

Hier die Zusammenfassung eines aktuellen Forschungsbeitrags über  
Arthur Sullivans Bedeutung für die englische Oper.

Den vollständigen Text in deutscher Sprache finden Sie  
auf den Seiten 33 – 103 in dem Buch

### **SullivanPerspektiven III**

*Arthur Sullivans Musiktheater, Kammermusik, Chor- und Orchesterwerke*

Herausgegeben von Antje Tumat / Meinhard Saremba / Benedict Taylor

Oldib-Verlag, Essen 2017.

## **Arthur Sullivan, das viktorianische Musiktheater und die englische Oper**

Most of the books titled “A History of English Opera” should be called “History of Opera in England”. Until the late 19th century, genuine English opera hardly existed. Purcell’s works were mainly plays with songs and masques (this is why they are just “semi”-operas), the so-called “ballad operas” were arrangements of popular tunes with no original compositions (the often mentioned Gay was nothing more than a librettist and the “composer” Pepusch a German), Handel never composed operas in English (just Italian, and apart from that, he was German, too) and Arne or Dibdin were highly competent but not outstanding 18th century composers who mainly imitated the Italian and French style. In the 19th century English musicians still had to struggle hard as opera composers because the focus was on Italian, French and German opera. However, in the last quarter of the 19th century they were successful. Unfortunately, until today English-speaking musicologists and musicians act in a bizarre way: Although the English are alleged to be more humorous than the Germans, they cannot or do not want to break down barriers of the so-called ‘light’ and ‘serious’ music and are tentative to accept the fact that Arthur Sullivan created the most substantial contributions to English opera before Britten, and that Carte’s Savoy Theatre was the opera house with the longest run of truly English works (with about ninety percent English topics).

For operas it is irrelevant whether they include recitative or dialogue (several works of the standard repertoire include the spoken word such as *Die Zauberflöte*, *Fidelio*, *Der Freischütz* or the original version of *Carmen*), but an authentic English opera requires works by native composers not foreigners like d’Erlanger or Benedict. It is not a tall order to require from an English or British opera that it is composed by someone who was born in the United Kingdom, has an original English libretto (not a translation or adaption of foreign operas) and has a story that takes places in Britain or is based on a British source. In addition, the operas should be premiered in a UK theatre wherever possible.

Concerning the sake of English opera, the Irishman Balfe is over-estimated as he was a Jack-of-all-trades: singer, manager and composer. He often wrote operas in English, but his truly English

operas can be counted on one hand. Even his most successful work, *The Bohemian Girl*, is stylistically more suited to the French stage than the English. Only one artist before Sullivan took English opera seriously: George Macfarren. However, due to a collapse of English opera companies in the mid-1860s and the loss of his sight, he ceased composing operas (apart from an unperformed trial with an Italian libretto) and focused on oratorio and his academic prestige. Out of jealousy, he tried to damage Sullivan's reputation.

Arthur Sullivan's early operatic plots reveal a certain crisis of identity with quests for orientation in an unacquainted and seemingly chaotic world. Searching to find a place with English topics, Sullivan responded to complaints in 1875 that "we have never had a national operahouse (sic), nor, in the fullest sense of the term, are we likely to have one for along while. Opera in England must, under present circumstances, be either foreign, pur et simple, or foreign in an English dress" (*The Musical World*, 6th February 1875). Two years later, Richard D'Oyly Carte announced a new work for a new opera company where "author, composer, singers and actors are all English" (*The Era*, 4th November 1877). Eventually the Savoy Theatre became the English opera house with the longest successive run of genuine native opera.

Sullivan contributed 19 operas under Carte's management. As Sullivan's speech "About Music" (1888) reveals, his choice of topics must have been stimulated by a political, intellectual and cultural atmosphere that was boiled down to an essence in Matthew Arnold's book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Culture was regarded as "the best which has been thought and said", it was something that "seeks to do away with classes" (which must have appealed to Sullivan who came from a lower class). Arnold recommended "culture as the great help out of our present difficulties". As a result, Sullivan created operas with a critical view of Society and utopian models of leadership, social coexistence and humanity.

Sullivan was praised by many because "as a musician his versatility was almost unique" (Cowen 1913) and his "useful activity, it may be expected, will extend considerably into the 20th century" (Mazzucato 1899). Composers such as Vaughan Williams and Britten paid tribute to Sullivan's previous achievements as "he was one of the most important musicians of the newer age" (Merian 1914) and the "founder of English national opera" (Scholtze, early 20th century).

The variety and the quality of Sullivan's output excelled and outpaced all other 19th century British composers – a German book on opera around 1914 still praised him as "the most famous English musician of our time". In light of the fact that Sullivan was regarded by many, even foreigners, as Britain's leading composer (not necessarily by some of his envious countrymen) it is totally unacceptable that Paul Rodmell (with his book *Opera in the British Isles 1875-1918* at present the most exposed example for many) counts a pièce d'occasion like Amherst Webber's *Fiorella* and other obscure works as true opera, but ignores Sullivan's vast output (apart from *Ivanhoe* and *The Beauty Stone*).

The paradigm that Sullivan did not contribute to English opera is highly questionable because as a paradigm is a standard of solution for a problem area accepted by the scientific community (according to the philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn), one might ask what actually is the problem for which the outlawing of Sullivan is the solution? Is it embarrassing for academic circles and the English-speaking musical world that – like some Germans – one of their English composers also wrote comic operas? Is it awkward that he launched operas with dialogues? Is everything that is not yearning for death, long-suffering and peaked objectionable?

However, a paradigm shift is possible. Targeting a new view of Arthur Sullivan's achievements will be a fundamental change in the basic concepts, a shift that Kuhn describes as a "tradition-shattering

complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science” but to let oneself in for this perceptual transformation can turn a duck into a rabbit – as in the famous ambiguous image (see illustration to the essay) – and “a scientist’s world is qualitatively transformed as well as quantitatively enriched by fundamental novelties of either fact or theory”.

This paradigm shift involves renouncing popular delusions of Sullivan and acknowledges that he was the most important British musician of the 19th century who established genuine English opera. It also acknowledges that the music is the most important element in his stage works and that his works are operas (not plays with music, operettas or musicals). Moreover, the paradigm shift confirms that Sullivan’s music is not a mosaic of influences but original and individual (and that he does not deserve to be mentioned solely in connection with Gilbert who was just one among other of his librettists). Finally, the shift accepts that his operas are part of the European cultural heritage on a par with the works of Mozart, Weber, Smetana, just to mention a few. Sullivan must not be treated as if *Ivanhoe* and *Iolanthe* belong to completely different composers. In fact, they are just different sides of the same valuable coin. In order to achieve a more sophisticated and complex view of Sullivan’s time and his achievements, an intensive study of the literary, social, political, historical and cultural background of his age is paramount.

The advantage of this paradigm shift is that the English-speaking world will gain a better & deeper understanding and execute better performances of Sullivan’s works as well as recognising one more important opera composer whose works deserve – next to those of Britten – to be an integral part of the European repertoire. As a result of Britten’s achievements, English opera was accepted after World War II. However, it was Arthur Sullivan who, as a pioneer, established English opera.

The year prior to Sullivan’s death, Gian Andrea Mazzucato stated in an essay about “Sir Arthur Sullivan – The National Composer” that “results shall be clearly seen, perhaps, only by our posterity” (*The Musical Standard*, 16th December 1899). This time has come. Although Edward Algernon Baughan (editor of *The Musical Standard* and music critic of the *Daily News*) had a very limited view of Sullivan’s vast achievements, his statement in the *Saturday Review* of 8th October 1921 is justified: “The Savoy operas are our only national opera.”

## SullivanPerspektiven I

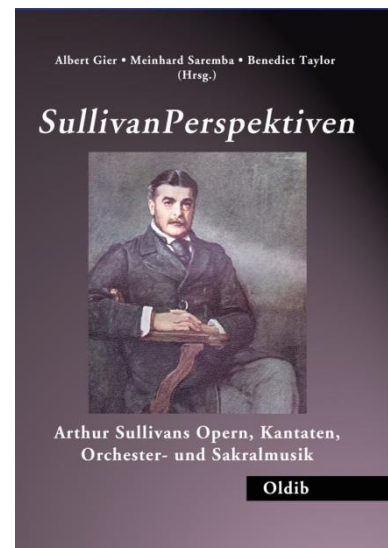
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hrsg. von / edited by Albert Gier/Meinhard Saremba/Benedict Taylor

Oldib-Verlag, Essen 2012; ISBN 978-3-939556-29-9

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hrsg. von / edited by Albert Gier/Meinhard Sarembe/Benedict Taylor

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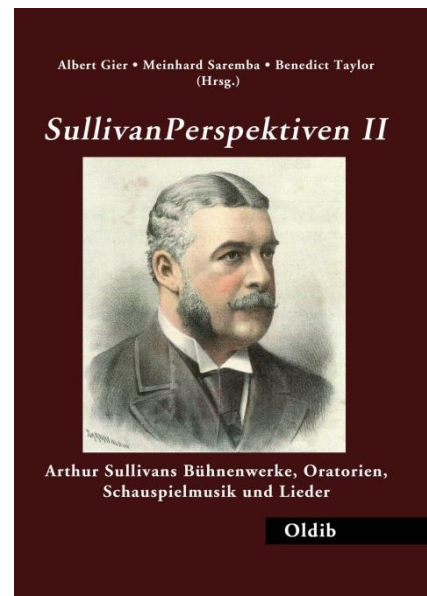
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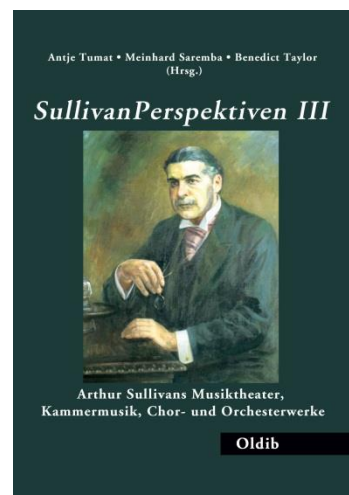
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### Arthur Sullivans Musiktheater, Kammermusik, Chor- und Orchesterwerke

hrsg. von / edited by Antje Tumat/Meinhard Saremba/Benedict Taylor

Oldib-Verlag, Essen 2017, ISBN 978-3-939556-58-9

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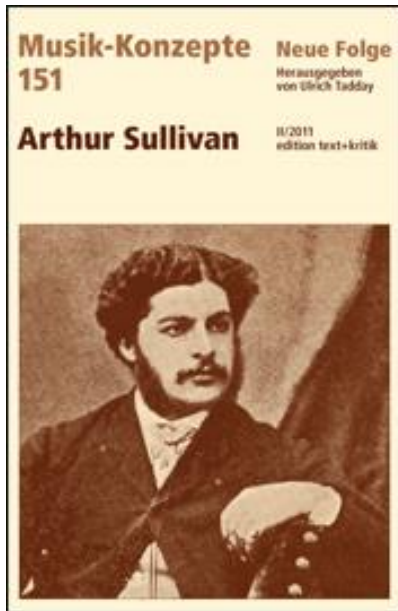
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Band 151

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München 2011, 114 Seiten, zahlreiche s/w-Abbildungen

ISBN 978-3-86916-103-7

€ 19,80

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