralph and the other sailors; joins Ralph and the Boatswain for the wonderful trio, “A British tar”: “Not very bright, especially when it comes to sightsinging!”<sup>1</sup> He has no solo spoken speeches in dialogue.

**TOM TUCKER (Midshipmite) (Non-speaking, non-singing):** The part is traditionally played by a child (male or female, but appearing to be male) about ten years old. He’s an officious little mite, superintending the sailors, and appears at various times throughout the opera.

**MARINES (Non-speaking, non-singing):** Two military men dressed in scarlet and white uniforms, they add pageantry to Sir Joseph’s entrance in Act I, take Rafe to his dungeon cell in Act II, and appear again in the Act II Finale. We seek two volunteers to play these parts, which will involve minimal rehearsal time, though full commitment the week before production and through the nine performances.

**JOSEPHINE (the Captain's Daughter) (Soprano):** A beautiful and dutiful daughter who tries valiantly to ignore—even reject—Ralph despite her love for him until his near attempt at suicide leads her to defy her doting (and socially ambitious) father. She's a clever woman, who turns Sir Joseph's assertion that "love levels all ranks"<sup>2</sup> against him, noting that "He little realizes how eloquently he has pleaded his rival's cause!"<sup>2</sup>

**HEBE (Sir Joseph's First Cousin) (Mezzo):** Hebe appears at Sir Joseph's right hand and is ready to echo his sentiments, and perhaps even dominate him! Her loyalty pays off at the end when the First Lord realizes that he cannot marry a person of lowly rank and she steps forth and offers to marry him and "soothe and comfort [his] declining days."<sup>2</sup> He buys it—and the social order is maintained. Hebe has only two short speeches in dialogue (before the Act II finale).

**MRS. CRIPPS (LITTLE BUTTERCUP) (a Portsmouth Bumboat Woman) (Contralto):** That is, she rows a small boat between the ships in the harbor, selling snacks, trinkets, and personal items to the sailors. A "plump and pleasing person,"<sup>2</sup> Little Buttercup has a long history with Ralph and Captain Corcoran, having nursed them "in childhood's happy hour."<sup>2</sup> In fact, she has a hopeless passion for the Captain. When she learns of Ralph's presence aboard the *Pinafore*, she sings "Remorse! Remorse!"<sup>2</sup> At the end we find out why. She also sings one of the most well-known songs in all Gilbert & Sullivan—right after the opening chorus.

I've said perhaps too often that there's only one G&S activity more fun than seeing one of their operas—and that's actually *working* on one, so thank you for coming today to auditions. Jeffrey and I both wish you well.



#### \*Bibliography

<sup>1</sup>William Cox-Ife, *How to Sing Both Gilbert and Sullivan* (London: Chappell & Co., Ltd., 1961).

<sup>2</sup>W. S. Gilbert, *The Savoy Operas: I* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).

<sup>3</sup>Peter Kline, *Gilbert & Sullivan Production* (The Theatre Student Series) (New York: Richards Rosen Press, Inc., 1972).