

"I AM a coalminer. I want to say 'thank you' for the introduction to such a delightful world." was one comment received by Leslie Baily after the broadcast of his radio-biography, *Gilbert and Sullivan: The Story of a Great Partnership*. That was the BBC series first broadcast in New Zealand in 1948, last heard here in 1950, and just as warmly received. Now ZB Sunday Showcase is to present *Gilbert and Sullivan*, a series of six BBC programmes, on Sunday, June 9, and the following five Sundays.

"This is not a recording of the earlier series," said Leslie Baily in his introduction to the new programme in the *Radio Times*. "Such great interest was shown then that I was encouraged to carry my research further into the lives of Sullivan, Gilbert and Carte, and as a result I wrote *The Gilbert and Sullivan Book*. The new BBC series generally follows the same lines as before, but I have revised the scripts in the light of this knowledge. As musical director this time we have Charles Mackerras, and the benefit of his great knowledge of Sullivan's music. He is, of course, the arranger of the Sullivan ballet, *Pineapple Poll*. The producer is Vernon Harris, who also produces my *Scrapbooks*."

The Gilbert and Sullivan operas have brought almost universal delight, yet their first opera was a dismal failure and has now been lost. *Thespis*, a tale of the Olympian gods grown old, seemed but a brief venture for an up-and-coming playwright and a well-known young, serious musician. Indeed, those who, with Queen Victoria, expected Sullivan "to uplift British music," hoped that there would be no more work of this nature, although it was not his first incursion into a field that also badly needed uplifting. In the next three years Sullivan continued to conduct, and compose oratorio, hymns and ballads, while Gilbert went on building a theatrical reputation as an author and stage-director.

Four years later, Sullivan again turned to comic opera, working with Gilbert on *Trial by Jury*, at the suggestion of Richard D'Oyly Carte. Sullivan's mercurial temperament and love of the theatrical may partly explain the new collaboration but, says Leslie Baily, in *The Gilbert and Sullivan Book*, "the likeliest explanation of why both Gilbert and Sullivan came back so readily into partnership is that they respected D'Oyly Carte as a man who combined business acumen with artistic integrity." He remained their manager and friend, playing a large part in their success.

*Trial by Jury* was immediately popular. Gilbert's comedy was light-hearted, ridiculous, and yet intelligent—he was guying ordinary English character types and institutions in a hearty, disrespectful, English way, and even the best people approved. It was the formula he followed in opera after opera, poking fun in turn at the Navy (*H.M.S. Pinafore*), the Army, the police, and the British sense of duty (*The Pirates of*



ABOVE: The partners as they were portrayed in the film "The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan"—Sullivan (in the wheelchair) was played by Maurice Evans, and Gilbert by Robert Morley. RIGHT: The radio biographer, Leslie Baily.



BBC photograph

*Penzance*), the Oscar Wilde cult and poseurs in general (*Patience*), the House of Lords (*Iolanthe*), women's emancipation (*Princess Ida*), old-fashioned melodrama (*Ruddigore*), and equalitarianism (*The Gondoliers*), while *The Mikado* was the greatest leg-pull of all, for despite its Japanese setting there is—as G. K. Chesterton said—hardly a single joke in the whole opera that fits the Japanese, but all the jokes fit the English.

To Gilbert's wonderful comedies, Sullivan added music rich in sensibility, in wit, in melody, setting the English language with as skill and sensitivity that has rarely been equalled. Sullivan was dogged by ill-health, and often his music was written in sickness, as he worked through the nights to finish the score in time for the opening performance. But somehow this did not affect the gaiety of the music.

Yet the limitations of Gilbertian plots and characters increasingly frustrated Sullivan. There were several

quarrels, and when Gilbert was obsessed by a plot involving magic lozenges, Sullivan went on strike. He wanted to write a great grand opera. Gilbert, to placate him, wrote *The Yeomen of the Guard*, the most serious of his libretti. Sullivan welcomed it as "No topsy-turveydom, very human, and funny also." In words and music this opera most attractively captures the spirit of its Elizabethan setting. But the harmony did not last long. Although their creative qualities fitted so perfectly, the tall Gilbert, with his military bearing and pungent wit, was miles away in temperament from the more urbane Sullivan, the Society bachelor. And Sullivan was constantly pricked by his Victorian artistic conscience.

The partnership was not helped by the fact that, according to Leslie Baily,

"their personal characteristics tended to fly off the wheel of their merry-go-round at opposite tangents. But they had a genuine appreciation of each other's gifts, and it was this—sheer good horse-sense (they knew where the money lay), plus admiration—with which, for many years, they covered up their disharmony and built upon it that world of harmony, the Savoy Operas."

Some people find these operas dated. Certainly some of the topical references have lost their point, and the passion for the wilder puns has passed; similarly some of Sullivan's choruses seem somewhat pompous today. Nevertheless, the Gilbert and Sullivan operas still bring joy to millions, a joy produced by a rare fusion of sentiment and satire.

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