

Sir Charles Mackerras (1925–2010): A Lifetime of Gilbert and Sullivan

2. From *Pineapple Poll* to a farewell *Patience* By Nigel Simeone

FOLLOWING THE PREMIERE OF *PINEAPPLE POLL* on 13 March 1951, Charles Mackerras conducted the ballet numerous times at Sadler's Wells in the early 1950s, usually as the last item on a triple bill. Though Mackerras conducted no Gilbert and Sullivan operas during his years as assistant conductor at Sadler's Wells (1948–54), he did give one notable concert: a rare performance of Sullivan's Cello Concerto with William Pleeth and the Goldsbrough Orchestra (precursor of the English Chamber Orchestra), broadcast by the BBC on 7 July 1953. According to a note in the *Radio Times*, 'The cadenzas William Pleeth is to play tonight were written specially by Charles Mackerras.' This was a decade before all the material for the Cello Concerto was destroyed in the Chappell's fire on 6 May 1964, and it was learning the work for this 1953 broadcast that enabled Mackerras to assist David Mackie with its reconstruction in the 1980s.

Mackerras was principal conductor of the BBC Concert Orchestra in 1954–6, and Sullivan often appeared on his programmes with the orchestra. Of particular interest was a series of six broadcasts on the Home Service in 1955–6: a new version of the radio biography *Gilbert and Sullivan: the story of a great partnership* by Leslie Baily. Originally broadcast in 1947 (conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent and Stanford Robinson) and revived in 1949 (conducted by the young Charles Groves), the 1955 production included songs from the operas performed by the likes of Victoria Elliott, Sheila Rex, Gwen Catley, Anna Pollak, Joyce Gartside, Thomas Round, Webster Booth, Arnold Matters and Owen Brannigan, with the BBC Chorus and Concert Orchestra under Mackerras. (These hour-long programmes were transmitted on six consecutive Sundays in December 1955 and January 1956). In 1955, Mackerras also started to record regularly at Abbey Road for EMI: the producer Walter Legge often asked him to stand in at short notice for an ailing maestro, usually in lighter repertoire. On 9 June 1956 he recorded four overtures: *The Yeomen of the Guard*, *Ruddigore*, *The Mikado* and *Iolanthe* (Fig.1) with the Philharmonia

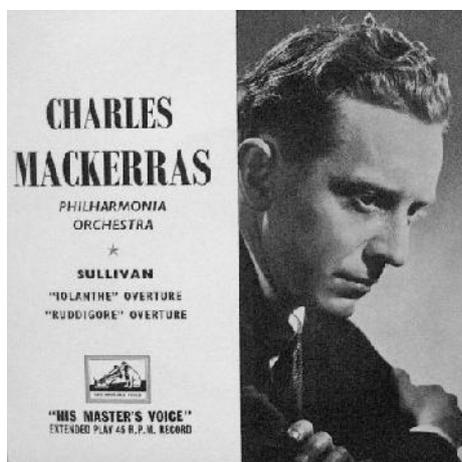


Fig.1. The original 7-inch EP of the overtures to *Iolanthe* and *Ruddigore* with Mackerras conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra, recorded in June 1956.



Fig.2. Charles Mackerras conducting at the London Coliseum in 1973.

(the principal horn at this session was Dennis Brain). Aside from *Pineapple Poll*, these overtures are Mackerras's first Sullivan recordings: characteristically energetic performances marked by propulsive rhythms, warmly expressive phrasing and an unusually attentive ear for the subtleties of Sullivan's orchestration (CD: EMI CDM 566538-2). For *Ruddigore*, Geoffrey Toye's 1921 version is used – a curious choice for Mackerras who had drawn extensively on Hamilton Clarke's original overture for *Pineapple Poll*. The last-minute scheduling of these sessions presumably meant that Toye's overture was the only one available at short notice.

A television production of *Pineapple Poll* starring Merle Park, David Blair and Stanley Holden was broadcast on 1 November 1959, with the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Mackerras (DVD: ICA Classics ICAD 5040). When he made a stereo recording of the ballet in the following year, HMV had the excellent idea of using the Royal Philharmonic. It was still very much Sir Thomas Beecham's orchestra, with a lightness of touch ideally-suited to this repertoire (CD: EMI CDM 566538-2).

With a growing number of invitations to conduct abroad in the early 1960s, and his appointment as First Conductor at the Hamburg State Opera in 1966, Mackerras was busy with a large operatic repertoire that left little time for Gilbert and Sullivan. This started to change after he returned to London to become Music Director of Sadler's Wells Opera (soon to be English National Opera), newly installed at the London Coliseum. In August 1973, he conducted a revival of *Iolanthe* (Fig.2) – this seems to have been the first time he conducted a complete Gilbert and Sullivan opera with a professional company. Reviewing the performance in *The Times* (18 August), Alan Blyth wrote:

Sandwiched between the first two operas of its second 'Ring Cycle', Sadler's Wells last night presented a lively revival of its familiar 'Iolanthe' production as a preparation for giving the work at Brussels in October. Here was Rhinegold's Erda, Anne Collins, and Wellgunde, Sarah Walker, happily and successfully turning to the utterly different idioms of the Queen of the Fairies and title roles respectively. Here, too, was Charles Mackerras, the company's music director, in the pit, and the veteran Denis Dowling (to whom a presentation was made after the performance for long service to the company) in his old role of Mountarat. This is an ensemble working as it should. Mr. Mackerras first came to prominence, years ago now, when he arranged Sullivan's music for the ballet 'Pineapple Poll', so it was interesting to hear him returning to G&S, and treating the old score with the respect due its craftsmanship through keenly articulated detail and bouncing rhythms. The cast obviously drew inspiration from his conducting because the performance was altogether tauter, the diction clearer than it was at last season's revival.

The planned visit by Sadler's Wells to the Europalia Festival in Brussels, including *Iolanthe*, was cancelled at short notice owing to a dispute between the company and the stagehands (see *Opera*, January 1974), but more Gilbert and Sullivan soon followed for Mackerras. On 29 October 1974, Granada Television made a recording of *Trial by Jury* first broadcast on Christmas Eve, with Mackerras conducting a cast led by Norma Burrowes (The Plaintiff), Eric Shilling (The Learned Judge) and John Brecknock (The Defendant), with the Ambrosian Opera Chorus and the English Chamber Orchestra. In his television column for *The Times* ('The Spirit of Christmas present', 24 December 1974), Michael Ratcliffe wrote:

Tonight's 'Trial by Jury' (Granada) is ... designed, by Peter Phillips, with a lovely long corridor for the whole cast to skip and caper down to the Bab-manner born. Norma Burrowes is a devastatingly competitive Plaintiff, fighting the Defendant not merely for breach of promise but also, and successfully, for possession of the melodic line in the Puritani/Lucia quartet. Charles Mackerras conducts, fast, but here allows the parody room to breathe.

The D'Oyly Carte Centenary Season saw Mackerras's first appearances with the Company. During the two-week Centenary Season in March–April 1975, he conducted *Trial by Jury* and *Pirates* (27th March) and *Mikado* (1st April). *Pirates* had a cast led by John Ayldon (The Pirate King), Julia Goss (Mabel), Lyndsie Holland (Ruth), Colin Wright (Frederic) and James Conroy-Ward (Major-General Stanley), while *Mikado* included four of the same principals (Ayldon as the Mikado, Goss as Yum-Yum, Holland as Katisha and Wright as Nanki-Poo), with John Reed appearing as Ko-Ko. (Fig 3) *The Mikado* was broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 and I remember some moments of poor coordination and a slightly unsettled feeling to the performance. Listening to it again recently I wondered if there had been a difference of opinion over tempo between Mackerras and John Reed (who, incidentally, had chosen the start of *Pineapple Poll* as one of his *Desert Island Discs*, broadcast on 23 September 1972¹). Mackerras's association with the D'Oyly Carte continued when he became a member of the Board of Trustees in 1980, and in 1981 he made another guest appearance with the company: at the Adelphi Theatre on 23 December 1981, he conducted *Pirates* for one night, the cast including John Ayldon (The Pirate King), Jill Pert (Mabel), Patricia Leonard (Ruth) and Alistair Donkin (Major-General Stanley).

¹ See <http://pinafore.www3.50megs.com/castaway.html> and <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk> This programme is not listed in the BBC's *Desert Island Discs* online archive.

By then the closure of the company had already been announced (the original D'Oyly Carte gave its last performance on 27 February 1982).

In June 1975, Mackerras conducted *Patience* at the Theater an der Wien on a visit by English National Opera to the Vienna Festival (the opera had first been performed at Vienna's Carltheater in 1887, as *Patience, oder Dragoner und Dichter*, but it was a rarity in the 1970s). A year later, on 5 September 1976, *Patience* was given at the Royal Albert Hall: the first time any full length Gilbert and Sullivan opera had been given complete at the Proms (though Sir Malcolm Sargent had made a good start when he conducted *Trial by Jury* in 1963). Reviewing the performance for *The Times* (6 September 1976), a disapproving Paul Griffiths wrote of 'a tiresome and false *Patience*, if one which, I have to admit, appealed strongly to an audience generous with its laughter and applause.' Griffiths complained that most of the cast 'hammed things up shamefully; they played every single line for laughs: they acted with the knowing wink of camp irony.' He was happier about one of the principals, and the conductor: 'Only Derek Hammond-Stroud, as Bunthorne, showed a true feeling for the style, which was also exhibited in Charles Mackerras's spirited and affectionate conducting of the orchestra.'

The 1980s and early 1990s were the decades in which Mackerras conducted more Gilbert and Sullivan than at any other time in his career. On New Year's Day 1981, BBC Radio 3 broadcast a specially made recording of *The Gondoliers* which had a very similar cast to that of the 1989 BBC series. The principal difference is that Michael Langdon sang *Don Alhambra* in 1981, replaced by Forbes Robinson in the later version. Marilyn Hill Smith appears in both performances, but she sang *Casilda* in 1981 and *Gianetta* (taken by Sandra Dugdale in 1981) in the later performance.

In 1982, Radio 3 again celebrated the New Year with Gilbert and Sullivan, this time with *Patience*, the cast led by Eric Shilling,

Tuesday, 1st April

The Mikado

(or The Town of Titipu)

Written by W. S. GILBERT
Composed by ARTHUR SULLIVAN

The Mikado of Japan	JOHN AYLDON
Nanki-Poo , his Son disguised as a wandering Minstrel, in love with Yum-Yum	COLIN WRIGHT
Ko-Ko , Lord High Executioner of Titipu	JOHN REED
Pooh-Bah , Lord High Everything Else	KENNETH SANDFORD
Pish-Tush } Noble Lords {	MICHAEL RAYNER
Go-To }	JOHN BROAD
Yum-Yum } Three Sisters, Wards of Ko-Ko {	JULIA GOSS
Pitti-Sing }	JUDI MERRI
Peep-Bo }	PATRICIA LEONARD
Katisha , an Elderly Lady in love with Nanki-Poo Chorus of Schoolgirls, Nobles, Guards and Coolies	LYNDSIE HOLLAND

Synopsis of Scenes

ACT ONE

Courtyard of Ko-Ko's Official Residence

Interval of 15 minutes

ACT TWO

Ko-Ko's Garden

Costume: Nanki-Poo, Act I, designed by Disley Jones and made by Berman's and Nathan's Ltd.

Other Costumes designed by Charles Ricketts

Conductor: Charles Mackerras

Fig.3. Programme for *The Mikado* at the Savoy Theatre on 1 April 1975 conducted by Mackerras during the D'Oyly Carte Centenary Season



Fig.4. The newly-knighted Sir Charles with his family (left to right: daughters Cathy and Fiona, Charles, and his wife Judy) outside their home at 10 Hamilton Terrace, after the investiture at Buckingham Palace on 27th February 1979

(Colonel Calverley), Derek Hammond-Stroud (Bunthorne), Anne Collins (Lady Jane) and Sandra Dugdale (Patience). This is a delightful performance, and it is particularly valuable as Mackerras did not conduct this opera for the 1989 BBC series. 1982 also saw his third and last gramophone recording of the complete *Pineapple Poll*. Made by Decca at the Kingsway Hall in December 1982, this is the most brilliant and dashing version of all, superbly played by the Philharmonia Orchestra and recorded in spectacular digital sound. At the same sessions, Mackerras and the Philharmonia recorded an equally ebullient account of the *Overture di Ballo*.

BBC Radio 2 broadcast a complete Gilbert and Sullivan series on twelve consecutive Sundays in 1989 (1 October-17 December), but the eight operas conducted by Mackerras had been taped several years earlier: in 1984 (*Ruddigore*, *Princess Ida*), 1985 (*Pirates*, *Trial*, *Yeomen*) and 1986 (*Pinafore*, *Mikado* and *Gondoliers*). Supplemented by fascinating interval features presented by David Mackie, and including generally well-delivered dialogue, these broadcasts are among the most persuasive of any recorded performances. The only drawback is the slightly cavernous acoustics of the Golders Green Hippodrome (home of the BBC Concert Orchestra), where the recordings were made. In terms of Mackerras's Gilbert and Sullivan performances, they are important documents too, particularly as they are the only occasions on which he conducted *Ruddigore* and *Princess Ida*.

The stirring centenary performance of Sullivan's *The Golden Legend* in Leeds Town Hall on 15 March 1986 was a memorable occasion, broadcast live on Radio 3 and conducted, in part, using the baton Sullivan himself had used a hundred years earlier (for details see John Cannon's article 'Sir Charles Mackerras and The Golden Legend' *Gilbert & Sullivan News*, Summer 2014, p. 9). Arthur Jacobs – a sympathetic but by no means uncritical Sullivan authority – reviewed this rare performance in the *Financial Times* (17 March 1986):

To Arthur Sullivan it was 'the best thing I've ever done.' In this century, however, 'The Golden Legend' has been relegated to the lumber room, among the vast number of Victorian 'sacred' cantatas. On Saturday in Leeds a centenary performance was so magnificently directed by Sir Charles Mackerras that one could almost believe in the piece. Leeds Town Hall, where the work was launched under the composer's baton in 1886, was again the location. The excellent Leeds Philharmonic Choir enabled Sir Charles to scale the summits with an impressive control of pace and climax. The Manchester-based BBC Philharmonic Orchestra revealed Sullivan's fine ear for the palette of a much larger instrumental force than could be exhibited in the operettas with Gilbert. Among the soloists Brian Rayner Cook did splendidly in deputising at a few hours' notice for an indisposed Richard Van Allan, bringing life to the sardonic figure of Lucifer. Unfortunately those big choral climaxes, eloquent in demonstrating Sullivan's skills as a composer, stand aside from the conflict supposed to be evoked by the drama itself. ... Enthusiastically received by a full house, this was ... a festive centenary salute to the greatest of Victorian composers.

Just over a month after *The Golden Legend* came the premiere of the reconstruction of the *Cello Concerto* by David Mackie and Mackerras. In 1985, Mackerras was laid low by a severe bout of hepatitis, and working on the restoration of the concerto was a welcome activity during his convalescence. Mackerras conducted the work with Julian Lloyd Webber and the London Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican Hall on 20 April. Hugo Cole wrote in *The Guardian* (21 April 1986):

Sullivan's 'Cello Concerto' has been so skillfully reconstructed by David Mackie and Charles Mackerras, that we forgot to wonder where the original fabric ended and restoration work began. I found myself applauding Sullivan for the way in which a motive from the middle section of the slow movement reappeared on woodwind as the cello repeated its big tune, till I remembered that it must have been the arrangers who fitted this piece so neatly into the jigsaw, since the original cello part is all that has survived. Too many cooks have not spoiled the broth.

On 2-4 September 1991 at the Brangwyn Hall in Swansea, Mackerras recorded *The Mikado* as the first in a series of Savoy Operas for Telarc, with Welsh National Opera forces, and casts that included both mainstream opera singers and Gilbert and Sullivan specialists. While this *Mikado* omits the overture and dialogue, and has some other small cuts (necessary to fit the opera on a single CD), it is a sparkling account, with notable performances from the likes of Richard Van Allan (Pooh-Bah) and Felicity Palmer (Katisha) alongside experienced Savoyards Donald Adams (*Mikado*) and Richard Suart (Ko-Ko), and outstanding contributions from the WNO Chorus and Orchestra. As Marc Shepherd noted on his Gilbert and Sullivan Discography website, in terms of 'operatic' performances of G&S, 'The Mackerras recordings have a spirit and life to them that the Sargent recordings never quite reached.'² They do indeed: one of the constant delights of this Telarc series is the verve and dramatic flair of Mackerras's conducting. As a young oboist, Mackerras had played for Sargent in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and he always admired Sir Malcolm's professionalism and high standards. His conducting on the Telarc discs is much closer to Sargent's first recordings of the Savoy Operas from the late 1920s and early 1930s rather than the much staler stereo

² <http://gasdisc.oakapplepress.com/mikmack.htm>



Fig.5. Charles Mackerras conducting and Felicity Palmer as Lady Jane in 'Patience at the Proms' on 11 August 2009 [Photo: Chris Christodoulou]

series. Following the success of *Mikado*, the WNO *Pirates* was recorded in May 1993, *Pinafore* came a year later in June 1994, and the last of the series were *Yeomen* and *Trial*, made in April-May 1995, in sessions that took place either side of the visit to London to perform *Yeomen* at Covent Garden.

Welsh National Opera's *Yeomen* at the Royal Opera House on 24, 25 and 26 April 1995 was a landmark: the first ever staging of a complete Gilbert and Sullivan opera at Covent Garden.³ The last of the three performances was broadcast live on BBC Radio 3. Ian Brunskill reviewed the production in *The Times* (26 April 1995):

An outstanding cast showed that the most preposterous characters gain from being believed in. Donald Adams drew on his vast experience of this repertoire to prove that even a figure as sketchily drawn as Sergeant Meryll will reward the efforts of a committed actor. He and Felicity Palmer (in commanding form as a splendidly lovelorn Dame Carruthers) not only justified the inclusion of their 'Rapture, rapture!' duet but turned it into the highlight of the evening. Richard Suart brought a desperate dignity to the role of Jack Point, suggesting complexity rather than confusion in his depiction of this unhappiest of fools. Donald Maxwell was a magnificently stupid Shadbolt. Alwyn Mellor's spirited Elsie Maynard, Pamela Helen Stephen's engaging Phoebe and Neill Archer's passionate Fairfax took plausible care of the romantic interest. Chorus and orchestra under Sir Charles Mackerras rose to the challenges of Sullivan's ambition, relishing both the scale and the detail of his scoring. In the Act II finale, in particular, this Yeomen achieved a grandeur and a pathos no less real for being utterly absurd.

On 17 November 1995, Mackerras celebrated his 70th birthday. A few weeks earlier, on 1 October 1995, a gala concert took place in the St. David's Hall, Cardiff, and Sir Charles chose to open it with *The Yeomen of the Guard* Overture. On his actual 70th birthday, he was at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, and conducted a suite from *Pineapple Poll* at the gala that night.

Five years later, on 24 July 2000, Mackerras opened a Prom with Sullivan's *Macbeth* overture and the *Cello Concerto* (with Paul Watkins), in a programme that also included works by Schubert, Mendelssohn and Schumann. A few weeks earlier, on 7 June 2000, Mackerras celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his first appearance

with Welsh National Opera. The entertainment at the gala dinner included *A Pineapple Pavlova*, the words of which will be included in Part 3 of this Mackerras trilogy. Sir Charles turned 80 in 2005. On 16 July, with the BBC Concert Orchestra, he once again brought Gilbert and Sullivan to the Proms. The programme opened with *The Yeomen of the Guard* overture, followed by a suite from *Pineapple Poll* and – after the interval – the Proms premiere of *HMS Pinafore*, substituting a narration in place of the dialogue. With a cast led by Felicity Palmer (*Little Buttercup*) and Richard Suart (*Sir Joseph Porter*), Mackerras was working with soloists who had sung this repertoire with him before, and the only problem with the evening (for this author, at least) was the narration by Tim Brooke-Taylor. During this Prom, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies announced that Mackerras was to be the

first recipient of the new Queen's Medal for Music.

Charles Mackerras never lost his youthful enthusiasm for Gilbert and Sullivan, and on 11 August 2009, he returned to the Proms with *Patience*. This time, the original dialogue was delivered by a cast led by Felicity Palmer as Lady Jane, Donald Maxwell as Colonel Calverley, Simon Butcher as Bunthorne, and Rebecca Bottone as *Patience*, with the chorus of English National Opera and the BBC Concert Orchestra. Sir Charles was quite frail by now – he had been suffering from the debilitating effects of multiple myeloma for a few years – but his conducting of this semi-staged performance had an unquenchable zest and vitality. Tim Ashley in *The Guardian* (12 August) offered some interesting thoughts on the work itself, and had no doubts about the performance:

Its satire on all things self-regarding seems entirely apposite to our pretentious age, and yet its immediate focus was the aesthetic movement that included among its members the pre-Raphaelites, Whistler, William Morris and Oscar Wilde, whose achievements we now value and admire. Patience is still incredibly funny, but hindsight has made its humour unfair and, at times, cruel.

Whatever one's qualms about the piece, however, this Proms revival was a model of how to present it. Charles Mackerras, a life-long Gilbert and Sullivan fan, conducted with panache without losing sight of those moments of deep pathos that humanise the score's often sardonic tone. Martin Duncan's production – described as a 'semi-staging' but lacking only a full set to make it complete – was a supremely intelligent affair that retained both the original period and dialogue, and managed always to teeter on the edge of camp without ever sliding into it. The cast was perfection. ...

We haven't had a G&S performance of this calibre for more than a decade. Outstanding, or as one of Gilbert's pseudos might say: "Consummately utter."

Patience turned out to be Sir Charles's final appearance at the Proms, and, as his daughter Cathy told me in a conversation we had on 19 August 2015, it was a particularly happy occasion: 'Dad's last Prom was just so much fun for him – he was smiling and laughing from start to finish. It was somehow appropriate that he went right back to his roots, musically speaking: to Gilbert and Sullivan and some of the first music he ever got to know.'

Nigel Simeone

³ *Pineapple Poll*, however, had long been a favourite at Covent Garden. Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet included it in their inaugural programme there in 1957.