

The GILBERT & SULLIVAN

MAY - JUNE 2012 NEWSLETTER

SOCIETY OF AUSTIN

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Libby Weed



After enjoying our Mother's Day musicale on May 13, I mused about what it is that makes something more than a century old come across to a contemporary audience as enjoyable and fresh. ("Enjoyable and fresh" is a good description of the Gilbert & Sullivan operas, by the way, when they are properly staged, artfully directed, and well cast.)

At the musicale, we were treated to a scene from Janette Jones's imagination, as she hosted a gathering in an American salon in the 1880s, and **Elisabet Ney**, the German sculptress, and **Oscar Wilde**, the Irish wit, dropped by. Reba Gillman describes the great fun of that event elsewhere in this newsletter. It was antique, and yet it felt fresh and fun.

Thinking about this made me realize why I am such a fan of G&S. William S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, as a creative team, were masters of several things that are sure to bring pleasure and laughter to anyone with an appreciation of beauty and a sense of fun.

- *Beautiful melodies*, the kind that move lyrically through your mind and heart and come back to you again and again after a show
- *Colorful and lively spectacles*, such as a dramatic stage setting with splashes of color and design moving across it
- *A good story*, especially one that has tantalizing twists and turns, curious characters, and the element of surprise
- *Creative wit* that does not insult your intelligence but actually makes you think and laugh at the same time

Patience may be new to you, or it may have been one of your favorites for a long time. In either case, you will be in for a serving of fresh enjoyment when you come to this summer's grand production. Go to www.gilbertsullivan.org today to reserve your seats, as ticket sales for "best available" seats are going fast.

See you at the theater!

September Musicale

After our grand production of *Patience* in June, the Society will take its traditional summer holiday, but will return with a Musicale in September (after Labor Day). Watch for information in our September newsletter, and on the website in August.

Correction

In the cast list for *Patience* in our last issue, an error was made: Kate Clark's name was omitted and Daytha Hulion's role was listed incorrectly. The correct listings are:

The Lady Saphir — **Kate Clark**
The Lady Ella — **Daytha Hulion**

New Theater Location

For those of you who missed the Mother's Day Musicale, don't forget that this summer's Grand Production of *Patience* is in a new (to us) location, the theater at Brentwood Christian School in north Austin. There is ample free parking available.



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Mother's Day Musicale: *Patience* Preview

by Reba Gillman



On Sunday, May 13, over 100 G&S enthusiasts gathered at the Brentwood Christian School's wonderful new theater to enjoy the fun and artistry of Gilbert and Sullivan. We were trying out our new venue for the June production of *Patience*. It is a dream come true, with a fine stage, an orchestra pit, 400 comfortable seats, excellent sight lines, a welcoming lobby

which will accommodate our displays of purchasable DVDs, artistic T-shirts and other delights, and the Official Opening Night Gala on Friday, June 8, with plenty of convenient parking.

With a show planned by our talented, imaginative **Janette Jones** and executed by members of the cast of the upcoming *Patience*, we spent a happy afternoon exposed to the wit and fun created by William Schwenck Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan. We were greeted by **Libby Weed**, who is not only President of our Gilbert and Sullivan Society, but also the proud and happy Elementary Principal and Vice President of Education at Brentwood Christian School. She quickly set the stage: "In 1880 Janette Jones, Grande Dame of Austin, is hosting a musicale in her home. Guests include Elisabet Ney (played by **Rosa Harris**), eminent sculptor and a new resident of Texas, the first woman to study sculpture at the Munich (Germany) Academy of Art, and the famous Oscar Wilde (played by **David Fontenot**), a recent graduate of Oxford and a prime example of aestheticism in Great Britain." Male and female guests, in this period setting, wearing appropriate garments (and hats—every lady but the unconventional Elisabet Ney wore a hat!), gathered to sing two madrigals, *Now Is the Month of Maying* by Thomas Morley, and *Come Again* by John Dowland. The singers left the stage, the ladies gathering in the theater's front seats. Elisabet then introduced Oscar Wilde, wearing a Renaissance doublet. He obliged with quotable remarks (taken from the actual writings of Oscar Wilde), and the ladies echoed outstanding phrases in the manner frequently used in G&S operas. As Wilde spoke the ladies responded enthusiastically, "Yes! Yes! Yes! ... Emotion is the aim of art! Action - let us take action!" Finally Wilde said "The telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art." At this point Bunthorne (played by **Arthur DiBianca**) appeared, struggling as he composed a poem. The ladies oohed and aahed, and Wilde scornfully remarked, "Caricature is the tribute that mediocrity pays to genius." As Bunthorne left the stage the maidens followed him rapturously, removing their hats and letting down their hair, in aesthetic style.

Libby returned to bring us back to 2012 and introduce our Artistic Director **Ralph MacPhail, Jr.**, to serve as Master of Ceremonies for selections from *Patience*. Rafe, as we like to call him, gave us some choice information which helped us understand and enjoy this opera. Rafe's article on page four of this newsletter repeats and adds to his delightfully succinct and humorous remarks. Rafe explained that the young and flamboyant Oscar Wilde, who had just come to London as he finished his studies at Oxford, immediately became the face of the pre-Raphaelite artists who were revolting against the utilitarian nature of Victorian Art. They wished to return to the days when art could be appreciated for its own sake. Wilde had not

yet achieved anything substantial, but his dramatic "aesthetic pose" captured everyone's attention and he is the one personality from the "aesthetic movement" who is remembered to this day. However, Rafe explained that Gilbert and Sullivan were not making fun of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood but rather of the faddish way in which popular culture hastened to adopt their speech, dress, and mannerisms.

Rafe then told us that the cast of our production had been working with **Jeffrey Jones-Ragona** on the score since March, and that Rafe had started stage rehearsals just six days before. He was pleased that quite a few cast members were present to sing some of the delightful score this afternoon. He noted that some principals were here today, and some principal roles would be sung by Lord High Substitutes, and he thanked them all for joining the fun. The cast included: Arthur DiBianca as Reginald Bunthorne; **Brittany Trinité** - singing Madrigals, Maiden; **Daniel Brookshire** - Madrigals, Dragoon; David Fontenot - Oscar Wilde, Dragoon, Pirate King; **Daytha Hulion** - Madrigals, The Lady Ella; **Jay Young** - Archibald Grosvenor; **Jennifer Tullis** - Madrigals, Maiden; **Karlyn McCutchan** - Maiden; **Kate Clark** - The Lady Saphir; **Leann Fryer** - Madrigals, Maiden; **Mario Silva** - Madrigals, Dragoon; **Mark Long** - Madrigals, Dragoon; **Meredith Ruduski** - *Patience*; **Patricia Combs** - Madrigals, The Lady Angela; **Robert L. Schneider** - Colonel Calverley; **Rachael Shaw** - Madrigals, Maiden; Rosa Harris - Elisabet Ney, Maiden; **Spencer Reichman** - Major Murgatroyd; **Wayne Davis** - Madrigals, Lieutenant, The Duke of Dunstable; **Jeanne Sasaki** - At the Piano.

The opera opens—"Twenty love-sick maidens we, Love-sick all against our will, Twenty years hence we shall be Twenty love-sick maidens still." Six maidens and Lady Angela and Lady Ella sing—there will be more maidens in the June production, but never twenty. Perhaps some have the vapors, a common Victorian ailment. The charming *Patience* enters, a simple milk maid, whom Bunthorne loves to the distress of all the love-sick maidens. "Still brooding on their mad infatuation" she sings, "I cannot tell what this love may be That cometh to all but not to me. It cannot be kind as they'd imply, or why do these ladies sigh? It cannot be joy and rapture deep, or why do these gentle ladies weep? It cannot be blissful as 'tis said, Or why are their eyes so wondrous red?" Lady Saphir, Lady Angela, and maidens join in and all then leave. Change of pace—enter the dragoons singing "The soldiers of our Queen Are linked in friendly tether; Upon the battle scene They fight the foe together. There ev'ry mother's son prepared to fight and fall is; The enemy of one the enemy of all is!" Robust and confident, a year ago these soldiers were engaged to all the maidens. Their Colonel arrives and sings, "If you want a receipt for that popular mystery, Known to the world as a Heavy Dragoon, take all the remarkable people in history, Rattle them off to a popular tune. The pluck of Lord Nelson on board of the Victory—Genius of Bismarck devising a plan—The Humour of Fielding (which sounds contradictory)—Coolness of Paget about to trepan...." This is one of the famous G&S patter songs. Very often the audience doesn't know what it's all about. The Colonel tells us—it's a joke, it's a random list, there's no sense to it, that's how you make a patter song. Gilbert was on shaky ground—was he giving away tricks of the trade?

Now Gilbert's contrasts come into clear focus. The aesthetic (and rather soggy) maidens return singing, "In a doleful train Two and two we walk all day, For we love in vain! None so sorrowful as they

(continued next page)

Mother's Day Musicale: *Patience* Preview

photos courtesy Steve Schwartzman

see more at gilbertsullivan.austin.smugmug.com



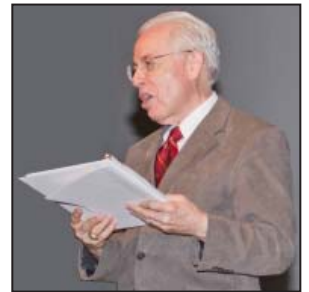
Patience wonders "What this love can be"



Bunthorne attracts the ladies



the eloquent *Oscar Wilde*



Rafe offers his insights



Jeanne Sasaki, at the piano, is assisted by *Emma Lacenski*



Choir Master *Karlyn McCutchan*

see more pictures
on pages 5 and 6!

Mother's Day Musicale, cont.

Who can only sigh and say, Woe is me, alackaday!" The dragoons respond vigorously, "Now is not this ridiculous—and is not this preposterous? A thorough-paced absurdity—explain it if you can. Instead of rushing eagerly to cherish us and foster us, They all prefer this melancholy literary man. Instead of slyly peering at us, Casting looks endearing at us, Blushing at us, flushing at us—flirting with a fan; They're actually sneering at us, fleeing at us, jeering at us! Pretty sort of treatment for a military man!" This turns into one of Gilbert's greatest "double choruses," with Sullivan providing the magnificent music to enhance the words. Bunthorne joins the crowd and confesses privately that "Though my book I seem to scan In a rapt ecstatic way, Like a literary man Who despises female clay; I hear plainly all they say, Twenty love-sick maidens they!" As the act proceeds *Patience* learns that love is a duty, and resolves not to go to bed that day until she is "head-over-ears in love with—*somebody*." Archibald Grosvenor, an "idyllic poet," appears and sings a charming

duet with *Patience*, "Prithee, pretty maiden." In a famous Gilbertian Act I finale, *Patience* decides she may not love the beautiful Grosvenor because love must be unselfish. She tells Bunthorne she will be his bride, since to love such an unpleasant person would truly be unselfish. The rapturous maidens feel completely abandoned and return their affections to the still admiring Dragoons. All but *Patience*, Grosvenor, and Bunthorne sing the final selection from *Patience*, "I hear the soft note."

Returning to another reality, David sang the lead-in to "Hail, Poetry" from *The Pirates of Penzance*, and following our tradition the audience rose to sing with the performers. Finishing with "Now to the banquet we press" from *The Sorcerer*, we adjourned to the splendid lobby to enjoy the delightful goodies and friendly conversations. Every mother present was offered a handsome red rose as she left. Note: this was all from only the first act. Be sure to come out for a performance to learn about the many amazing excitements provided in Act II.



Patience and Oscar by Ralph MacPhail, Jr.

One of the features of the recent *Patience* musicale, devised so creatively by Janette Jones, was an appearance by Oscar Wilde. So as I prepared my remarks as emcee for the afternoon, I tried to focus on this brilliant Irish wit, poet, and dramatist and his part in the evolution of what became the sixth Gilbert & Sullivan

collaboration, *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride*.

As I thought about it, it seemed to me that Oscar has everything to do with *Patience*, and yet, today—nothing. How topsy-turvy! How Gilbertian!

Gilbert's original idea for his plot had its "genesis," as he put it, in his 1867 "Bab" ballad, "The Rival Curates," in which two Anglican clergymen, Clayton Hooper and Hopley Porter, vie for the attention of their village maidens. (Gilbert had early borrowed this idea for *The Sorcerer*, in creating Dr. Daly, Vicar of Ploverleigh, who yearned for younger days when he was much admired by the young ladies.)

But as Gilbert worked, he felt "hampered" (his word) by the idea of clergymen, concerned that such a plot might lead to a "charge of irreverence" (also his words).

Gilbert was no doubt familiar with Oscar Wilde, a young Irishman, recently arrived in London from Oxford. Wilde enjoyed capturing attention, and he did this in the way he dressed, his epigrammatical conversation, and his love for flowers, blue china, and *Japanoiserie*. He became the face of the so-called "aesthetic movement," a group of artists (painters, novelists, designers, poets, critics) yearning for the days when art could be appreciated for its own sake. They were rebelling against the materialistic and utilitarian functions of art in mid-Victorian England.

Wilde's "peculiarities" were lampooned by George DuMaurier in his *Punch* cartoons, where Wilde-like characters were pictured worshipping blue china, devoted to lilies and Japanese *tchotchkes*, and describing things as "utter" or "too too precious."

DuMaurier, and later Gilbert & Sullivan, were not lampooning the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood as much as the faddish way in which popular culture adopted the speech, dress, and mannerisms of the Pre-Raphaelites, much as teenagers today might speak the slang, wear the garb, and otherwise walk the walk and talk the talk of the latest pop idol.

Patience, with rival poets named Reginald Bunthorne and Archibald Grosvenor instead of those rival curates, had its première at the Opéra Comique in London. (It was in the same dim, stuffy, subterranean theatre where Richard D'Oyly Carte had produced *Trial by Jury*, *The Sorcerer*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and *The Pirates of Penzance*.) The "Entirely New and Original Aesthetic Opera" opened on April 23, 1881.

Oscar Wilde was only 25 at the time, having achieved nothing substantial except for his "aesthetic pose," but Wilde is the one personality from the "aesthetic movement" who remains in our collective memories.

Long before *Patience*, D'Oyly Carte had a dream: to build a theatre expressly for English light opera, and the construction of this theatre was completed during the opening run of *Patience* at the Opéra Comique.

Patience was transferred to the new Savoy Theatre and opened on 10 October 1881 (about six months after the première). The Savoy was an innovative public building, the most striking innovation being that "the electricity" was laid on throughout, the first public building *in the world* to be so wired.

The new and softer glow of incandescent bulbs that replaced the harsh and oxygen-eating gas lights meant that the sets needed to be repainted and the costumes reconstructed for this innovative new theatrical "space."

D'Oyly Carte, ever the showman, didn't keep his innovation a secret. Tickets were at a premium, for even before *Patience*, opening-night reservations for Gilbert & Sullivan productions were highly sought. The first night at the Savoy was a glittering social occasion, as usual, but there was one special playgoer in the stalls that night.

This was none other than Oscar Wilde Himself, wearing his trademark velvet suit. Asked later about *Patience*, he said, "Caricature is the tribute that mediocrity pays to genius." When later asked if he'd ever (quoting from *Patience*) "walked down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily in his medieval hand," he replied that he'd accomplished something more difficult: he convinced people he actually *had* done so!

Oscar subsequently accepted a proposal by impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte, and went to America on a lecture tour as *Patience* ran in London. Cynics said D'Oyly Carte sent Wilde to these shores as "a sandwich-board boy for *Patience*"—and the cynics were probably right!

In the United States, Oscar Wilde gave his lecture on home décor—to Society matrons and to coal miners and to all sorts of audiences in between; best of all, he dressed like Bunthorne in *Patience*, and his outrageous pronouncements in countless interviews garnered him newspaper coverage wherever he went. Two of my favorite Wildean *bon mots* date from this trip: when he landed in New York, he told the customs official that he "had nothing to declare but his genius." And when asked by reporters about his voyage, he admitted that he "was disappointed with the Atlantic Ocean!"

Meanwhile, as Oscar toured the United States, *Patience* made its première in America and ran merrily on at the Savoy in London.

It was literally the first of the Savoy Operas and ran for a remarkable 578 performances!

Gilbert was more than a little concerned about how the opera would "go" when it was revived twenty years later at the Savoy in the first decade of the twentieth century. Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte were both dead, Wilde had been disgraced (though his plays would continue to live as monuments of comedy—and do so even to this day), and the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and their "rapturous groupies" had long since abandoned their yearnings. As Gilbert put it, "The aesthetic movement was as dead as Queen Anne."

But as Gilbert himself wrote, in an introduction to the libretto published in America, "The opera woke up brilliantly." Modesty probably precluded his saying why, but the reason is of course that he "built better than he knew," and every generation can appreciate *Patience* for its satire on affectation.

Which brings me back to the point I was trying to make at the start. *Patience* has its existence thanks to Oscar Wilde, but today's audience need not realize this. In fact, many today think of Oscar as the author of "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and a play usually regarded as one of the finest of *all* English comedies, *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

But had Oscar not left Ireland, or had not come down to London from Oxford, or had not become so flamboyant—so outrageous, even—long before he established his literary reputation—it's very likely that *Patience* would have been about two rural Anglican curates—or perhaps not have been written at all.

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).

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NEWS of our MEMBERS



Artistic Director **Ralph MacPhail, Jr.**, has edited and published *Papers, Presentations and Patter: A Savoyards' Symposium*, a collection of 14 papers on Gilbert and/or Sullivan originally presented at the International Gilbert & Sullivan Festival in Gettysburg, PA, during June 2011.

The book is available from Lulu.com and Amazon.com.

Rafe will teach a Road Scholar (Elderhostel) course on *H.M.S. Pinafore* at the Warwick Center in Warwick, New York, July 8-13. Details: www.roadscholar.org.

La Follia Austin Baroque presents: Yankee Baroque: Music in America at the Time of the Revolution

Experience the raw beauty of music composed and performed in Colonial America. La Follia performs sacred music from New England, American dance music written for Washington, music Jefferson performed as an accomplished classical violinist, songs with lyrics by Ben Franklin, and songs of love and patriotism. Featured performers include GSSA's own Music Director, **Jeffrey Jones-Ragona**, and mezzo soprano **Lisa Alexander** (*Pirates* 2008, *Iolanthe* 2010). The concert will be held on June 30 at 8:00 pm at the First Presbyterian Church, 8001 Mesa Drive. For more information, see lafollia.org.

Wand'ring Minstrels

The Gilbert & Sullivan Society of Austin's Wand'ring Minstrels are ready to entertain for your next event. Have Gilbert and Sullivan tunes performed at your home, party, school, or activity. See our website (www.gilbertsullivan.org) for further details.

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!



*Colonel Calverley with the Dragoons (above)
 try to win the rapturous maidens (below)
 at the Mother's Day Musicale*



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MAY - JUNE 2012



*Grande Dame Janette Jones welcomes Elisabet Ney to her home in the Mother's Day Musicale.
 (See pages 2 and 3.)*

"Patience has some of Gilbert's finest comedy and Sullivan's most captivating tunes ..."

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Patience

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This project is funded and supported in part by the City of Austin through the Cultural Arts Division and by a grant from the Texas Commission on the Arts and an award from the National Endowment for the Arts which believes that a great nation deserves great art.



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

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