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Other Side of Sullivan Transcript

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THE OTHER SIDE OF SULLIVAN

Professor Robin Wilson

When you think of Sullivan, you probably think of something like this:

Three little maids from school

But there was another side to Sullivan, which is less familiar:

Extract from Overture to *Macbeth*

- part of the incidental music to Henry Irving's production of *Macbeth* at the Lyceum Theatre in 1888. Today I want to explore this other side of Sir Arthur Sullivan, with examples of his art songs, his church and choral music, his grand opera, and his orchestral output.

This lecture is part of the Gresham series of lectures marking the tercentenary of St Paul's Cathedral, a building with which Sullivan had associations throughout his life. Indeed, after his death in 1900, Queen Victoria insisted that he should receive a State funeral at St Paul's, and his grave can still be seen in the crypt. The pall-bearers at his funeral included Sir John Stainer, a life-long friend and composer of 'Stainer's *Crucifixion*', and his close friends and contemporaries Sir George Martin, organist of St Paul's, and Sir Frederick Bridge, organist of Westminster Abbey and Gresham Professor of Music. The music played at the funeral included *Brother, thou art gone before us*, which Sullivan had composed twenty years earlier for his sacred musical drama *The Martyr of Antioch*.

Brother, thou art gone before us

Early days

Arthur Sullivan was born on 13 May 1842 in Lambeth. His father was a theatre musician who was appointed bandmaster at the Royal Military College at Sandhurst when Arthur was 3. The young Arthur decided by the time he was 5 that his career was to be in music, and he soon learned to play all the instruments in his father's band.

When Arthur was 12 he was admitted to the choir of the Chapel Royal, and with his outstanding treble voice he soon became 'first boy', taking solo parts and performing at important national occasions such as the opening of the Crystal Palace in 1854. In the following year, when he was just 13, he composed his first anthem, which was performed at the Chapel Royal, and his first published work appeared, a sacred song called *O Israel*.

In 1856 Sullivan was winner of the first Mendelssohn Scholarship at the Royal Academy of Music, the youngest of seventeen competitors. He studied piano with Sterndale Bennett and one of his other tutors was Sir John Goss, organist of St Paul's Cathedral. Meanwhile his father was appointed to a professorship at the Military School of Music at Kneller Hall, where he remained until his death.

When Sullivan was 16 an extension of his Mendelssohn Scholarship sent him for three years to Leipzig, the finest music school in Europe. He studied piano with Moscheles, friend of Beethoven, and met Schumann, Spohr and Liszt, and was a fellow-student of Grieg. While there he heard the compositions of Schubert, Schumann and Wagner, which were practically unknown in England at the time. In his final year there he composed, as a graduation exercise, some incidental music for Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which was performed at the famous Gewandhaus.

Dance from *The Tempest*

The 1860s

On his return to England, he got to know Sir George Grove, famous for his *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, who arranged for 12 movements of the *Tempest* music to be played at the Crystal Palace, conducted by August Manns. It was an immediate success, taking the musical world 'by storm', with five items encored, and was repeated the following week. Charles Dickens was there and congratulated him, saying '*I don't know much about music, but I do know I've been listening to a very great work*'. Sullivan was warmly praised by the national press - and he was still only 19.

The next decade, the 1860s, was one of frenzied activity, as Sullivan learned his trade and started 'empire-building'. At the Academy he introduced the Principal to the music of Schumann, and became a champion for the music of Schubert and Schumann. While on holiday in Paris with Dickens and Grove, he met the elderly Rossini who played piano duets from the *Tempest* with him, and on a later trip he visited Vienna with George Grove, where they met an old clerk who'd known Schubert and unearthed two symphonies and the part books of the then-unknown *Rosamunde* music: they were so excited that they copied out the parts overnight, ending with a celebratory game of leap-frog.

In 1863 he had composed a Wedding March for the marriage of the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII), while the following year he composed a masque for the Birmingham Festival and a ballet for Covent Garden. He became organist for the Royal Italian Opera (now the Royal Opera House), and started to edit operas for Boosey's Royal Edition - having to prepare piano transcriptions of Mozart, Beethoven, Rossini and Verdi was invaluable training for someone who would eventually become an operatic composer.

He also started to compose songs for use in the drawing room - about a hundred of them, beginning with six Shakespeare songs. One of the best was *Orpheus with his lute*.

Orpheus with his lute

Other small-scale pieces written before he was 30 included some piano pieces for the drawing room, a fine song cycle, *The Window*, with words by Tennyson who subsequently disowned it, and a number of part-songs, including his best-known one, *The long day closes*.

The long day closes

By this time Sullivan had also written some major orchestral works. In 1866, an important year for him, he wrote his only symphony, the *Symphony in E (The Irish)*, which was performed at the Crystal Palace. In the same year he composed his only concerto, a *Cello Concerto*.

Cello Concerto movement

In the same productive year, Sullivan wrote an overture for the Norwich Festival. Sullivan found difficulty in getting inspiration for this work, and his father said '*Don't worry: something will turn up*'. Tragically it was the sudden death of his father that gave the distraught composer the inspiration he needed, and he quickly composed his overture, *In Memoriam*. Only two further purely orchestral works were to follow.

Another thing was already happening that would have a major influence on his later career - he started to compose comic operettas. In 1866 he composed the music for a one-act operetta called *Cox and Box* to a libretto by F. C. Bernard, a writer for *Punch* magazine, and the very next year he followed it with another one, *The Contrabandista*.

In 1869, Sullivan was appointed a professor at the Royal Academy of Music, at the age of only 27. But in the same year another event took place that was to have a greater effect on his life - he was taken to a rehearsal of an operetta composed by his friend Frederic Clay. There he met Clay's librettist, a certain W. S. Gilbert. 'Gilbert & Sullivan' was about to be born.

The 1870s

Their first collaboration was a commission from the Gaiety Theatre, 'an entirely original grotesque comic opera' called *Thespis*, or *The Gods Grown Old*, which ran for six weeks, quite a success in those days. This was watched by a young impresario called Richard D'Oyly Carte, who brought them together four years later, in 1875, for their first great success, the one-act *Trial by Jury*.

Meanwhile, Sullivan had been following pursuits of a more serious character. He had written his first major choral work in 1869, an oratorio called *The Prodigal Son*, and followed it four years later with another oratorio, *The Light of the World*, which caused an immediate sensation when it was first performed at the Birmingham Festival.

The following year, 1874, saw the miraculous recovery from typhoid of the Prince of Wales, and a great national event took place at the Crystal Palace. Arthur Sullivan was commissioned to write another choral work, his *Festival Te Deum*, which was performed with great success by 2000 singers and orchestral players before an audience of 20,000.

He was also composing other sacred music - church anthems, sacred part-songs, and hymns, including his best-known one, *Onward Christian Soldiers*. In 1874 he edited the SPCK hymn-book for the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, for which he composed 26 new hymns and arranged 7 others, including his well-known arrangement of *It came upon the midnight clear*.

Lead, kindly light

The next few years were eventful, with Sullivan becoming the conductor of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir and Principal of the National Training School, later incorporated into the Royal College of Music. He also received Honorary doctorates from both Oxford and Cambridge Universities, and wrote his most famous song - indeed, the most famous of all Victorian ballads - *The Lost Chord*, which was composed by the grief-stricken composer while his brother lay dying of a liver disease at the age of 39.

But most of the next few years were taken up with a succession of comic operettas. Following *Trial by Jury*, Gilbert and Sullivan wrote *The Sorcerer*, to be succeeded by *HMS Pinafore* and *The Pirates of Penzance*. The D'Oyly Carte Opera Company was by then well established, running several touring companies, and these last two operettas were both smash-hit successes in the USA as well as in London.

The 1880s

The next decade was probably Sullivan's most successful, at least as far as comic operetta was concerned. But the 1880s opened with his appointment as Conductor of the Leeds Festival, possibly the most prestigious of all the music festivals at the time. These festivals were held every three years, and Sullivan became Chief Conductor for seven of them, from 1880 to 1898.

For the first of them he composed a sacred musical drama, *The Martyr of Antioch*, to words by Henry Hart Milman, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, arranged by none other than W. S. Gilbert. This work contains some fine choral passages, and we heard a brief extract from it earlier.

The next comic operetta was *Patience*, a skit on the aesthetic movement of Oscar Wilde and Algernon Swinburne. By this time, the works of Gilbert and Sullivan had become so popular that Richard D'Oyly Carte decided to build his own theatre, the Savoy, and *Patience* was transferred there in October 1881. It was the first public building to be lit entirely by electricity.

From then on, the operettas became known as the *Savoy Operas*, the next two being *Iolanthe* and *Princess Ida*. The latter was not successful, and a number of revivals of earlier operettas took place, until their great triumph *The Mikado* was ready.

Meanwhile Sullivan had been hob-nobbing with royalty. He went on an extended trip to Europe with Albert, the Duke of Edinburgh, visiting the Tsar of Russia, the King of Denmark, and the future Kaiser, who serenaded him with, '*I polished up the handle of the big front door*'. In 1883 Sullivan was knighted by Queen Victoria, and the national press, taking the high moral ground, remarked pompously that: '*Some things that Mr Arthur Sullivan may do, Sir Arthur ought not to do. Here is not only an opportunity, but a positive obligation for him to return to the sphere from which he has too long descended*.' But Sullivan needed the Savoy operas to pay for the visits to the gaming-tables and brothels that he so much enjoyed.

Meanwhile, Sullivan's visits to the triennial Leeds Festival continued to be hard work, but most rewarding. The 1883 performance he conducted of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* was described as the best ever heard in England, and in 1886, Sullivan conducted one of the first full-length performances in England of Bach's *B Minor Mass*, and edited the Novello vocal score that is still used today. He also invited Antonin Dvorak to visit Leeds and conduct a new choral work, *St Ludmila*.

It was also at this Leeds Festival that Sullivan introduced his greatest choral work, the dramatic cantata *The Golden Legend*, to words by Longfellow, to great acclaim.

Extract from *The Golden Legend*

The Times described it as '*a work which, if not one of genius in the strict sense of the word, is at least likely to survive till our long expected English Beethoven appears on the scene*'. Nevertheless, although rarely performed today, it was until the First World War the most performed choral work in this country, other than Handel's *Messiah*.

The next three years saw three further Savoy Operas, *Ruddigore*, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, and *The Gondoliers*. The last of these was particularly successful, resulting in a command performance at Windsor Castle, and causing Gilbert to write to Sullivan: '*I must thank you for the magnificent work you have put into the piece. It gives one the chance of shining right through the twentieth century with a reflected light.*' Sullivan replied in kind: '*Don't talk of reflected light. In such a perfect book as *The Gondoliers* you shine with an individual brilliancy which no other writer can hope to attain.*'

The final decade

But it was not to last, as Gilbert and Sullivan quarrelled bitterly over the cost of new carpets that D'Oyly Carte had installed at the front of the Savoy. Sullivan sided with D'Oyly Carte and things were never the same again. Sullivan refused ever to write again for the Savoy, and went in with D'Oyly Carte, who built the Royal English Opera House, now the Palace Theatre, which opened with Sullivan's only grand opera, *Ivanhoe*.

Ivanhoe has often been described as a failure, and yet it ran for over 150 consecutive performances, surely a record for a grand opera. Some failure! Although it's a somewhat inconsistent work, it does contain some very fine music. Here are three excerpts: a very English scene from Act I, a verse of *Ho Jolly Jenkin*, the most well-known song in the opera, and the powerful duet *Woo thou thy snowflake*.

Three items from *Ivanhoe*

Sullivan did write two more operettas with Gilbert, *Utopia Limited* and *The Grand Duke*, but neither was a success. There were revivals of earlier Savoy Operas, such as *The Mikado*, and Sullivan composed operettas with other librettists: *Haddon Hall* in 1892, *The Chieftain* in 1894, a more serious work *The Beauty Stone* in 1898, and *The Rose of Persia* in 1899. All of these contain much attractive music, but Sullivan needed better librettists, as he had in his hey-day with Gilbert.

Sullivan had suffered from kidney stones for many years, and by the late 1890s he was tired and ill and showing his age. His last diary entry, in November 1900, was written when he was aged just 58: *Lovely day. I am sorry to leave such a lovely day.* He died on St Cecilia's Day, 22nd November. His last work, an unfinished comic operetta called *The Emerald Isle*, was completed by Edward German and presented at the Savoy.

But let's conclude by returning to St Paul's Cathedral, where his State funeral took place. Britain was in the midst of the bloody Boer War and, shortly before he died, Sullivan had been approached by the Dean and Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral with a commission to write a *Te Deum* for a Grand Peace Service once the War was over. It was to be Sullivan's last completed work, but the War dragged on and the *Boer War Te Deum* did not receive its first performance until June 1902, eighteen months after his death, at a service attended by the new King and Queen.

As the procession moved up the aisle of St Paul's Cathedral, the whole congregation rose to their feet and joined heartily in singing Sullivan's best-known hymn *Onward Christian Soldiers*. To conclude this tribute to Sir Arthur Sullivan I'd like to play you the magnificent final movement of the *Boer War Te Deum*, in which the composer skilfully combines various themes from earlier in the work with this celebrated hymn-tune.

Boer War Te Deum