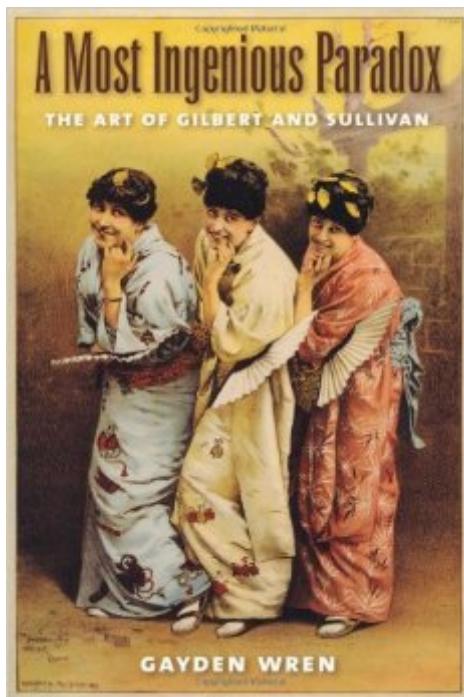


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A Most Ingenious Paradox: The Art Of Gilbert And Sullivan



Synopsis

Written more than a century ago and initially regarded even by their creators as nothing more than light entertainment, the fourteen operas of Gilbert & Sullivan emerged over the course of the twentieth century as the world's most popular body of musical-theater works, ranking second only to Shakespeare in the history of English-language theater. Despite this resounding popularity and proven longevity, most books written about the duo have focused on the authors rather than the works. With this detailed examination of all fourteen operas, Gayden Wren fills this void. His bold thesis finds the key to the operas' longevity, not in the clever lyrics, witty dialogue, or catchy music, but in the central themes underlying the characters and stories themselves. Like Shakespeare's comedies, Wren shows, the operas of Gilbert & Sullivan endure because of their timeless themes, which speak to audiences as powerfully now as they did the first time they were performed. Written out of an abiding love for the Savoy operas, this volume is essential reading for any devotee of these enchanting works, or indeed for anyone who loves musical theater.

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Customer Reviews

In the past, when asked to name the minimal list of books essential to a full understanding and thereby appreciation of the Gilbert & Sullivan operas, I would have cut it down to three. For a study of the social conditions behind Gilbert's satire, there is the long out of print "The World of Gilbert and Sullivan" by W.A. Darlington. For a fairly well balanced discussion of both the scripts and the music, there is "Gilbert & Sullivan Opera: a New Assessment" by Audrey Williamson, which passed into a

second edition when I saw it last. Then there is the indispensable single volume edition of "The Complete Annotated Gilbert & Sullivan" by Ian Bradley under the aegis of Oxford University Press. Now from that same august publisher comes a volume I might seriously consider as a fourth: "A Most Ingenious Paradox" by Gayden Wren. Having worked most of his life in the theatre and specializing in Gilbert & Sullivan, Wren has come up with the thesis that "Beneath the surface charm of the Savoy operas...lies a powerful thematic core that makes their works effective to this day" (p. 4). Well, so it is with Shakespeare, Shaw, and even Rodgers & Hart. It is the examples offered up by Wren that affords so much surprise and delight. The book is organized into fairly self-contained chapters. The first deals with "Gilbert before Sullivan," the second with "Sullivan before Gilbert." Then we have a chapter for each of the 14 works, followed by a chapter about their careers after "The Grand Duke" and a final one about their "Legacy." There follows an appendix with plot outlines, details about the original "Ruddigore" script and score, notes, an excellent critical bibliography, and index.

Wren, no doubt, has thoroughly researched his topic. He has lived with these operas and knows them intimately as anyone could. One cannot help but admire the depth of analysis given to several of the Savoy operas. I was particularly impressed by his analysis of the subtle flower imagery running thru Ruddigore, and his work on Gilbert's poetical schemes. His musical analysis falls short most of the time, and betrays a lack of understanding regarding Sullivan's approach (or indeed, theatrical music in general). His attacks do not suffer from the German 19th century-influenced prejudices which affected Gervase Hughes' study of Sullivan's music but often misconstrues meaning and in some cases, misses the joke entirely (yes, Sullivan could joke right along with Gilbert; Gilbert in fact famously remarked "I never had to explain a joke to Sullivan"). Wren decries the simple and lovely strophic setting of Patience's air "Love is a plaintive song," complaining (like some other authors) that Sullivan failed to capture the lyric. Not true. The simple, largely diatonic setting exquisitely captures lyric and character's frame of mind-- Patience is simple and straightforward, she is unhappy, confused, and parroting what Angela has led her to think love should be; a full out, through-composed dark aria would be uncalled for, and unconvincing from this character. In the same opera, when we meet Grosvenor in Act I, the music that accompanies his entrance is nearly Wagnerian in its dense chromatic wandering, admirably suited to a trendy, artistic young man of the time. Later, when Grosvenor emerges as "An Everyday Young Man," he sings a song that is literally reduced to two chords-- a subtle joke to be sure, but the humor is evident.

Mr. Wren has written a sometimes interesting and occasionally useful book, one, however, not quite so interesting or so useful as the author fancies it to be. The bibliography at the back of the book casts a particularly interesting light on the mind of the author. He goes out of his way to slag many or even most of the previous writers in the field, some for lapses of scholarship, some for mere redundancy, some for poor physical layout, some for lack of concern for thematic criticism (i.e., for not writing THIS book), and poor old Leslie Baily for being nice to the memory of Richard D'Oyly Carte. By his own testimony, Mr. Wren is a director of G&S stage productions. Like many directors, Mr. Wren has a fully matured appreciation of the essential rightness of his opinions, however crackpot. That is to say, his half-baked notions do not always agree with my reasoned conclusions--or maybe it's the other way around. The book abounds with points suitable for sticking in one's craw. There are nice pieces of logic of almost Gilbertian circularity. The later--but not the latest--Savoy operas are good and the early ones are bad. Why? Because the early ones are not like the later ones. Some things clearly intended not to be amusing are criticized for the grievous sin of not being funny, while some hilarious bits are buried beneath ponderous and gloomy commentary. It is with his critique of "H.M.S. Pinafore" that Mr. Wren's critical wheels go wobbly. He devotes a lengthy analysis to the "simple eloquence" of Ralph Rackstraw and the management style of Captain Corcoran. Unfortunately, the analysis comes to grief, as Wren points out, on the Captain's use of the word, "Elysian." A lesser man might harbor doubts, but Mr.

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