

The GILBERT & SULLIVAN

MAY-JUNE 2016 NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY OF AUSTIN

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Libby Weed

If you were in attendance at the musicale on Sunday afternoon, May 15, you have a very good idea of what a joy this summer's production of *The Gondoliers* is going to be. Whether you were there or not, get ready—this show is going to be a blockbuster!



Maybe you have attended several comic operas by Gilbert & Sullivan but are not familiar with *The Gondoliers*. Maybe you are a seasoned Savoyard and have seen it numerous times. Maybe you are like me—you have seen lots of G&S and always enjoy any show you see, but you find that this show is one that really thrills you. It is just so full of topsy-turvy fun, and so vibrant with sparkling music and lively dances! If it is new to you or if it is already a favorite, I can assure you that you will love this opera.

Stage director **Michelle Haché**, music director **Jeffrey Jones-Ragona**, and choreographer **Christine Jean-Jacques** are working energetically with the cast right now, preparing the “feast for the eyes, ears, and heart” that we have promised you. **Bill Hatcher** is working with the production staff to be sure the production is technically perfect and beautiful in every respect.

At the moment, just about all of our energies and attention are focused on preparations for this show. But I want to tell you a bit about something you should put on your calendar now for October 20. This year marks the 40th anniversary of The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin—forty continuous years of producing the works of Arthur Sullivan and William S. Gilbert in central Texas—and we are going to celebrate with quite a party. You are invited!

We will signalize the occasion with a buffet featuring heavy hors d'oeuvres and dessert, as well as a cash bar, at Chez Zee. There will be musical entertainment by some of our top G&S stars, and we will honor the past inductees into our Hall of Fame and introduce four new members to this august group.

In our next newsletter, we will tell you more about the 40th anniversary gala and will introduce the newest members of the Hall of Fame (and re-introduce those honored in the past). But please do mark Thursday evening, October 20, for this very special occasion.

I'll look for you at the theater in June!



The Gondoliers

Our Grand Production of *The Gondoliers* will have nine performances:

- Thursday June 16 7:30 pm Opening Night
- Friday June 17 7:30 pm Gala Performance—
Free Buffet with Cast
Follows Performance
- Saturday June 18 7:30 pm
- Sunday June 19 2:00 pm Children's Activities at 1 pm
- Thursday June 23 7:30 pm
- Friday June 24 7:30 pm
- Saturday June 25 2:00 pm
- Saturday June 25 7:30 pm
- Sunday June 26 2:00 pm Closing Performance

Tickets are now on sale, via our web site, www.gilbertsullivan.org, or by calling 512-474-5664.

In This Issue

- The Gondoliers* Preview Musicale pp. 2, 3
- A Conversation with Michelle Haché pp. 4, 5
- News of our Members p. 5
- Wand'ring Minstrels p. 5

A *Gondoliers Assortimento* Preview Musicale by Rosa Mondragon Harris



On Sunday, May 15, at 3 pm, 130 gathered for the GSSA's summer production preview musicale at the Worley Barton Theater at Brentwood Christian School.

Libby welcomed the audience and introduced our delightful narrator for the afternoon, **Michelle Haché**, who will also be guest director for the production culminating GSSA's 40th season. Michelle told us that we would be presented with a sneak-peek assortment, or *assortimento*, of musical selections from the upcoming grand summer production of *The Gondoliers*.

Our cast for the day included **Bob Beare** as The Duke of Plaza-Toro, **Jerry Cordova** as Luiz, **Arthur DiBianca** as Don Alhambra del Bolero, **Holton Johnson** as Marco Palmieri, **Derek Smootz** as Giuseppe Palmieri, **Jake Jacobsen** as Antonio, **Danny Castillo** as Francesco, **Patricia Combs** as The Duchess of Plaza-Toro, **Corinna Browning** as Casilda, **Priscilla Salisbury** as Gianetta, **Angela Irving** as Tessa, **Jennifer Garza** as Fiametta, **Diana Rodriguez** as Vittoria, **Sarah Manna** as Giulia, and **Janette Jones** as Inez. Chorus members who appeared were **Bruno Barbosa**, **Andy Fleming**, **Paul Halstead**, **Ezra Hankin**, **Jayda Maret**, **Erica Salinas**, **Sarah Steele**, **Jamieson Taylor**, and **Tristan Tierney**.

The twelfth Gilbert and Sullivan collaboration, said to be the duo's last great success, was set in Venice and premiered at the Savoy Theatre on December 7, 1889. *The Gondoliers* ran for an impressive 554 performances and became the first Gilbert and Sullivan opera to be requested for a command performance by the English monarchy. Queen Victoria herself requested the performance for the royal family at Windsor Castle in 1891.

The Gondoliers brought audiences a chorus of fawning contadine, dashing gondolieri, and exciting, tuneful dances. The setting was Venice around 1750, and our gondolier brothers, Marco and Giuseppe, were grown and had decided that the time had come to marry. In a little game of blindman's bluff, the brothers blindfolded themselves and would get hitched to the first girl they would bump into during the game. The audience laughed as Michelle relayed that, because this opening scene of the show is 57 pages long, she would move on to introducing us to the Spaniards in our story.

The Duke of Plaza-Toro, his wife, the Duchess of Plaza-Toro, their daughter, Casilda, and their drummer, Luiz, arrived in Venice from Spain. Luiz went to tell Don Alhambra del Bolero, the Grand Inquisitor of Spain, that the Duke had arrived, and in his absence, the Duke and Duchess told Casilda that she was married to the infant son and heir to the throne of Baratara when she was a mere six months old. Understandably, Casilda was indignant that the union was conducted without her consent. The King of Baratara had recently been killed in an insurrection, and the hidden prince was now king. Casilda, who was now the wife of the new king, had been brought by her parents to be introduced to her husband. The Duke, the Duchess, Casilda, and Luiz next offered the audience, "In enterprise of martial kind."

Soon after, we learned that Casilda is, in fact, secretly in love with her drummer, Luiz. They finally had a moment alone together, and she told him of her infant marriage. The couple resigned to live forever apart, and recalled their happy memories in "There was a time."

The Grand Inquisitor arrived and explained that the prince was raised by Baptisto Palmieri, a humble gondolier, who also had a son of his own that was the prince's age. Unfortunately, the drunken gondolier father eventually forgot which boy was his son and which boy was the prince. But there was still hope—the nurse who took care of the prince was located by Don Alhambra and would be able to identify the real prince. Don Alhambra, The Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro, Casilda, and Luiz then sang "I stole the Prince."

Michelle brought us back to our Italians, where Gianetta and Tessa had just married Marco and Guiseppe. The contadine and gondoliers all gathered to celebrate and honor the two couples in "Bridegroom and bride," as Tessa sang of their happy nuptials. After the ceremony, the newlyweds crossed paths with Don Alhambra, who informed them that one of the husbands was the King of Baratara. The couples were to remain separated until the actual king was identified, and Gianetta pleaded to the Grand Inquisitor that she couldn't bear the thought of being apart from her husband in "Kind sir, you cannot have the heart."

In Act II of the opera, the gondolieri have left their wives back in Venice and have been working in the palace for the past three months. Guiseppe led his fellow gondoliers in singing about their lives in "Rising early in the morning." Although the men were content, the grooms missed their brides after such time apart. Michelle introduced the next selection as being "in true tenor fashion." Opera fans in the audience knew Michelle's words rang true and they chuckled as Marco approached the stage and offered us "Take a pair of sparkling eyes." The brides soon arrived in Baratara and were reunited with their husbands, but Don Alhambra appeared and revealed to everyone that one of the gondoliers had married Casilda when she was a baby. As they attempted to console their wives, the Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro arrived with their daughter. While she would be a dutiful wife, Casilda explained, she could never love her husband. The Duchess stepped forward and told of her own matrimonial memories in "On the day when I was wedded."

The last musical offering of summer production's preview was the effervescent Act II chorus sung by the contadine and gondoliers upon their arrival in Baratara, "Dance a Cachucha." The audience was left with some lingering questions, such as "Who is the King and who is the son of the drunken gondolier?" and "Will Casilda be torn from her true love, Luiz?" All will be revealed next month, Michelle reminded us, in *The Gondoliers*.

Michelle and Libby gave thanks to the cast members who sang for us as well as to our wonderfully talented pianist **Jeanne Sasaki**, and her page turner, **Cody Ireland**. In keeping with tradition, **Bob Beare** sang the Pirate King's lead into "Hail, Poetry" from *The Pirates of Penzance*. The audience joined in and then sang "Now to the banquet we press" from *The Sorcerer* to close the afternoon.

The audience and cast proceeded to the lobby for refreshments and socializing, and the excitement surrounding the forthcoming production of *The Gondoliers* filled the air. On a personal note, I couldn't help but feel the physical absence of our dear **Roberta Long**, who always greeted everyone with a smile from the merchandise table. I know that her spirit will remain and bestow good wishes upon us for many years to come.

A Gondoliers Assortimento: A Preview Musicale

photos of the event courtesy Steve Schwartzman

see more at gilbertsullivanaustin.smugmug.com



The Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro (Bob Beare and Patricia Combs)



Casilda and Luiz (Corinna Browning and Jerry Cordova)



Giuseppe and Tessa (Derek Smootz and Angela Irving)



Marco and Gianetta (Holton Johnson and Priscilla Salisbury)



GSSA member **Betty Hatcher** was serenaded by the assembled group to celebrate her 100th birthday



Don Alhambra del Bolero (Arthur DiBianca)



director Michelle Haché

the chorus of gondolieri and contadine



A Conversation with Michelle Haché

President Libby Weed discusses this summer's grand production with our guest director.

Libby: It is quite exciting to have you stage directing this summer's production of *The Gondoliers*. What does this challenge mean to you?



Michelle: *The Gondoliers* is a 300-page score that is chock-full of more choreography than any other Gilbert and Sullivan creation. That is quite a sizable score to stage within a month! But it's going to be so much fun, because of its high-energy, fast-paced nature. It was described as having a "bubbling, champagne like quality" by critics of its time. There was good reason why it was a favorite of Queen Victoria. So, we are all going to have a tremendous amount of fun with this. Perhaps the only challenge will be to fit as much detailed work as I possibly can into the production within the month of rehearsal!

Libby: I remember when you showed up for auditions in 2010 and blew us away. Tell us the circumstances that brought you to Austin.

Michelle: My husband actually brought us down here in 2009 because he was accepted into the Ph.D. program at UT in English (in Victorian lit, as a matter of fact!). And I remember that when he was accepted to several schools we chose Austin because it had the most active performing arts scene of all of the college towns we had to choose from. In fact, we were still quite new in town when I auditioned for *Yeomen* in 2010. I didn't know anyone in Austin yet, and it totally felt like a leap of faith. My husband actually told me about the audition, and since I was new in town, I didn't think for one moment that I would have any kind of shot at the lead soprano role. I was completely shocked when I got the call from Bill Hatcher that night!

Libby: Tell us a little about your path into theater—especially musical theater—and about your training and preparation.

Michelle: In the beginning it was all about dance and choreography. Ballet, mainly. I would spend hours every day involved with American Festival Ballet up in the Northwest. But then, I took a bit of a knee injury. So, my mother thought that I should audition for some summer stock musicals at Washington State University, where she was a professor. This eventually led to voice lessons, because a very kind graduate student in voice by the name of Greg Harrell spoke to my mother and offered the lessons free of charge. He changed my life forever. From then on, I was obsessed with theater and music theater full time. In college, I had the opportunity to study with a wonderful director by the name of George Ballis, who came from Carnegie Mellon. Goodness, I loved this little old Greek man! He taught me all that I know as far as stage direction is concerned. And then at Oklahoma City University, I was fortunate enough to study both opera and music theater with Florence Birdwell. Kristin Chenoweth & Kelly O'Hara both came from her studio (Kelly was there at the same time I was, as a matter of fact.) Eventually, I ended up at Juilliard, where I got a second graduate degree, this time in Vocal Performance. There, I studied with the fabulous Marlana Malas, who specialized in larger voices. She was a legendary, tough teacher, and she was absolutely amazing. I would see performers from The Met next door regularly come in for brush-up voice lessons with Marlana.

Libby: How has your stage experience affected your role as a director?

Michelle: I always found that the audience is willing to lose themselves in the story if they can truly identify with you as the character. So I have enjoyed updating some of the more classic characters, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes more obvious ways, depending on the show/character. For example, it is quite challenging playing female roles in period pieces today, because we simply do not live in the same world as women did 40, 50, or 100 years ago. So, because of this, it is dangerously easy to unintentionally create a disconnect with one's audience when you're doing period pieces. I've always found that if one can play up the strength within the character (which is the same strength we all have as women, regardless of time period), the audience identifies with that. So, as a director, it is important to show the audience that the characters and story are just as timely as something that could happen today. We still have the same struggles, win the same victories, laugh at the same situations, love the same way, etc. It's the director's job (and the performer's) to get the audience to really see that.

Libby: You have quite an extensive voice studio. Tell us about your activities with your students.

Michelle: I am in love with my studio ... It really is my third child. It has grown very large and I have gotten to the point where I teach every day of the week, but I love it. We've had some great success, with students winning national competitions, Broadway roles, etc. I really enjoy passing on the knowledge my amazing professors handed down to me. When you really think about it, the lineage of this is astounding; I was given technique that was developed over generations, passed down from one legendary teacher to the next. I think that it's my job to create real professionals who truly know themselves and what their strengths are, and to make sure that they get on the fast track to successful careers. Their dreams are my dreams, and the best part is that the studio has become one big family.

Libby: You have a supportive family. How are they interacting with your many artistic activities?

Michelle: As a lot of people already know, both of my sons have autism. Over the past few years I've gotten more vocal about it because I think that my experiences can really help families out there (not to mention that I think that the general public is still, for the most part, in the dark about autism and what unique challenges the families and individuals face every day). One of the most important lessons that I've learned is that, because of these daily challenges autism parents have, it is even more important for them to stay true to the things that they love most in life. It is very easy for parents to lose themselves in the process. For me, the thing that makes me whole and fulfilled has always been music and theater. I think that staying active in the theater world not only makes me a better person and a better mom, but it keeps me positive. And this is something that my family has always understood. It certainly isn't easy, and along with a very busy voice studio, it can at times feel like we never stop moving (and there are days that I don't ever see my husband at all!). But there is magic in music ... and it has an effect on my kids like nothing else. People always tell me that it is wonderful to see my boys so completely connected and happy, and I have no doubt

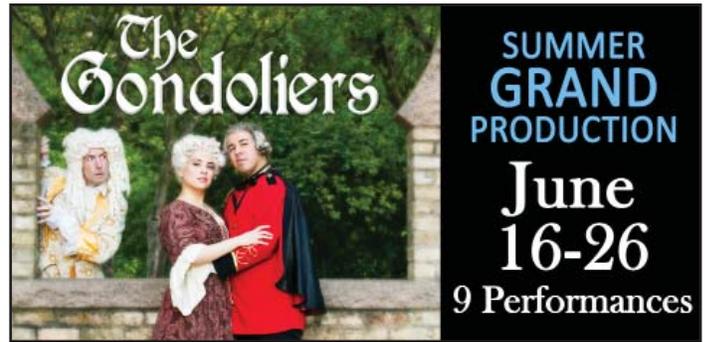
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that my involvement in theater and music has everything to do with that. This has always been my number one priority: creating joy in their lives.

Libby: What should we expect in June when we come to see *The Gondoliers*?

Michelle: I am so very excited for this production! GSSA holds a special place in my heart, and getting involved in the role of director with a G&S show has always been a dream of mine. It is a perfect marriage between opera and musical, which I love equally! Without giving too much away, I can reveal one surprise: We will be taking a slightly different approach with the chorus. There will be families (sub-story lines), and they will be playing a more involved role within the whole production. For example, we are staging the overture to set up the various relationships between the characters within the chorus. (We will have the drunk chorus member, a love triangle, a cheating husband, etc.) It's going to be so much fun to watch our fabulously talented chorus members embody these roles!



Send Us Your News!

The next newsletter should arrive in early September; the deadline for submissions will be in mid-August. Please send your news to news@gilbertsullivan.org. Thanks!

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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- Pooh-Bah** (\$500-\$999)
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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:

NEWS of our MEMBERS

Artistic Director **Ralph MacPhail, Jr.**, will offer a Gilbert & Sullivan Road Scholar (Elderhostel) Program at the Warwick Center in Warwick, New York, the week of August 28-September 2. The entire week of programming will be devoted to G&S, with emphases on *H.M.S. Pinafore*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, and *The Mikado*. For further information, visit www.RoadScholar.org (then search on "Gilbert & Sullivan and The Big Three"); and/or write to RafeMacPhail@Yahoo.com.

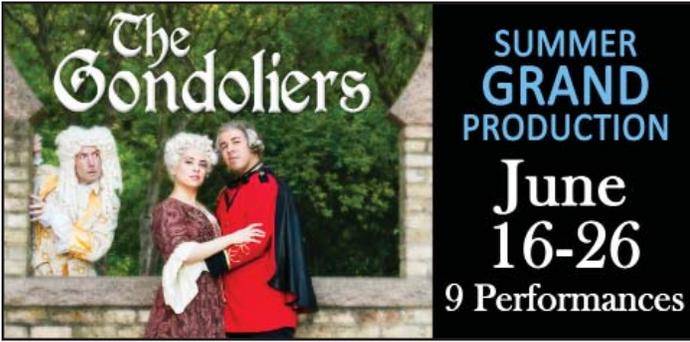
Joseph Alcocer (violinist) and Hector Moreno (cellist) of our GLOO (Gillman Light Opera Orchestra) recently did a tour of the south with the NYGASP (New York Gilbert & Sullivan Players) production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. They toured Boerne, Galveston, Blinn College, and Missouri State University in Springfield. Joseph reported that he enjoyed the experience and that it was a very fine production.

Wand'ring Minstrels

If you would like to have the Wand'ring Minstrels perform at your school, retirement center, civic club, business meeting, or private party, please see the web site, www.gilbertsullivan.org, for information, or contact Robert Schneider at minstrels@gilbertsullivan.org.

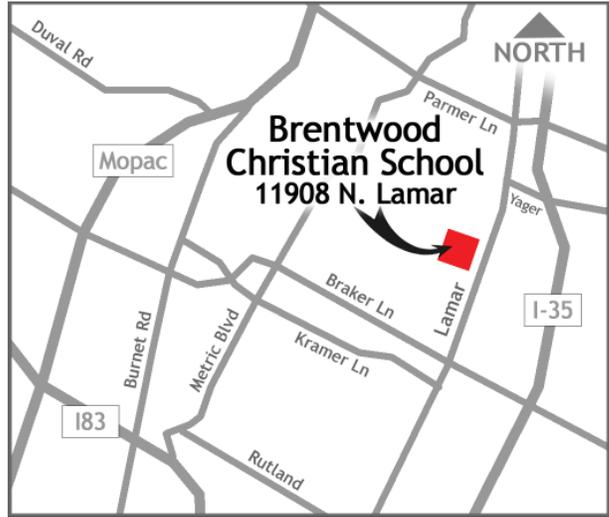


The Wand'ring Minstrels performed at Westminster on Mother's Day



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Our venue this year is again the Worley Barton Theater at Brentwood Christian School. *All seats reserved.*

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MAY-JUNE 2016

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

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