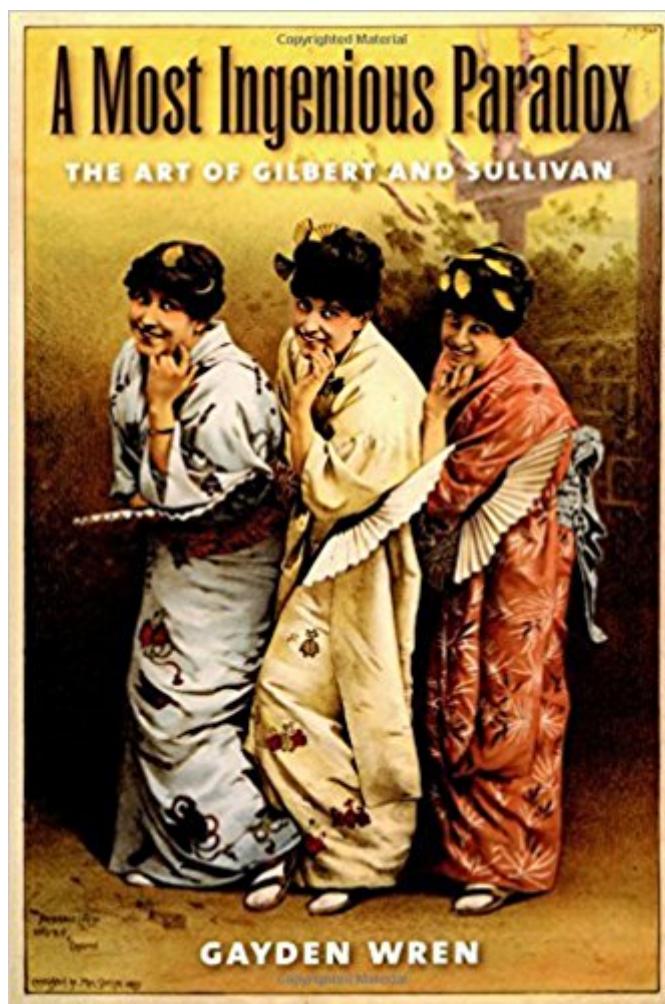


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# A Most Ingenious Paradox: The Art Of Gilbert And Sullivan



## 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 the 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

New York Times editor Wren credits the lasting vitality of the works of Gilbert and Sullivan to their universal themes and the humanity of their characters. Those who would credit the brilliant pairing of witty language and superb music will dispute this, but Wren substantiates his claims with detailed arguments that prompt a new look at these familiar works. Although many books are available on the lives of Gilbert and Sullivan, the operas, and their place in Victorian life, there are a number of

reasons to purchase this one. Wren's lengthy and intimate acquaintance with the works as performer, director, and teacher allows him to write with affection in an uncluttered style that will please both the general reader and the scholar. Beginning chapters cover each man's work prior to their collaboration, with subsequent chapters devoted to each Gilbert and Sullivan opera in chronological order and the final sections treating their later, separate work and their legacy. Plot summaries are given in an appendix, and a useful bibliography discusses the relative merits of each work. Finally, Wren illustrates Gilbert and Sullivan's complex and often adversarial relationship and its integral role in the success (or failure) of each opera. Highly recommended for academic and public libraries. Kate McCaffrey, Onondaga Cty. P.L., Syracuse, NY Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"There are a multitude of books about Gilbert and Sullivan...many of them, as [Wren] duly notes, are sketchy or superficial. But no one could fairly throw these adjectives at *A Most Ingenious Paradox* itself. Mr. Wren argues his case in impressive detail."--The Wall Street Journal "Wren explores...with authority and brilliance."--Tim Page, The Washington Post "Wren's book is both a fascinating read and a valuable resource."--American Theatre "Wren's lengthy and intimate acquaintance with the works as performer, director and teacher allows him to write with affection in an uncluttered style that will please both the general reader and the scholar...Highly recommended." --Library Journal "Essential to a full understanding and appreciation of the Gilbert & Sullivan operas...I kept nodding and thinking about most of his conclusions with 'Of course, I should have realized that years ago.'"--Brattleboro Reformer "Wren is an excellent professor of G&S literature and makes an impressive number of points that will absorb (and sometimes annoy) advanced Savoyards."--Opera News "Wren is a gifted writer and gives his honest views with confidence, providing clear style of presentation, clarity of description and much to get one thinking."--Classical Music Web "Wren's analyses of *The Mikado* and *The Gondoliers* are models of their kind...Sometimes brilliant, occasionally maddening, Wren is almost unfailingly provocative."--Gramophone "Thoughtful analyses of each of the Savoy operas...a book worth adding to your library."--G&S Bag "A fascinating study for anyone interested in the delightful works of Gilbert & Sullivan as well as the contemporary American musical theatre..."--Recommended Books "Gayden Wren's book is a worthwhile and long overdue attempt to get to the heart of the Savoy operas. It is thoughtful on many aspects of both words and music."--Music and Letters "A Most Ingenious Paradox will take its place as an important study of Gilbert & Sullivan as the worlds of music, theater, and scholarship continue (sometimes reluctantly) to evaluate and then acknowledge the Savoy Operas to be the

classic works they are."--Ralph MacPhail, Jr., Bridgewater College of Virginia

I have only made it through the first part of the book so far... up through "The Sorcerer". It is easy to read and very enlightening. Gayden Wren touches on facets of Gilbert and Sullivan that I never considered. I look forward to reading the rest of the book! I would recommend it to any Gilbert & Sullivan enthusiast!

This is one of the best G&S books I've read in a long time. Concentrates on the performance life of the G&S opera since the closing of the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company, and perhaps the birth of a new phase of artistic freedom and creativity.

This was not as I expected. I thought there would be more on the background of the operas, the personalities of the creators and the performers and the general atmosphere of the theatrical world of London of that era. All that is offered, essentially, is a pseudo-intellectual analysis of each of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas written in such a way that if the reader did not know each of the works in some close fashion then they would be lost and definitely bored. I am very familiar with most of these works and I was very bored indeed. The author attacks each chapter as if he were writing about Shakespeare, Milton or Dante. As much as I love G&S, they are not in that intellectual sphere no do the operas merit or benefit from such analysis. He seems to contradict himself all over the place making the reader quite confused. His pontifications about the relative quality of each opera seems quite subjective and offensive. I found myself getting angry. In the final analysis this book commits the unpardonable sin. It is so dull!

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. I think that directors will appreciate the emphasis Wren puts upon the seriousness that underlies some of the works, and not only "Yeomen of the Guard." For example, consider the scene just before the finale between Iolanthe and the Lord Chancellor in which things do become "life or death" and which could easily lead to an unhappy ending with no violence to what has gone before. Of course, the public expected a happy ending with G&S, but that was no reason they had to get one. His remarks about "The Mikado," although confined to only 15 pages did make me suddenly aware of how Gilbert keeps tipping his hand all through by having the characters call attention to their being in a play: "Japanese don't use pocket-handkerchiefs," "the Japanese equivalent for Hear, hear, hear," "Virtue is triumphant only in theatrical performances," and so on. I part company on him with him on some remarks about "Princess Ida," but his comparison between the opera and the Tennyson original is quite revealing. In general, I kept nodding and thinking about most of his conclusions with "Of course, I should have realized that years ago." The style is friendly, the author taking it for granted, of course, that you know the plots of the operas fairly well to begin with. Yes, I think I might recommend this as the fourth essential book. But please give it a try and let me know what you think. A little postscript would be in order here. Naxos is reissuing at budget prices the old "Martyn Green" G&S sets that used to be available on London and then Richmond mono LPs. Thus far they have added to their catalogue "The Mikado," "HMS Pinafore," "Pirates of Penzance/Trial by Jury," and just this month "The Gondoliers." Anyone interested in the Wren book would certainly want to own these vintage recordings.

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. Wren applauds Sullivan for relying less on recit in later operas, taking it's lack of use as evidence of compositional maturity (a prejudice similar to Gervase's, in that through-composed opera was somehow philosophically preferable to the recit-aria Italian format) when in fact, Sullivan uses recit only where it serves his purpose-- and doesn't when it is not called for. In Ruddigore, Dame Hannah's first song is interrupted by a recit like passage-- to call attention to the lines she utters, when Sullivan could have easily continued in the verse-form. This surprising and effective touch is evidence of compositional maturity, not a lapse into formula by an undeveloped talent. The bibliography at the end is thorough but also full of editorializations on each book mentioned, which are indeed informative, but also subjective, almost entirely so. With those comparatively minor cautions sounded, let it be said that this is a book is worth owning and reading and is an \*outstanding\* resource for the informed analyses of the lyric and historical backgrounds. It should of course be complemented, as an study would be, by consulting other sources and if so fortunate, an acquaintance with good productions (alas, so many productions of G&S operas lapse into pure silliness).

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