PIRATES, POLICEMEN, AND OTHER PATRIOTS:
LATE VICTORIAN 'ENGLISHNESS' AND THE COMIC OPERAS
OF GILBERT & SULLIVAN

by

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Abstract

Music and theatre have long played a particular – but hitherto rather neglected – role in the construction and articulation of national identity. This thesis takes a closer look at that role through an examination of the fourteen “Savoy operas” produced by librettist William S. Gilbert and composer Arthur S. Sullivan between the years 1871 and 1896. It explores the impact these operas had on the formation of a particular idea of ‘Englishness’ in the late 19th century.

The Savoy operas were produced in the context of a larger cultural trend, a historical moment of collective self-examination in which English national identity was being renegotiated and redefined. Designated as ‘authentically English’ national cultural products, the operas acted as foci for a cultural-nationalist discourse that defined and glorified English culture. Through their satire of the foibles, ‘typical’ traits, institutions and attitudes of a specific (English) national community, they encouraged their audiences to imagine themselves as part of that community, and educated them in the symbolic content of the national culture. The operas’ unprecedented popularity crossed class and geographical boundaries, making participation in the Gilbert and Sullivan phenomenon a common cultural referent for many thousands of English people. The fact that the operas were musical theatre (as compared to literature, poetry, visual art, or classical music) meant that they were performed in countless different social contexts, and thus involved a large population in actively producing and re-producing the version of ‘Englishness’ that they came to represent.

The example of the Savoy operas makes it clear that the workings of cultural nationalism are more complex than the imposition of hegemony through national culture on subordinate groups by an elite. National identities are forged in the interaction of all the various aspects of cultural production, from music, lyrics and staging to critical discourse, audience experience and amateur participation. Nationality is a constructed category, certainly, and one that is learned rather than inherent – but one that is also internalized and ‘acted out’ on a concrete, everyday level through forms of cultural expression such as music and theatre.
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Pirates, Policemen, and Other Patriots: 
Late Victorian 'Englishness' and the Comic Operas 
of Gilbert & Sullivan

He is an Englishman! Behold him!

For he himself has said it
And it's greatly to his credit
That he is an Englishman!

He might have been a Roosian
A French, or Turk, or Proosian
Or perhaps Italian!
But in spite of all temptations
To belong to other nations
He remains an Englishman!

(HMS Pinafore, 1878)

The above lines were written and set to music by William S. Gilbert (1836-1911) and Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) respectively. The lyrics are ironic, seeming both to point out the arbitrariness of nationality and to ridicule excessive patriotism. The music, however, makes other interpretations possible. The first “He is an Englishman,” sung by the soprano and tenor soloists and then by the chorus, is a triumphant, soaring vocal flourish — a climactic moment in the scene. The verse that follows is dramatically declaimed by everyone onstage to a slow, majestic march.

This short passage opens a small but effective window into the representation of Englishness in the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, and hence into the questions that guide this thesis. If, as Geoff Eley and Ronald G. Suny, have suggested, “politics is the ground upon which the category of the nation was first proposed, [and] culture was the terrain where it was elaborated,”¹ then the focus of this thesis is on that cultural terrain of elaboration. More specifically, it will concentrate on two forms of cultural expression — music and theatre, as they interact in the genre of light opera — as vehicles for the construction and articulation of national identity. HMS Pinafore, which ran in London for a record-breaking total of 571 performances, was the third in a string of successful “Savoy operas” (as they were later called) that made Gilbert and Sullivan the most

popular librettist-composer team in the history of British theatre. It is my contention that the Savoy operas, and the ‘Gilbert and Sullivan phenomenon’ more generally, were part of a larger cultural trend – a historical moment of collective self-examination in which English national identity was being renegotiated and redefined. Designated by many contemporaries as national cultural products, the operas were both expressive and constitutive of a specific version of Englishness that emerged in the late nineteenth century. The fact that they were musical theatre in particular meant that they played a unique role in the formation and dissemination of ideas about national culture, identity, and what it meant to be English in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s.

The Savoy operas were important building blocks of late Victorian Englishness in two ways. First, Gilbert and Sullivan and their achievements provoked an extraordinary amount of discourse both in their time and after, in the form of newspaper reviews, music criticism, theatre history, literary analysis, performance accounts, biographies, annotated collections of libretti, and volumes of published letters and diaries. Much of this discourse was distinctly English-cultural-nationalist in tone. Gilbert and Sullivan were hailed as national cultural figures; when Gilbert wrote to Sullivan in 1887, “We are… as much an institution as Westminster Abbey,” he was only echoing the opinion of many of his contemporaries. The Savoy operas were considered by a certain sector of their audiences to be shining examples of the achievements of English culture; furthermore, they were seen collectively as the embodiment of English national character. The cultural nationalist rhetoric that they generated is revealing – for the present-day historian – of how a particular group thought about nationality and national culture at the turn of the century. More than that, by designating Gilbert and Sullivan and their operas as “typically English,” such discourse also helped to identify – and glorify – a particular version of Englishness in the minds of contemporary readers and spectators.

While nationality is undoubtedly a category constructed through discourse, as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and others have theorized it, awareness of national belonging is also something that is internalized on what, paraphrasing Raphael Samuel, I would call a "more molecular" level. Eley and Suny have described it as "something reproduced in myriad imperceptible ways, grounded in everydayness and mundane experience." People come to think of themselves as part of a national community without even being aware that they are doing so, because they are constantly negotiating and reproducing the boundaries and defining characteristics of that community in their ordinary lives. It is on this concrete, everyday level that I believe the Savoy operas also worked as building blocks of national identity. They did so because they happened to be a particular kind of satirical musical theatre, rather than literature, poetry, visual art or classical music. As engaging visual spectacle accompanied by unusually accessible music, they appealed to a broader social spectrum than these other cultural forms could have done. The music and theatricality of the operas demanded an emotional response and a degree of collective involvement from their audiences that made them effective vehicles for the transmission of ideas about nationality (a nationality that the operas poked fun at, but in the process helped to define). Sullivan’s music played a particular role because it made the operas – and the Englishness they represented – available to be continually created and re-created by vast numbers of amateur performers in various different social and cultural contexts.

Gilbert and Sullivan became household names in the late nineteenth century – part of everyday life for large numbers of people. In so far as turn-of-the-century English people can be said to have had certain cultural referents in common, participation in the Gilbert and Sullivan phenomenon was one of these. It consisted not only of attending the operas and reading the reviews, books, letters etc., but also of buying the sheet music and playing it at home, performing in amateur choral or dramatic societies, and even of buying products marketed using references to the

operas. Being a spectator of the Savoy operas was a highly participatory, collective experience. This thesis will examine the impact that this experience had on the construction of a particular kind of communal identity.

This will require a more detailed and more conscious look at contemporary reception and audience experience of the operas than has been taken in previous work on Gilbert and Sullivan and English/British national identity. Such analysis is, I think, crucial to any discussion of the Savoy operas as musical or theatrical works. It is perhaps true of any cultural product, but especially so of a performance art form like opera, that the relationship between production and reception is much closer than is often recognized. In her book *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, Susan Bennett argues that films and novels, for instance, are essentially finished products — unchangeable — by the time they reach their audiences. Audience members (or readers) do still interact with the work both individually and collectively, and create their own meaning(s) for it, but this process is almost entirely divorced from the actual production of the film or novel. A play, on the other hand, is only considered ‘complete’ while it is being performed for a live audience; and anyone who has been involved in any sort of theatrical enterprise will testify that the result differs in subtle — and sometimes not so subtle — ways at every show. Although the content is ostensibly the same, it is in the interaction between performers and audience that the cultural product is actually evolved. It seems clear that the same would be true of an opera, which is at its most basic level a musical play. The music, however, drastically influences the spectator's theatrical experience, and adds a whole other dimension to the relationship between production and reception. In any case, to discuss the meaning of an opera without discussing its audience is to neglect an integral aspect of its creation. Furthermore, the study of reception is crucial to an understanding of how these cultural

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4 Eley and Suny, 22.
products interacted with and were shaped by the larger historical and social contexts in which they were produced. Such an understanding is particularly important if I am to draw connections between audience experience of the Savoy operas and the creation of a sense of national belonging in the late nineteenth century.

Who went to see the Savoy operas? How did they understand what they saw and heard? James Johnson has succinctly stated the central problem of writing about audience experience in the past: “… we cannot hear a Haydn symphony the same way Haydn’s contemporaries did. Musical meaning does not exist objectively in the work – or even in its composer’s intentions. It resides in the particular moment of reception, one shaped by dominant aesthetic and social expectations that are themselves historically structured.” Studying reception must, therefore, be a highly historicized process. It must put the operas and their audiences into the larger political, social, and cultural context of the period, and examine how that context might have shaped interpretations of their meaning(s). Both Johnson and Susan Bennett refer to the concept of the spectator’s “horizon of expectations,” developed by literary theorist Hans Robert Jauss. This term encompasses all the various factors that might influence an audience member’s response: social status and background, political convictions, knowledge and prior experience of the genre, the composer, the playwright or the theatre company, expectations of the performance based on reviews, publicity etc., ideas about what makes good theatre… and so on and on. The difficulty lies in determining which factors are at play, and how they act upon audience response; also, in determining which factors are specific to the individual, and which ones are shared by part or all of the audience.

In this respect, Bennett theorizes – and Johnson demonstrates with the more concrete historical example of Parisian opera audiences between 1750 and 1850 – that, while each spectator brings his or her own horizon of expectations to the performance, he or she is also part of what Stanley Fish has termed an “interpretive community.” This refers to a group of people who share

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8 Bennett, 48-49 and Johnson, 3-5.
similar horizons, and have the same socially-, culturally- and historically-constituted interpretive tools at their disposal. In what follows I argue, relying as much as possible on contemporary testimonies (in reviews, memoirs and other primary sources), that a particular idea of the English nation was an important part of the horizon of expectations of a certain sector of Savoy opera audiences. The operas provided these people with a focus for a cultural nationalist discourse that both reflected and constituted this idea of ‘Englishness.’ I also speculate that the Savoy operas, being in many ways a genre unto themselves, created a specific interpretive community out of their audiences — and that embedded within the horizon of expectations that characterized this community was a particular idea of what it meant to be English.

The first section of the thesis examines the theory and historiography that have informed the discussion, and puts the Gilbert and Sullivan phenomenon into the broader historical/social context of the late nineteenth century. The next section deals with the cultural nationalist discourse that surrounded the Savoy operas and the version of ‘typical Englishness’ that it articulated. The third section considers satire and nationality in the operas — that is to say, it deals with the question of how poking fun at patriotism and at many so-called ‘national’ characteristics of the English (which Gilbert and Sullivan did constantly) could contribute to the creation of a sense of national identity. The final section looks more specifically at the highly participatory nature of Savoy opera audience experience, and at the impact this had on the formation of a sense of national community.

1. Englishness: Theory, Historiography and Historical Context

The conceptions of nation and nationality upon which this thesis is based owe much to the thinking of Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, as well as to that of their predecessors Ernest Gellner and Miroslav Hroch. In their formulation, nationality is a constructed category, a state of

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9 Bennett, 40.
mind. National consciousness is learned rather than inherited or inherent, and emerges under particular historical conditions, the result of specific social and economic relations. Rather than being static, organic, eternally existing entities, national identities can therefore more productively be viewed as works in progress – always being redefined, always subject to historical change.

This thesis focuses on a particular vision of ‘what it meant to be English,’ one that was shaped out of the particular historical circumstances of the late nineteenth century. This is not to say that a sense of English national identity did not exist prior to this period, or that the traditions and symbols of late Victorian Englishness were conjured out of thin air. On the contrary, they were articulated in different form in different periods (both before and after the one in question). Linda Colley, for example, has shown how a British national identity crystallized in the years between 1707 and 1837, around such shared institutions and experiences as Protestantism, war, antipathy towards France, and imperialism. Alternatively, Adrian Hastings has traced a particular definition of Englishness and English national identity back to the Middle Ages, with religion again playing a crucial role.

These works are part of a relatively recent historiographic trend. English national identity has been a problematic subject of historical study, and one that has until recently been left almost entirely unexamined by historians of the British Isles. Most found it difficult, or else unnecessary, to discuss English nationalism or English national identity when England had never had – had never needed to have – a political national movement in the generally accepted sense of that term. It had been the dominant power in the British Isles for so long that ‘England’ as a state-power was continually conflated with ‘Britain,’ and the terms ‘British’ and ‘English’ used interchangeably, as though the histories and cultures they designated were one and the same. It is a common complaint of “Celtic Fringe” historians that most histories of Britain are really histories of England. The

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reverse is also true, in that other histories of the British Isles often conscientiously treat Scotland, Wales, and Ireland as separate nations without according England that status (instead, again, considering it covered by generalizations about ‘Britain’).

In the 1970s and 80s, however, scholars – many left-leaning, and motivated in part by a desire to understand the resurgence of “little Englandism” and the jingoistic national chauvinism surrounding Thatcherite conservative politics and events such as the Falklands War – began to look more closely at the history of the symbols and institutions of English national identity and English patriotism. Many took as their conceptual starting-point Eric Hobsbawm’s seminal theory of the “invention of tradition.” Accordingly, they pinpointed the period from the 1860s to the First World War as a moment of intense collective self-examination on the part of certain sectors of English society, which saw the emergence of a particular definition of English identity and culture. This ‘Englishness’ was shaped primarily by the intersection of class concerns with attitudes towards industrialism, modernity and the pursuit of Empire.

Some of this recent historiography ends up by offering an interesting critique of Hobsbawm’s theory, claiming essentially that it simplifies matters too much by reducing the processes of nation-building and identity formation to “a simple matter of the imposition of an identity by the dominant on the subordinate.” Rather, it is argued, these processes do not work only in one direction, from the top of the social pyramid down. Too much focus on the ‘invention’ part of the framework deprives the people participating in the tradition of any agency or ability to influence its shape and content. It ignores the fact that no tradition, whether ‘invented’ or not, would even last long enough to become a tradition if it did not somehow become real to those people.

It is, I think, in the interaction between the ‘inventors’ and their audience – and in the blurring of the lines between those two categories – that a more nuanced understanding of the

13 See for example Raphael Samuel, *Patriotism*, vol. 1, x-xi.
14 See Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, and the works on ‘Englishness’ listed in my bibliography.
dynamics of cultural nationalism might lie. The Savoy operas make a good historical example in support of such an approach, if only because many people in their audiences were also performers, actively involved in (re)producing the Englishness the operas were perceived to represent. It was the participation of these people in the emerging tradition as much as its actual content that made it an effective ‘nationalizing’ force – if, in fact, it was such a force. Given the varied nature of audience response and the many different contexts in which the operas were performed, it might be more useful to view them not as vehicles for the construction of one version of Englishness, but as arenas for the formation and contestation of several different versions.

In any case, most scholars in the field agree that, although the late nineteenth-century remaking of Englishness was more a “distinctive complex of ideas”16 than a movement, it manifested itself in countless aspects of cultural life, from literature and poetry to music, theatre, and architecture. It was undertaken by all kinds of different groups, but these various groups did share what Dodd has described as “an interlocking membership and an overlapping vocabulary of evaluation.”17 This membership is described variously as “the dominant English” (Dodd), the “educated classes” (Heathorn), or the “articulate classes” (Wiener). It consisted of an upper/middle-class elite composed mainly of businessmen, professionals (lawyers, doctors, public officials, journalists), men and women of letters, and artists.

Why should national identity and culture have become a dominant preoccupation of these people at the end of the nineteenth century? Robert Colls has remarked that

The obverse of a nation which is insisted upon as solid is a nation feared as fragile. Englishness has had to be constantly reproduced, and the phases of its most intense reproduction – borne as its finest moments – have simultaneously been phases of threat to its existence from within and without.18

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17 Colls and Dodd, 2.
18 Ibid., 29.
And indeed, the evidence does seem to suggest that middle/upper-class concern with national culture was motivated by a deep-seated sense of vulnerability – if not by a conscious desire to oppress and control the masses, then at least in part by concerns that were definitely class-related.

The ‘educated classes’ (broadly defined) are generally thought to have come into their own in the mid-nineteenth century, to have gained unprecedented political, social and economic status thanks to the successes of industrialization. Martin Wiener has shown how, even as the entrepreneurial and professional (middle) classes began to be able to compete with the aristocracy in political power and economic clout, they began to gentrify, remaking themselves in the cultural image of those they were supplanting. The sons and grandsons of ‘self-made’ factory owners and merchants distanced themselves from the roots of their wealth, attended Oxford and became country gentlemen. Lawyers and doctors, enjoying the increased status and professionalization of their careers, took pride in their ability to be aloof from the sordid money-grubbing struggle for income. They developed a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards the forces of progress and economic development (technology, industry, and commerce), even as industrial expansion and the pace of technological change grew ever more rapid and aggressive.

The cultural conservatism of this sector of English society was, Wiener argues, “most evident in its conception of what constituted Englishness,” as cultural and intellectual elites evolved an image of the nation that questioned the validity of England’s close identification with industrialism and ‘modernity’ more generally. This was brought on, in part, by the onset of economic depression in the 1880s, and by the realization that Britain had begun to lose ground to its German and American competitors. It became increasingly difficult to see Britain as the unchallenged leader of the industrial world – and English elites were not even sure they wanted to do so anymore. Although they had hitherto taken great patriotic pride in England’s status as the nation which had

19 Wiener, 11.
20 Ibid., 13-14.
21 Ibid., 41.
22 See Wiener, and also Alun Howkins, “The Discovery of Rural England” in Englishness: Politics and Culture, 64.
invented the industrial revolution and exported it to the world, many began to feel that, in doing so, it might have unleashed a force whose destructive effects it could no longer really control. This was not new to the late Victorians; a strain of anti-industrialism can be traced in English thought back to Blake’s “dark satanic mills” and beyond. But in the latter half of the nineteenth century it seems to have become more urgent, more immediate, as the ecological effects of industrial exploitation became more obviously widespread, and urban poverty and crime reached what seemed to many middle-class observers to be crisis levels.23

This questioning of the industrialist ethos dovetailed with profound middle- and upper-class anxieties over the working classes (growing both in numbers and in political power as the turn of the century drew nearer) and the threat they might pose to order and authority. Rapidly growing cities – London in particular, but also industrial centres like Manchester and Liverpool – were seen as dens of iniquity, seething with dirty, uneducated masses who were dangerous in their ignorance and discontent. The urban industrial environment was thought to breed a weak, degenerate working class that might contaminate the rest of English society with its lax morality and inferior racial stock.24 Middle-class calls for educational and social reform were often couched in terms of national necessity. Change was urgently required, not only for humanitarian reasons but also to turn out strong, healthy, English men and women and educate them in the duties of citizenship, so that they might nurture and defend the nation against both internal and external threats.25

These threats were thought to lurk very close to home, not only in the form of the uneducated, discontented – and now more enfranchised – masses, but also in increasingly vocal and politically aggressive nationalist movements in Scotland, Wales, and especially Ireland. The acrimonious and divisive political debates surrounding Gladstone’s Home Rule Bills of 1886 and 1893 seemed to shake the very foundations of the United Kingdom; at the very least, they put national identity and national culture front and centre in the public mind. It seems logical that, as

Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalists defined themselves through a radical rejection of (what they perceived as) ‘Englishness’, the English themselves should begin to question and attempt to define their own identity. The discovery (or “rediscovery”) of an authentically English national culture was to be the antidote to all divisive sentiment, whether it be class-related or associated with other sectarian political trends such as Irish, Scottish or Welsh separatism, feminism, or independent labour. More than that, however, it was to be the backbone of English authority all over the world.26

This last was particularly important given the ever-increasing size and scope of British imperialism in the late nineteenth century. Like industrialism, English elites found Empire at once a source of patriotic pride (as Jose Harris has pointed out, “the mere fact of imperial dominion lent credence to widely disseminated assumptions about the superiority of British institutions and the British race”27) and a source of ambivalence and insecurity. Educated English people worried that the Empire would drain England economically, or that it would become too impossibly large to defend and would cause the complete collapse of English power. Steeped in the Classics-heavy public school curriculum of the day, they drew the obvious analogy — most famously proposed by Edward Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* — to the fate of the ancient Roman imperial state, overextended and decaying at the centre, overrun by barbarian hordes.28 Colonial conflicts such as the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the Crimean War and particularly the disaster of the Boer War fed into this sense of England’s vulnerability.

The experience of Empire itself, moreover, was a formative, but destabilizing one for perceptions of English identity. Ian Baucom has described the Empire as “less a place where England exerts control than the place where England loses command of its own narrative of identity. It is the place onto which the island kingdom arrogantly displaces itself and from which a

25 Heathorn, 4-5.
26 Ibid., 85.
puzzled England returns as a stranger to itself.”

Although the “civilizing mission” was a pillar of Victorian English identity, and exposure to different cultures in the colonies was mostly interpreted in such a way as to reinforce English perceptions of their own superiority, the colonial experience also often forced the English to compromise and negotiate with other identities. It undermined patriotic certainties as much as it reinforced them. As Baucom puts it, “the nation’s uneasy commitment to its empire had massively complicated the task of defining what it meant to be English in large part by making it so difficult simply to determine what kind of place England was.”

Empire had an impact on the rhetorical construction of national identity as well – particularly in its class-conscious inflections. Stephen Heathorn and Alun Howkins, among others, have pointed out how the racialist discourse of imperialism was applied at home, by the middle-classes when commenting on the “lower orders.” Reformers wrote about journeys into “darkest England,” and about the people they found there, in much the same way as colonial officials wrote about the “subject races” of Africa or Asia. In both cases (as in the rejection of industrialism and urbanization), ‘Englishness’ was being defined in opposition to something dark and dangerous, ‘modern’ and insidious.

English cultural and intellectual elites took refuge from these (real or perceived) threats in a revamped vision of England that was insular and highly nostalgic. The ‘true England,’ as they saw it, was to be found in the countryside, undefiled by industrialism and the “false cosmopolitan values” of modern urban life. London’s huge and ever-growing urban sprawl was ignored, as were the many other industrial towns that were characteristic of much of England by the turn of the century. Instead, the true nation was “everything industrial society was not – ancient, slow-moving,

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30 Ibid., 37.
31 Heathorn, 118-119.
stable, cozy, and spiritual.” It was a nation of green, rolling hills, well-tended fields, and simple country people living in small thatched cottages and quaint villages. Its designated national past was the mid-16th-century, the “golden age” of Queen Elizabeth I. New trends in architecture recalled the building styles of Tudor and Stuart England, while a parallel development in theatre, for example, saw new productions of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan/Jacobean playwrights going up in the years before the First World War. English History and English Literature were established as academic disciplines and became compulsory school subjects in the late nineteenth century, while new publications like the Dictionary of National Biography detailed the pre-eminence of the English in all fields of endeavour.

Like any other cultural nationalist trend, this reshaping of Englishness involved what Philip Dodd has aptly described as “complex and overlapping processes of invention, transformation and recovery.” As a response to a sense of insecurity and (real or perceived) threat, it also involved uncompromising and sometimes strident assertions about the superiority of English culture and civilization, and calls to preserve, promote and generally shore up all aspects of English identity. This kind of discourse served, of course, to designate many things as being ‘typically English’ in the first place.

In so far as I acknowledge the constructed nature of this Englishness and the class concerns that motivated it, I adhere to the “invention of tradition” framework developed by Hobsbawm and Ranger. In this context, the Savoy operas can indeed be viewed as an invented tradition – and have been, by David Cannadine in an article entitled “Gilbert and Sullivan: The Making and Unmaking of a British Tradition.” What follows will, to a point, support the argument that the operas appealed mainly to middle-class audiences (precisely the sector of society whose concerns with national

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33 Wiener, 6.
35 Colls and Dodd, 1.
36 Ibid., 19.
37 Ibid., 1.
culture and identity were mapped above), who hoped that they would be schools of middle-class English values for lower-class audience members. However, the very presence of these lower-class people in Savoy Theatre audiences, and their energetic participation in the Gilbert and Sullivan popular musical phenomenon more generally, make it necessary for me to go beyond Hobsbawm’s theory and its focus on the elite creation of hegemony through national culture. Whether the Englishness the operas came to represent was ‘invented’ or not, it obviously struck a chord with huge numbers of English people of different social backgrounds, as the unprecedented popularity of the Savoy operas testifies. Indeed, viewing the operas’ impact on the construction of Englishness as simply a top-down teaching process of social control limits their potential as vehicles of national identity, because it does not take into account the possibilities inherent in the musical theatre genre. This thesis examines how cultural nationality might be learned, and identity both enacted and contested, in much more concrete, immediate ways.


In their efforts to define and promote an authentic national culture, contemporaries praised many aspects of the Savoy operas as being ‘typically English.’ Usually first and foremost was the fact that they were the original work of an English composer and an English dramatist. This was a matter of some note in the 1870s, when many in the cultural sector lamented the fact that English audiences seemed to prefer foreign (usually continental European) composers, authors and performers to their own compatriots, with the result that native works were rarely produced with any kind of popular (or critical) success. Gilbert and Sullivan, whose operas were widely recognized from the beginning of their collaboration as being both artistically legitimate – if rather lightweight –

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and popular with the more general public, were hailed as illustrious Englishmen, living proof of the vitality and quality of England’s national culture.

In this respect it is interesting that Sullivan at least was, ethnically speaking, not an Englishman at all. His parents were Irish from Dublin, and his mother was partly Italian as well. Contemporaries noted this fact, but nonetheless gaily appropriated him as an Englishman. His friend and biographer, Arthur Lawrence, wrote: “Here one might make almost any deduction one pleased on the score of heredity, of the peculiar advantage of this admixture of Celtic and Italian blood in this most English of Englishmen.”  

It should be noted that Sullivan lived almost all of his life in London, and thought of himself as an Englishman – indeed, he was very conscious of his position as a pre-eminent representative of English classical music.

Similarly, Henry Lytton (a prominent actor in the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company for over forty years) described Gilbert as “a pattern of the fine old English gentleman” – in the process, of course, defining what being an English gentleman entailed:

Of that breed we have only too few survivors today [Lytton’s memoirs were published in 1922]. Some who know him superficially have pictured him as a martinet, but while this may have been true of him under the stress of his theatrical work, it fails to do justice to the innate gentleness and courtesy which were his great and distinguishing qualities. Upright and honourable himself, one could never imagine that he could ever do a mean, ungenerous action to anyone, nor had any man a truer genius for friendship.

The New York Times, on the other hand, described the playwright in old age as “the most English thing that has happened since Shakespeare planted his mulberry tree and applied for a coat of arms.”

Even their detractors saw Gilbert and Sullivan as “ours,” belonging to the nation and representing it in the cultural sphere. The Sunday Times critic, reviewing the premiere of HMS
Pinafore in 1878, wrote: "It is not a reassuring circumstance to see a representative dramatist and a representative musician unable or unwilling to give us anything better than fare which is toothsome but not filling." Reviews, biographies and memoirs are full of references to "our greatest and most popular composer" or "our chief humourist," and their implied obligation to uphold the national culture. The Musical Review, in a passage of especially purple prose on the occasion of Sullivan’s knighthood (granted in 1883), exhorted the composer to

wield the knightly sword – to do battle for the honour of English art. Let him (...) stand forth as our champion and leader against all foreign rivals, and arouse us thoroughly from our present half-torpid condition. Let our musical daze be broken by our musical knight, and that night prove the forerunner of brighter days.

One wonders if this was intended ironically, terrible puns and all. Regardless, however, this kind of rhetoric postulated an ‘us’ – a national cultural community – to which Gilbert and Sullivan belonged and which they represented in the teeth of foreign competition. England might be losing ground on the international scene to American trade or German colonial expansion, but this only made it all the more necessary that the nation prove its worth in the cultural arena.

The operas Gilbert and Sullivan produced together were held up as evidence that it was possible to make a success of musical theatre on English terms. The London Times, for example, reviewing the premiere of HMS Pinafore, gave the opera itself only modest praise but noted approvingly that here was

a libretto by an English dramatist and music by an English composer; the former witty and amusing, without a shadow of the more or less veiled improprieties characteristic of French importations; and the latter melodious and admirably constructed without the aid of German or Italian models.

Francois Cellier, a close friend of Arthur Sullivan's and assistant conductor of the Savoy Opera orchestra, wrote of Trial By Jury (the second Gilbert & Sullivan collaboration): "a musical play,
absolutely pure and unadulterated English, not only by parentage, but as regards characterization and mise-en-scène, was something to rejoice at. Everybody was delighted." 49 A.H. Godwin, in his *Critical Appreciation of the Savoy Operas* (published in 1926), described the operas as "...English of the English. They are English in their sentiment, in their outlook on life, and in their humorous and musical forms. And as a native product, racy of the soil and owing nothing at all to exotic influences, they are worth preserving as a treasured heritage." 50 It is easy to hear in this kind of rhetoric the echoes of late Victorian racialist discourse and its concerns with purity of descent, authenticity, and the perniciousness of foreign influences.

What, more specifically, did contemporaries see as being 'typically English' about the Savoy operas? First, as the *Times* review above suggests, Sullivan was acclaimed for proving that creative, effective music could be written in a specifically English style. By the late nineteenth century the English classical music establishment – and, indeed, English elites more generally – suffered from an acute inferiority complex vis-à-vis their Continental neighbours. They bemoaned the fact that England had not produced a great composer of the stature of Mozart or Beethoven – indeed, had produced no composer of international renown since Henry Purcell (ca. 1659-1695). They claimed that English music of the nineteenth century in particular (with the possible exception of that written for church and chapel) had been merely so much pale imitation of the French, Italian and German masters. Paralleling similar discussions on the state of English culture more generally during this period, English musicians, composers and critics debated hotly as to why this sad state of affairs existed, what might be done to remedy the situation, and most importantly, what an English national musical style would entail. 51 When Arthur Sullivan arrived on the musical scene in the early 1860s (he had his first big success at age 20 with music for *The Tempest*, performed at the Crystal

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48 *The Times*, May 27, 1878.
50 Godwin, 2.
Palace in 1862\textsuperscript{52} — a young, obviously talented, original voice — contemporaries hoped that he would turn out to be the long-awaited English composer of genius. Long before and throughout his collaboration with Gilbert, Sullivan's music was heard as 'national' — first, because he himself was an Englishman (as discussed above), and one who did not seem to be as much under the sway of his European influences as other English composers of the time. Second, like other artistic manifestations of English cultural nationalism in this period, his music referred back to the glory days of the Tudor and Stuart past.\textsuperscript{53} Sullivan was praised for his use of "old English" forms such as madrigals and glees, as well as of the "national" motifs of country folk songs, as in this review of \textit{Iolanthe}:

\begin{quote}
The "early English" element, so frequently and so happily introduced by Mr. Sullivan, is exemplified by the song of the sentry in the second act, the final "Fal la la" of which is more especially a real \textit{coup de g\'enie}.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Finally, Sullivan's music sounded home-grown to listeners thanks to the considerable influence of the Anglican Church music tradition on much of his writing for the choruses of the Savoy operas. The composer had, after all, begun his musical career as a boy soprano in the Chapel Royal choir. His earliest compositions were choral settings of sacred texts, and he continued — very successfully — to write hymns and other forms of sacred music throughout his career. Indeed, this more 'serious' kind of composition was where he thought his true vocation lay. In 1885 he told an American interviewer, "My sacred music is that on which I base my reputation as a composer. These works are the offspring of my liveliest fancy, the children of my greatest strength, the products of my most earnest thought and incessant toil."\textsuperscript{55} In any case, the formative influence of the church music tradition is plainly audible in choruses such as 'Hail, Poetry' from \textit{The Pirates of Penzance}.

\textsuperscript{52} Jacobs, 28-29.
\textsuperscript{53} The Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould, a prominent late Victorian scholar and proponent of the English folk-song revival, wrote in 1925: "Happily, at the present hour there are musicians of real freshness and merit among us who are diving into the old cisterns of Elizabethan and Stuart music, and of folk-music as well, for inspiration. The latter furnish them with a well-spring of purest melody, the former supply superb examples of harmony. Perhaps the first to lead the way of exploration was Sullivan." (Orel, 108)
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{The Times}, November 27, 1882.
\textsuperscript{55} Jacobs, 223.
Knowledgeable listeners were aware of the roots of this stylistic tendency, and thought it made
Sullivan’s music all the more typically English.56

While Sullivan was not by any means the only English composer writing in what was
perceived as an English style during this period (others included Charles Villiers Stanford, Alexander
MacKenzie, Hubert Parry and Frederic Cowen), he was by far the most well-known and popular
with the general public – in large part thanks to the wide appeal of the Savoy operas. As such he
was acclaimed for popularizing the “revived” national style. J.A. Fuller-Maitland wrote that
Sullivan’s music for the Savoy operas “taught the ordinary Englishman that there might be such a
thing as music written by a compatriot that would appeal to him, and did much to explode the old-
fashioned notion that the only music worth listening to must come from abroad.”57 In fact, it seems
likely that, due to his extraordinary popularity and the discourse his work generated, Sullivan was at
least partly responsible for actually defining an English musical style in the first place and fixing it in
the minds of both contemporaries and successors (such as Elgar, Holst and Vaughan Williams).
After his death Charles Maclean, in an address to the Royal Musical Association in 1902, referred to
Sullivan as a “national style-builder.”58 During his lifetime, however, contemporaries quite simply
rejoiced at what they saw as a successful English composer writing in a typically English idiom.

In similar fashion Gilbert, as the partner responsible not only for the plots and libretti but also
for the staging of the operas, was credited with “making the English stage once again essentially
English” – that is to say, liberating it from the domination of French opéra bouffe and low burlesque.59
This, not surprisingly, is a bit of an exaggeration (Gilbert and Sullivan tended to provoke hyperbole
in their admirers). The Savoy operas were not the only native theatrical or operatic entertainment
available to late nineteenth-century London theatre audiences, either upper/middle- or working-
class. In the 1870s and 1880s, a play-goer’s options included poetic tragedy, Shakespeare, Gothic or

56 See for example B.W. Findon in Lawrence, 306-307.
58 Jacobs, 406
59 Godwin, 31.
nautical melodrama, pantomime, light comedy and farce. In the musical theatre vein, there was burlesque of all kinds, and *opéra bouffe*, usually translated and adapted from the original French. On the grand operatic stage, apart from the works of European masters such as Handel, Verdi, Donizetti, Offenbach and Wagner, there were English operas by Michael William Balfe (most famously composer of *The Bohemian Girl*), William Vincent Wallace, George Alexander MacFarren and others. In the music-halls, there were sketches, ballets, animal entertainments, and performers singing ballads of all kinds (humorous, pathetic, patriotic, satirical).

But Gilbert, Sullivan and Richard D'Oyly Carte (the impresario who brought the collaborators together and produced all but one of their fourteen operas), felt themselves to be doing something rather different — and rather more elevated — than anything else on offer at the time. Sullivan wrote that if *The Sorcerer* (the first full-length Savoy opera, which premiered in 1877) was a success, it would be “another nail in the coffin of Opera Bouffe from the French.” In a speech given to the O.P (Old Playgoers') Club in 1906, Gilbert remembered

> When Sullivan and I began to collaborate, English comic opera had practically ceased to exist. Such musical entertainments as held the stage were adaptations of the crapulous plots of the operas of Offenbach, Audran and Lecocq. The plots had generally been bowdlerized out of intelligibility, and when they had not been subjected to this treatment they were frankly improper; whereas the ladies' dresses suggested that the management had gone on the principle of doing a little and doing it well.

We set out with the determination to prove that these elements were not essential to the success of humorous opera.

What, then, were the elements of English comic opera as Gilbert thought it ought to be executed? These included coherent plots (if utterly ridiculous, his libretti would at least hang together properly and resolve themselves without leaving loose ends) elaborated via intelligent, polite and unhackneyed dialogue; a comparatively understated style of delivery that depended on the actor playing it impeccably ‘straight’ (Gilbert to Rutland Barrington: “You must never let on that you are the funny man; the audience will discover it for themselves soon enough, if you are”); new songs

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60 See Michael Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), ch. 5.
with music written specifically for them (rather than putting new words to stock tunes as was
common in English musical theatre of the time); and the highest possible production values in
matters of set, costume, props and choreography.

Audiences were given visual cues to the authentic Englishness of what they were watching
and hearing, in details of set and costume. As a review of *The Sorcerer* noted in 1877: “There is some
intention to caricature modern life, the scene is laid in an English village, and the characters wear the
costumes of today.” The ship on which the action of *HMS Pinafore* takes place, for example, was
closely modelled on Nelson’s flagship, the *Victory*, which was nothing if not a potent national
symbol to the late Victorians. After the premiere of *The Pirates of Penzance*, Sullivan wrote to his
mother that “all the girls are dressed in the old-fashioned English style – every dress designed
separately by Faustin, and some of the girls look as if they had stepped bodily out of the frame of a
Gainsborough picture.”

Echoing the nostalgic ruralism of the late nineteenth-century national ideal, many of the
operas were set in various rustic, but recognizably English, locations: *HMS Pinafore* takes place on a
ship at anchor near Portsmouth; *The Pirates of Penzance* and *Ruddigore* in Cornwall; *Iolanthe* partly in a
highly stylized “Arcadian countryside” and partly in the House of Lords. *Patience*, which is set in an
unidentified rural landscape, is nonetheless peppered with references to well-known London shops
and other landmarks such as Grosvenor Gallery. *The Yeomen of the Guard*, the opera that seems to fit
most closely with the late nineteenth-century ideal of Englishness, takes place in 16th-century
“Merrie England” near no less a national landmark than the Tower of London. *Yeomen*, generally
recognized as Gilbert and Sullivan’s one collaborative attempt at more serious opera, is also in
keeping with the nostalgic mood of late nineteenth-century English cultural nationalism in its tone,
which is hardly mocking at all; in fact it is almost elegiac in its portrayal of a doomed romance in a

62 Allen, 50.
64 *The World*, November 21, 1877.
simpler, more natural time (the “golden age” of the Tudors and Stuarts). Its most famous tune, ‘I have a song to sing, O!’ is a lilting, melancholy ballad, clearly meant to recall the traditional folk music that was considered the nation’s most authentic form of self-expression.

A colleague of Sullivan’s wrote that the characters of Yeomen of the Guard “might have walked out of Macaulay’s ‘History of England’”\(^{66}\), which brings us to the next point: Gilbert’s characters themselves were seen as embodying various aspects of English national character. It should be noted that national character, like national identity, is a historically specific construct and one that is in constant evolution. Contemporary commentary on the Savoy operas is revealing of late Victorian perceptions of what it meant to be English. A.H. Godwin, whose book about the operas contains a chapter entitled “The Englishman’s Looking-Glass,” described the typical Gilbertian character (and thus the typical Englishman) as

>a mixture of hard sense and sentiment. He is a plain citizen who has nevertheless an affection for titles and the social ornamentations. He is an easy-going fellow who has a knack of forging ahead of his rivals. He is by instinct a non-intellectual person who has a fund of the shrewdest intelligence. He clings to a vague conviction that he is the salt of the earth, and a far from vague conviction that he is eternally going to the dogs.\(^{67}\)

Henry Lytton, who played more than thirty Gilbert and Sullivan characters in his career as a principal in various D'Oyly Carte companies, described them as “easy going. We are a little too inclined to doff the thinking-cap at the first opportunity. Speaking generally, we are not a studious race, and we don’t want to be bothered with ‘problems’.” And later: “Like the rest of us, too, they [the stage characters] are forever getting into some dilemma or other, and they disentangle themselves without excitement or flurry. Each point is made without the banging of drums or the sounding of trumpets.”\(^{68}\) These, it was thought, were some of the national traits that had put England in a position of world pre-eminence, traits which English men and women needed to


\(^{66}\) Cunningham Bridgeman, in Cellier and Bridgeman, 174.

\(^{67}\) Godwin, 39-40.

cultivate as they faced the uncertainties of the fin-de-siècle and the many (perceived) threats to nation and empire.

The Savoy operas were also thought to be typically English in the values that they represented. The most important part of Gilbert’s contribution to “making the English stage once again essentially English” was, in the opinion of many contemporaries, the fact that he made it respectable – a place where middle-class and aristocratic men could take their wives and children without fear of corrupting their morals. Here it ought to be noted that Sullivan’s refined musical settings, as well as his status (established well before his collaboration with Gilbert began) as a highly regarded composer of serious ‘art’ music, undoubtedly had something to do with this. D’Oyly Carte also came in for some of the credit, thanks to his institution of orderly innovations such as the queue system for unreserved seats, and the serving of tea, coffee and cake in the intervals. But Gilbert was seen as being primarily responsible for making the Savoy Theatre stage acceptable to Victorian middle-class sensibilities. George Smalley, an American journalist and foreign correspondent for the New York Tribune, remembered: “Certainly Gilbert’s influence on the stage was, in respect of morals, altogether good. (...) He would tolerate no licence on or off the stage. He was a more implacable censor than the Lord High Chamberlain (...) no look or gesture or innuendo escaped him.”

A reviewer for The Morning Advertiser wrote of the operas in 1882:

Burlesques they certainly are in a way, but free from vulgarity, commonplace, or coarseness, direct or inferential. Mr. Gilbert does not forget that he is writing for English women. He is not unwarrantably suggestive, even in his wildest and most eccentric flights of fancy; that is a great point.

This acknowledgement of the presence of women in the audience was, to many contemporaries, the ultimate barometer of Gilbert’s respectability. A writer in The Graphic even went so far as to say that “ladies” were the people to whom the Savoy operas largely appealed. This definitely signalled a change in British theatre-going practices; until this period the theatre had

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69 Orel, 36.
70 The Morning Advertiser, November 27, 1882.
not been a place where a respectable middle-class woman could be seen without danger to her reputation. Whether Gilbert was in fact the instigator of this development is debateable; surveys of nineteenth-century English theatre indicate that the “reform of the stage” was a broad-based social/cultural movement that had begun well before Gilbert’s career as a dramatist took off in the late 1860s. It included not only such impeccably high culture endeavours as Henry Irving’s new productions of Shakespeare at the Lyceum, but also middle-class attempts to “clean up” the music halls and other working-class places of entertainment. Like Sullivan and national music, Gilbert was simply the most popular proponent of a much larger trend.

Much was made, for instance, of his insistence that “no lady of the company should be required to wear a dress that she could not wear with absolute propriety at a private fancy ball.” Contemporaries also pointed to Gilbert’s clever dialogue, which was funny without resorting to ribaldry, silly puns or cheap slapstick. The presentation of the operas was refined; not only were the costumes suitably modest, but cross-dressing was forbidden. No woman’s part was ever played for easy laughs by a man, or vice versa. The D’Oyly Carte Opera Company was known for its high standards of discipline and professionalism, and all members were expected to be morally above reproach. Even Gilbert’s staging of the operas, in which each tiny bit of ‘business’ down to the least little step of the lowliest chorister was choreographed in advance and rigorously rehearsed, was lauded as yet another instance of admirable English discipline. Some thought Gilbert took things rather too far – a notice in Punch once referred to his style as “a kind of marionette-like accuracy.” But the London Times, in a highly typical review, remarked on “the graceful pantomime action, which on the English stage takes the place of the grotesque motions of French opera bouffe.” It is not difficult to see the appeal of Gilbert’s preternaturally calm, controlled choruses to middle-class

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71 Baily, 295.
72 Booth, 22-23.
74 Baily, 414.
75 Stedman, 217.
audiences anxious about the ever-growing, undisciplined masses. Here on the stage, at least, was a crowd that could be trusted to behave itself.

Finally, the Savoy operas were seen as 'national' because it was obvious to contemporaries that they were about Englishness. Even when they were ostensibly set in Japan (The Mikado), Spain and Italy (The Gondoliers), or Germany (The Grand Duke), they remained satires of English customs, attitudes and institutions. This conviction would have been subtly reinforced by the recognizable Englishness of Sullivan's music (as discussed above). Gilbert's admittedly half-hearted attempts to set his operas in exotic locations would have been further undermined by, for example, the presence of a madrigal in The Mikado ('Brightly dawns our wedding day'), or an Anglican-hymn-like chorus in The Pirates of Penzance ('Hail, Poetry!'). But even leaving the music aside for the moment, critical commentary on The Mikado makes it clear that at least part of Gilbert's audiences knew exactly what he was up to:

Mr. Gilbert has once more exhibited his facility for seizing upon a subject occupying a considerable share of public attention, and turning it to humorous account. Japanese art is extremely fashionable just at present, and the manners and customs of this strange race may be studied with advantage at Knightsbridge. But it is our home political and social life that is principally caricatured in 'The Mikado,' (...).77

Though nominally Japanese, the allusions are more or less thinly-veiled sarcastic references to our native institutions and peculiarities.78

In fact, in the late Victorian version of Englishness, satire itself was something of a national pastime. In his introduction to A.H. Godwin's Critical Appreciation of the Savoy Operas, G.K. Chesterton wrote that "the best work of the Victorian age, perhaps the most Victorian work of the Victorian age, was its satire upon itself."79 Similarly, Henry Lytton commented with respect to Gilbert's stage characters:

Stage 'puppets' as they may be, they do show us a lot about both our virtues and our follies, but rather more about our follies, because as a race we are notoriously shy of our praises being sung! They are always ready to

76 The Times, January 7, 1884.
77 The Athenæum, March 21, 1885.
78 The Monthly Musical Record, May 1, 1885.
79 Godwin, vii.
In any case, much of the humour in Gilbert’s libretti depended at least in part on his audiences’ recognition of familiar (English) foibles, or of current hot political or cultural issues (such as the feminist movement, turned topsy-turvy in *Princess Ida*, or the aesthetics craze surrounding Oscar Wilde, parodied in *Patience*). Throughout the fourteen operas of their collaboration, Gilbert and Sullivan poked fun at almost all the most cherished pillars of late Victorian English society, from the monarchy, the House of Lords and the Empire to the Navy, the Army, the Police and the courts of law. They caricatured ‘typically English’ ideals, such as devotion to duty (in *The Pirates of Penzance*), class prejudice (*HMS Pinafore*), and enthusiasm for democracy and capitalism (*Utopia, Limited*). They even skewered English patriotism itself, over and over. This complicates what has until this point been a pretty straightforward assessment of the Savoy operas as representations of late nineteenth-century Englishness.

3. Satire, Nationality, and Music in the Savoy Operas

How can a body of work that makes fun of English traits and English patriotism have been a building block of English national identity? In asking this question I disagree with David Cannadine’s argument that the treatment of national chauvinism and national characteristics in the operas was ultimately a “paean of praise to national pride and to the established order,” a patriotic reaction to the *fin-de-siècle* anxieties of middle-class audiences. I do not deny that patriotism was a response to such anxieties (that is precisely what I and others have argued about the whole late-nineteenth-century English cultural nationalist trend). But to view the representation of Englishness and English patriotism in the Savoy operas as being as straightforwardly nationalistic as Cannadine suggests, (a) dulls the edge of Gilbert’s satire almost beyond recognition, and (b) fails to take contemporary critical responses into account.

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80 Lytton, 122-25.
It is difficult to read Gilbert’s libretti and not believe that his was a very pointed and somewhat subversive humour. He loathed humbug or hypocrisy of any kind, and seems to have viewed excessive national pride as just another sort of affectation to be pricked and deflated like a balloon.\textsuperscript{82} As a writer in \textit{The Academy} ruefully put it, “it is a characteristic of Mr. Gilbert that whether it be in comedy or in extravaganza he paints us all as no better than we ought to be, and leaves us under the impression that it is a very good thing that we are not.”\textsuperscript{83}

Cannadine argues that “there is nothing disingenuous” about the lines quoted at the beginning of this thesis, ‘He is an Englishman’ from \textit{HMS Pinafore}.\textsuperscript{84} But in the context of the scene in which it occurs, the song doesn’t really celebrate Englishness so much as point out the arbitrariness of nationality, by exaggeratedly suggesting the opposite (that it is a choice, and that Ralph is to be praised for choosing to be English “in spite of all temptations/ To belong to other nations”!). Moreover, Gilbert pokes fun at the complacency of English national chauvinism by making Englishness so excessively important to the characters as to seem ridiculous. Ralph and Josephine present the fact that “he is an Englishman” to her father as the ultimate character reference, the trait that should wash away all objections to the fact that she wishes to marry well below her station.

There are many other similar instances throughout the fourteen Savoy operas. In the second act of \textit{Ruddigore}, for instance, the mad baronet is about to make off with the heroine when he is interrupted by Dick Dauntless, who brandishes a Union Jack over her head: “While this glorious rag flies over Rose Maybud’s head, the man does not live who would dare to lay unlicensed hand upon her!” Faced with “the flag that none dare defy,” the baronet yields immediately (“Foiled! And by a Union Jack!”).\textsuperscript{85} Englishness is the talisman, the supposedly unanswerable defence. The patriotism implied

\textsuperscript{81} Cannadine, 19.
\textsuperscript{82} See for example Stedman, 22 and 27.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{The Academy}, April 10, 1880.
\textsuperscript{84} Cannadine, 20.
\textsuperscript{85} W.S. Gilbert, \textit{The Savoy Operas: Being the Complete Text of the Gilbert and Sullivan Operas As Originally Produced in the Years 1875-1896} (London: MacMillan, 1926), 413.
in this is undermined, however, by the utter ridiculousness of the situations in which the magic
weapon of nationality is deployed, and the manner in which it is received by the characters.

Gilbert’s portrayal of various national institutions is also less than complimentary.
Throughout the Savoy operas Kings, admirals, high-ranking army officials and police officers are
silly, fumbling characters – eminently likeable, but obviously incompetent. His representative of the
illustrious British Navy, First Lord of the Admiralty Sir Joseph Porter, boasts that a junior
partnership in a legal firm was “the only ship that I ever had seen.” His advice to aspiring admirals:
“Stay close to your desks – and never go to sea/ And you all may be rulers of the Queen’s Navee!”
One wonders how Cannadine can see this as a “respectfully admiring” depiction of the Royal Navy
as “the greatest fighting force in the world.”

Examination of reviews and other contemporary commentary shows, furthermore, that a
certain sector of Gilbert’s audiences was well aware that his patriotic references were not necessarily
to be taken seriously. Cannadine claims that the statement, made in Utopia, Limited, that Britain
‘occupies a pre-eminent position among civilized nations’ was not made ironically. But a reviewer
for The Musical Times, following the opera’s premiere in 1882, wrote: “The mainspring of the action
is in the caricature of English institutions, or rather of institutions supposed to be peculiarly
English.” Indeed, I would argue that, far from being a glorification of British civilization, Utopia,
Limited is in fact Gilbert’s most overtly ironic treatment of British/English identity and
British/English national chauvinism. It is also a merciless satire of the assumptions and attitudes
surrounding that most nationalist of late Victorian institutions, the British Empire.

This is the stance taken by Carolyn Williams, in her article “Utopia, Limited: nationalism,
empire and parody in the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan.” She argues that Gilbert’s
representation of Englishness throughout the Savoy operas actually demonstrates the performative,
theatrical aspect of nationality. In her view, he portrays it as an aesthetic, something essentially

86 Cannadine, 21.
87 Ibid., 20.
superficial that can be easily put on and taken off, like a costume, or the exaggerated “Early English” poses adopted by the aesthetes in *Patience*. 89 In a sense, she sees Gilbert as being way ahead of his time in viewing national identity, not as something organic and inherent (as nineteenth-century nationalists tended to do), but as an artificial category. If this is true, one might be forgiven for thinking that the ultimate effect of the Savoy operas would have been to undermine national certainties, not to articulate and reinforce them. Perhaps, however, a satirical treatment of national traits is not as far removed from the processes of nation-building as it might at first appear.

Williams tries to solve this seeming-paradox at the beginning of her article, by saying that “Gilbert’s plots often attempt to patch up in the end what has been torn to shreds in the middle. His representations of ‘England,’ of ‘Great Britain,’ and of ‘the English’ also shore up, repair, and glorify what he parodies, teases, and attacks.” 90 But she never really demonstrates how Gilbert did this, and indeed I am not convinced that he actually did so. It is true that, in almost every Savoy opera, what has been turned topsy-turvy is made right again at the end and the ‘natural’ order of things is restored. This usually occurs, however, via a convenient but completely improbable plot twist, which encourages the audience not to take the so-called restoration any more seriously than they have taken what has gone before. In *HMS Pinafore*, Ralph does not win the Captain’s daughter because “He is an Englishman.” Rather, he is allowed to marry her because a last-minute disclosure by Little Buttercup reveals that he is well-born. In fact, it transpires that he and the Captain were exchanged at birth, so that Ralph ends up Captain of the *Pinafore* and the former Captain is demoted to lowly sailor. In *The Pirates of Penzance*, all the pirates turn out to be “noblemen gone wrong” who, once reformed (by the invocation of “Queen Victoria’s name”), are worthy suitors for Major-General Stanley’s daughters. The staunchly republican heroes of *The Gondoliers* are no longer required to rule in tandem as King of Barataria, when it is discovered that they were switched at

88 *The Musical Times*, November 1, 1893.
birth with the true heir, who has been disguised as a drummer-boy throughout. And the ending of
*Utopia, Limited* — the opera Williams examines at length in her article — is quite as bitterly satirical on
the subject of national greatness as the rest of the libretto. Princess Zara, trying to understand why
her Utopian society — although closely modeled on Great Britain in almost every respect — doesn’t
function the way the original does, finally hits on the answer. One crucial English institution has
been hitherto overlooked by the Utopians:

> Government by Party! Institute that great and glorious element — at once
> the bulwark and foundation of England’s greatness — and all will be well!
> No political measures will endure, because one Party will assuredly undo
> all that the other Party has done; and while grouse is to be shot, and
> foxes worried to death, the legislative action of the country will be at a
> standstill. Then there will be sickness in plenty, endless lawsuits,
> crowded jails, interminable confusion in the Army and Navy, and, in
> short, general and unexampled prosperity?

In fact, the second sentence of the monologue originally read “No political measures will endure,
because one party will undo all that the other Party has done; inexperienced civilians will govern
your Army and your Navy; no social reforms will be attempted, because out of vice, squalor, and
drunkenness no political capital is to be made; and while grouse is to be shot [etc.]…” Gilbert,
yielding to negative critical reaction, removed the line after the first night.

Uncomplicated flag-waving this was not. But, in a backhanded way, Gilbert’s satire *did*
promote the existence of an English national community. For one thing, it assumed that such a
community existed, and that it possessed recognizable traits that could be satirized. For another, as
Stephen Heathorn has pointed out, “before symbols and narratives can be reconfigured for another
purpose in self-conscious and critical ways, some understanding of the original meaning is
necessary.” In other words, in poking fun at ‘typically English’ things, Gilbert assumed that his
audiences already possessed what Heathorn refers to as “national literacy” — a certain level of
common cultural knowledge that would enable them to understand the joke. And when audiences

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92 Allen, 413.
93 Heathorn, 217.
laughed, they proved to him and to each other that they were nationally literate. They constituted
themselves as a community simply by virtue of the fact that they recognized the national symbols,
narratives, character types and attitudes that were being parodied.

Furthermore, I think it is important to remember that the libretti were only a part of the total
product. The subversive, undermining effect of Gilbert’s satire surely was diluted by the sheer
joyous pageantry of a Savoy opera production: beautiful costumes, luxurious sets, a well-drilled cast
executing carefully choreographed staging, and all in the comfort of an attractive theatre equipped
with every modern convenience (including electric lighting). And then there was the music. If
anything fulfilled the repairing, glorifying function to which Williams refers, I would argue that it
was the music of Arthur Sullivan. Williams does not refer to Sullivan’s role at all; her title should
probably be “Nationalism, empire and parody in the libretti of William S. Gilbert” because she does
not deal with the operas as operas at all — only as texts. Her argument is interesting, and very
persuasive; but in my view, any analysis of the representation of nationality and nationalism in the
Savoy operas is incomplete without some discussion of how the music interacted with the words,
and of the effect it might have had on the meanings contemporary audiences assigned to ‘national’
references or mock-patriotic statements.

Late nineteenth-century reviewers laid varying degrees of emphasis on the role of Sullivan’s
music in the operas. The place accorded to it in a standard review — usually after a short
introduction and a detailed plot summary — is indicative of the fact that contemporaries viewed its
function as primarily illustrative of Gilbert’s plots and words. “The play’s the thing’ beyond all
question,” wrote The Musical World, “Mr. Sullivan’s work being simply to supply for its lyrics such
graceful, refined, and artistic strains as please without distraction.”94 Sullivan’s music was typically
admired in these kinds of terms; other commonly used adjectives were charming, sparkling.

94 The Musical World, April 30, 1880.
humorous, light-hearted, melodious, harmonious, pleasing... and so on. He was widely regarded as being able to set even the most difficult lyric to an appealing tune:

How any music at all can be applied to the words of certain songs in this libretto is a matter for surprise for those who do not know that some composers, like Swift, can "write beautifully upon a broomstick." Mr. Sullivan has this rare gift in an eminent degree. Where his text offers the slightest suggestion of sentiment or passion he is sure to avail himself of it.95

What effect did Sullivan's music have on responses to the operas? In the first place, he was often praised for his ability to enhance Gilbert's jokes with cleverly executed musical humour of his own, through orchestral effects or parodies of recognized operatic conventions. Secondly, one gets the impression that critics were rather grateful to Sullivan for smoothing over Gilbert's prickliness somewhat. The music softened the sting of his satire, and gave his rather two-dimensional characters and their ridiculous plights more humanity, and more emotional appeal.

More particularly, Sullivan's treatment of Gilbert's mock-patriotic references often did both these things. On the one hand, he continued and extended Gilbert's mockery of nationalistic sentiment by setting excessively patriotic words to exaggerated, overly heroic music, as for example in the melodramatic coloratura for Mabel's "Go ye heroes, go to glory" in The Pirates of Penzance. On the other hand, this kind of music made it possible to ignore the satire entirely and take the patriotism of the characters at face value, as having genuine emotion behind it. For instance, his fanfare-like setting of the first, dramatic "He is an Englishman!" in HMS Pinafore, followed by a slow, reverent march for the verse, would have made it possible for the spectator to think here was a glorification of Englishness, if he or she listened more closely to the music than to Gilbert's sardonic words. Sullivan's friend Francois Cellier called this song "the jingo jingle," and claimed that it "rivalled in popularity – for the time being – the National Anthem."96

95 The Times, November 27, 1882.
96 Cellier, 60.
Contemporary reviews recognized the possibility of different interpretations thanks to Sullivan’s music; the critic for the London *Times*, for instance, commented on ‘I shipped, d’ye see, with a Revenue sloop’ from *Ruddigore*:

Set to a rolling sea tune in the Dibdin style by Sir Arthur Sullivan (…) the song might well be taken for a serious glorification of the British Navy by an ingenuous patriot in the gallery, while, on the other hand, the frequenter of the stalls, provided moreover with a book, would of course see the satire, both being pleased according to their lights.97

Similarly, *The Times* also wrote of Ralph’s ballad ‘A maiden fair to see’ (in *HMS Pinafore*) that “A very unsophisticated audience might accept [it]… as the real sentiment of which it is an admirable caricature.”98

The patronizing assumption that none of the “gallery gods” were musically or politically knowledgeable enough to enjoy the pointed satire was characteristic of contemporary middle/upper class attitudes towards the less well-heeled attendees of the Savoy operas. It seems much more likely that both reactions (and others, of course) were possible no matter where one sat in the theatre. It would have been easy, moreover, to react to Sullivan’s triumphant setting of, for instance, ‘He is an Englishman’ with an outburst of patriotic pride even if one was aware that the song was intended as a parody of that same sentiment. One response does not necessarily preclude the other. At the very least, Sullivan’s treatment of that section seems designed to provoke a rush of joyful excitement. In similar fashion, his majestic, brass-heavy ‘March of the Peers’ in *Iolanthe* (particularly accompanied as it was by the spectacle of the Lords parading onstage in full regalia) might sweep the listener up in its glorious bombast even as it poked fun at the supercilious Peers, and at the supposedly English passion for pointless ritual and pageantry.

The emotional appeal of Sullivan’s music was also thought to be the main reason for the operas’ attraction to more than one class of people. The *Times* reviewer’s acknowledgement of the

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97 *The Times*, January 24, 1887.
98 Allen, 77.
"ingenuous patriot in the gallery" was typical of much contemporary commentary on Gilbert and Sullivan. François Cellier wrote of the first night of *Iolanthe*:

> The house, packed with an enormous audience, comprised a mixed assortment of patricians and plebeians. Every shade of politics was represented, but, unlike the assemblies in the greater play-house in Westminster, here there was no spirit of controversy. Every Act was passed without a division. M.P.s – Unionist and Radical, Home Ruler and Socialist – alike hailed the appearance of the composer with far greater and more spontaneous rapture than any with which they greet the rising of a distinguished Front-bench orator. Sullivan’s music soothed the angry breasts of politicians."

Here we must allow for the rose-coloured glasses of a lifelong Savoyard and close friend of Sullivan’s. It is worth noting that the Savoy operas were not, in fact, universally acclaimed. Even when they were criticized, however, it was often through the prism of national culture. Sullivan, a classically-trained composer hailed in his early career as the ‘great white hope’ of English art music, was severely criticized by many in the English musical establishment for not devoting himself to more serious musical pursuits. Critics thought he was wasting his talents on the Savoy operas, which were dismissed as fluff – undoubtedly popular, clever and well executed, but fluff nonetheless. Gilbert, on the other hand, was often accused of recycling his plots and comic devices over and over again, and of taking his trademark “topsy-turvydom” too far. One particularly virulent critic denounced him as follows:

> Mr. Gilbert starts primarily with the object of bringing Truth and Love and Friendship into contempt, just as we are taught the Devil does. Mr. Gilbert tries to prove that there is no such thing as virtue, but that we are all lying, selfish, vain, and unworthy. In the Gilbertian world there are no martyrs, no patriots, and no lovers.

Many reviewers – perhaps trying to seem more discerning than the average theatre-goer – distanced themselves from the enthusiastic reception accorded the operas by admiring crowds. Much of the critical commentary quoted in this thesis, while it praises the operas as national cultural products, remains lukewarm – if not downright disparaging – about their aesthetic worth. The *Times* critic was

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99 Cellier, 109.
100 See, for example, J.A. Maitland’s chapter on Sullivan in his *English Music in the XIXth Century*, 165.  
101 Quoted by Cellier, 116-17.
not the only one to think “the question of popular success is of course quite different from that of artistic merit.”\textsuperscript{102}

Still, the Savoy operas were acclaimed for their ability to unite people from all walks of life in the enjoyment of the “morally harmless and artistically legitimate” entertainment they provided. The \textit{Times} reviewer wrote of the première of \textit{Princess Ida}:

\begin{quote}
Whatever may be thought of the abstract worth of Messrs. Gilbert and Sullivan’s work, it has the great merit of putting everyone in a good temper. It was pleasant to watch the audience on Saturday. The occupants of stalls and boxes, including many musicians and literary men of note, the dress circle, and even the unruly ‘gods’ in the gallery, were equally delighted, and expressed their delight after the manner of their kind.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

It seems likely that, to a point, middle/upper class observers like Cellier were seeing what they wanted to see – a unified national public. The idea that Gilbert and Sullivan might heal (even if only temporarily) the divisions between a Home Ruler and a Unionist, or between an aristocrat and a socialist shop clerk, was a comforting prospect in a period when Great Britain’s unity seemed threatened on all sides (see section 1). Indeed, the operas’ popularity with what elite observers thought of as “all classes”\textsuperscript{104} was crucial to their construction as national cultural products. Such success was seen as proof that an English national culture did exist, and that it was ‘of the people.’

On the other hand, their popularity was thought to give the Savoy operas enormous potential as teaching tools for the values and symbols of that national culture, and as unifying influences on audiences otherwise divided by boundaries of class, politics, and education.

English elites certainly were being overly optimistic in proposing Gilbert and Sullivan as balm for all the insecurities and divisions that were perceived to threaten society and nation as the turn of the century approached. I think, however, that the question of whether such a cultural event as an opera can be a unifying or nation-building force – and how it might accomplish this – deserves

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{The Times}, April 5, 1880.
\textsuperscript{103} \textit{The Times}, quoted in Cellier, 126.
\textsuperscript{104} Members of the lower working classes were almost certainly excluded, at least from actually attending the original London performances. Touring shows and amateur performances may have been more accessible to the less well-off.
closer examination than music and theatre (particularly music) have generally provoked from scholars in nationalism studies. The next section attempts such an investigation.

4. Audience Experience and the Formation of National Identity

What follows must first be qualified by a reiteration of the difficulties inherent in generalizing about audiences, either in the past or otherwise. Each spectator brings a different horizon of expectations to a performance, which shapes his or her responses to it in particular ways. It would be inaccurate and simplistic to portray reception as a straightforward process, or to view Savoy opera audiences as a monolithic bloc. While the “gallery gods” were attending the same opera as the people in the boxes, it seems highly likely that they interpreted what they saw in very different ways. At the very least, their experience of the performance was different.

The principal difficulty lies in the fact that the primary source material which has been available to me in the writing of this thesis has consisted entirely of the testimony of those (upper/middle class) people who had the time, inclination and ability to write about their experiences of the Savoy operas and publish the results. The closest I can get to the “silent majority” (as James Johnson has called them) who never did so, is to see them through the eyes of the sources I do have. In doing so it is important to recognize that those sources had biases and agendas of their own when discussing the responses of the “lower orders” to the Gilbert and Sullivan phenomenon. As I have already noted, given the historical and social context in which the operas were produced, elite observers had a vested interest in portraying Savoy audiences as a loyal, enthusiastic and unified national public. I cannot, therefore, rely too heavily on their testimony for evidence of how those “silent” spectators interpreted the operas, either individually or collectively. Rather than speculating any further on whether or not audiences ‘read’ the operas as patriotic texts or representations of Englishness (an analysis that would always of necessity be incomplete, and
difficult to substantiate), this final section will focus on the more tangible, public and collective aspects of audience experience.

First, sheer numbers: many thousands of English people saw and loved the Savoy operas. While contemporary sources may have exaggerated their popularity, the fact remains that even the least successful of the full-length operas ran for at least a hundred nights during its original run — and the most successful, *The Mikado*, ran for almost seven hundred.\textsuperscript{105} Although the Savoy Theatre almost certainly did not fill all of its 1,292 seats on every one of those nights, the management would only have kept each production on the boards for as long as it did if enough tickets were being sold to make this economically profitable. Most of the seats were probably occupied by doctors, lawyers, businessmen, journalists and other denizens of the affluent middle classes — and their families. But unlike other artistic manifestations of the newly (re)discovered national culture, the Savoy operas were available to the more prosperous members of the working classes; a seat in the gallery at the Savoy cost only one shilling.\textsuperscript{106} They were also performed for non-London audiences, thanks to the D'Oyly Carte touring companies. In the mid-1880s, when they were at the height of their success, Gilbert, Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte could boast as many as three or four different productions running at the same time — one in London and several others in the provinces. In this sense, the operas became a common referent for people all over England, part of a cultural landscape that crossed class and geographical boundaries.

Genre had something to do with this; if the Savoy operas had been satirical comedies with no musical component at all (in the vein of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example), or indeed if they had been grand operas or symphonies, their audiences would have been much smaller and more exclusive. But Gilbert and Sullivan essentially created a genre of their own: satirical musical theatre that was equal parts burlesque, extravaganza, melodrama and Offenbachian

\textsuperscript{105} *Thespis* and *Trial By Jury* are excluded from this tally, as they were originally performed as 'curtain-raisers' for other plays. See Appendix A for a complete list of all the operas in the Gilbert and Sullivan collaboration, with dates of their premieres and number of performances.
comic opera – and that gleefully parodied all of these styles. While contemporaries were perhaps unduly patronizing in assuming that the “lower orders” enjoyed only those aspects of the operas that recalled “lower” forms of entertainment, they were not entirely wrong. By combining different genres in new and creative ways, Gilbert and Sullivan could appeal to audiences with widely varying ideas about what good entertainment should be. In other words, their operas could fit into many diverse horizons of expectations. They were new and different enough to be interesting, but not so unlike other forms of late nineteenth-century entertainment as to be disconcerting or inaccessible.

Not only did many, many English people see the Savoy operas, the nature of their spectatorship was different than it was for other theatrical fare of the time; it was, I argue, more participatory – sometimes in a very literal sense. More than one contemporary noted that it was customary, at Savoy Theatre performances, for the people in the gallery and pit to pass the time while they waited for the curtain to go up with spontaneous renditions of songs from the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire:

There was no “rag, tag, and bobtail attached to a Savoy crowd. If, perchance, there were present any claqueurs of the rowdy class they were never in evidence. The refining influence of Gilbert’s wit and Sullivan’s convincing music sufficed to tame the wildest Hooligan from Shoreditch and the East, and to compel every man and woman entering the sanctum of the Savoy to put on company manners. The people, packed in close order in the gallery, resembled a huge, well-dressed concert choir, not only in the formation of their ranks, tier above tier, but in the manner of their behaviour. As soon as they had settled in their places, instead of reading books and newspapers, our accomplished “gods” delighted the house with a gratuitous recital of every favourite chorus or part-song from the Gilbert and Sullivan repertoire.107

Once the performance had begun, those who could purchase a printed libretto followed it closely; a columnist from the Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News once caustically noted that attending a Savoy ‘first night’ was like going to church, with crowds of serious people listening intently, and the only sound the rustling of turning pages.108 Audiences showed their approval for

107 Cellier, 130-31. See also Lytton, 75 and the diaries of W.S. Gilbert as quoted in Allen, 78.
108 Baily, 343.
particular songs or choruses by cheering them until they were repeated, sometimes more than once – it was not unusual for such multiple encores to prolong a performance by an hour or more. Interestingly, comments by Francois Cellier suggest that encoring was mainly a response of the people in the cheap seats (who were indeed often described as “rowdy” or “unruly”). Apparently, the Savoy Theatre management sometimes had to ask the orchestra conductor not to allow encores because “the enthusiasm of the people in the pit and gallery led to the annoyance of the occupants of the stalls.” Such uninhibited behaviour perhaps did not fit into the middle-class ideal of respectability and decorum.

This kind of involvement in the performance of the operas was, furthermore, only the tip of the iceberg. In this, the particular nature of Sullivan’s music played a special role. As well as being tuneful, light-hearted and emotionally appealing, it was accessible to amateurs. It provided a connection to the widespread and dynamic phenomenon that was amateur musical endeavour during this period.

Studies of popular music in nineteenth-century Britain make it clear that musical activity of various kinds was an integral part of life for people at all levels of society. The processes of industrialization and urbanization that characterized the period were accompanied by a parallel expansion and diversification of musical culture. Thanks to the growth of the population, its concentration in urban centres, and the possibilities for improved transportation and communication engendered by the expanding railway system, vast new markets were opened and infrastructures developed for the production and consumption of entertainment. Economic prosperity and the gradual formalization of leisure time provided both middle- and working-class consumers with increased spending power on the one hand, and greater opportunity for such consumption on the other. By the end of the nineteenth century, not only were many more English people than ever before ‘consuming’ music (listening to it in performances by professional

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musicians or other entertainers), they were also actively involved in making it; either privately at home, or in more public, collective contexts such as singing classes, choirs, brass bands, orchestras or operatic societies.\footnote{See Dave Russell, \textit{Popular Music in England, 1840-1914} (Manchester University Press, 1997, 2nd ed.) and Derek Scott, \textit{The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour} (Open University Press, 1989).}\footnote{Temperley, 45-47.} The piano became a fixture, first of middle-class drawing-rooms, and then – later in the century – of many working-class households as well.\footnote{Russell, 6-11.} Theatres, music halls, sheet music publishers and specialty music shops flourished. Music-related periodicals (such as the \textit{Musical World} or the \textit{Musical Times}) were founded and published in unprecedented numbers. Associations were formed for the study, appreciation and performance of everything from opera to handbell-ringing.

Although this flourishing musical activity was to a certain extent divided along class lines (brass bands, for example, were almost always strongly working-class, while amateur orchestras were more likely to draw their membership from the white-collar sector), the different forms it took were in constant interaction with one another. Dave Russell argues that the nineteenth century saw a "nationalization of repertoire" – the emergence of a "vast middle ground" of common musical property that became available across class boundaries.\footnote{Scott, 17-19 and Russell, 9.} Operatic airs by Verdi or Michael William Balfe – definitely 'high culture' when performed by famous singers at Covent Garden – were published in sheet music form as stand-alone ballads to be sung at the piano by bourgeois amateurs, or in vocal and brass arrangements for working-class choirs and bands.\footnote{Scott, 182-84.} In the opposite direction, songs from the music halls began to find their way into the drawing-room repertoire from the 1890s onward.\footnote{Scott, 182-84.} This capacity to appeal to a broad social spectrum and adapt to diverse cultural forms seems to me to be almost unique to music, or at least to certain kinds of music. Many of the usual barriers (literacy, education, need for specialized training) do not necessarily apply to the making of vocal music, for instance. Almost anybody, apart from the completely tone deaf, can learn to sing
well enough to participate in and enjoy collective music-making. In nineteenth century Britain, many people of otherwise limited education went much farther than that, becoming much more skilled than the term ‘amateur’ implies.

The Savoy theatre gallery gods could, therefore, join in the impromptu pre-curtain choruses because they had most likely performed the works of Gilbert and Sullivan themselves before, in choirs or brass bands or amateur dramatic societies. Sullivan’s music was undoubtedly part of the “vast middle ground” of communally-held repertoire: D’Oyly Carte claimed as early as 1876 that “on any pianoforte in any drawing-room in England one will find half a dozen songs of Mr. Arthur Sullivan’s to one of the French composers.”

Although an exaggerated claim, this certainly became true of the Savoy operas to some degree, thanks to Carte’s energetic marketing of the libretti and music, and to the flourishing state of the music industry more generally. E. Goodman, formerly a messenger boy for Chappell & Co., the publisher of the Savoy operas, remembered:

> At our printing works the vocal score would be set up, all ready to print, and the machines would be standing by to turn out the thousands of copies the public clamoured for (...). The music was always ready to be sold at the theatre on the first night of the opera and in the shops the next day. I remember in Bond Street outside our offices there would be rows and rows of horse-vans and cabs lined up, waiting to be loaded, and railway vans too, ready to take the country deliveries.116

Similarly, Cunningham Bridgeman, Francois Cellier’s collaborator on his book about the Savoy operas, claimed that when the score of *The Gondoliers* was published, “on the first day 20,000 copies (eleven wagon loads) of the vocal score alone were dispatched. But the printing machines were still kept going at high pressure, and the first order executed by the publishers, including the pianoforte score, the vocal score, the dance, and other arrangements reached over 70,000 copies.”117

Thus G&S songs, detached from their original operatic contexts, were performed in middle/upper class drawing rooms, by working-class choral societies, and even by organ-grinders in city streets all over Great Britain. Sullivan’s music provided the (primarily working-class) English

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115 Baily, 140.
116 Ibid., 209-10.
brass band movement with a major injection of new repertoire, as band music publishers turned out cheap “portmanteau” compilations of favourite tunes from the Savoy operas. Furthermore, amateur dramatic societies devoted to the production of the Savoy operas sprang up, in impressive numbers. Dave Russell claims the amateur operatic society was “a major new element” of popular musical (and theatrical) activity in the late nineteenth century, and that it was, in fact, Gilbert and Sullivan who “provided the operatic societies with their raison d’être.” This is borne out by contemporary sources: Cunningham Bridgeman argued “among the many extraneous influences of the Gilbert and Sullivan opera on all branches of society at large, none is more remarkable than the impetus they have given to amateur performances.” He provided statistics to prove it, from a directory published by the National Amateur and Dramatic Association (founded in February 1899) that listed performances given by amateur societies affiliated with the national organization. The lists show that by 1914 in London, for example, there existed 36 operatic societies, 20 of which played Gilbert and Sullivan operas in a given year (with an average of about five performances per society). In the provinces, there were 312 societies, of which about 173 were producing Savoy operas. And these are only the organizations affiliated with the NADA; there were undoubtedly many more that were never officially listed. Such amateur troupes helped to disseminate the Savoy operas across Great Britain, attracting both performers and audiences that might never otherwise have attended the theatre. According to Dave Russell, an amateur production at Hanley in Staffordshire in the mid-1890s drew almost 15,000 people over six days of performances. He claims, “This enthusiastic adoption of Gilbert and Sullivan must rank as one of the most significant popular musical phenomena of the period to 1914.” It is worth noting that it crossed not only class and geographical lines, but – to a certain extent – gender lines as well; public participation in

117 Cellier and Bridgeman, 285.
118 Russell, 237-38.
119 Ibid., 266.
120 Cellier and Bridgeman, 393-94.
121 Russell, 265-66.
the Gilbert and Sullivan phenomenon was acceptable for women in a way that perhaps only choral societies had been up to that point.

Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, it would be fascinating to look more closely at amateur involvement in the Gilbert & Sullivan phenomenon – to examine the social composition of the choirs, operatic societies and brass bands, and to study the ways in which changing the performance context, from theatre to local concert hall to private drawing room and back again, influenced the possible meaning(s) attributed to the words and music. With respect to national identity, it seems possible that such an investigation might reveal the Savoy operas as vehicles for the elaboration of not one, but several ideas of what it meant to be English in the late nineteenth century.

In any case, it is clear that being a spectator of the Savoy operas meant much more to thousands of people than simply attending the theatre. In essentially creating a genre, Gilbert, Sullivan and D'Oyly Carte also created what, today, we might call a ‘fan community.’ With new operas being produced in the same successful mould every few years for almost two decades, they became fixtures on the musical and theatrical scene, and the same people came back to see each successive production. Spectators developed commonly held expectations about style, presentation and content; they got to know the principal actors of the D'Oyly Carte Company, and cheered them like old friends when they appeared in new roles. Audiences in the provinces rested assured that they were seeing almost exactly the same operas as had been performed in London, thanks to Gilbert's rigorous insistence on the maintenance of all his original lyrics, blocking and stage directions by all touring companies and amateur troupes. Having performed parts or all of the operas themselves before, audience members undoubtedly developed a deeper emotional involvement with the music and theatre, and a sense of kinship or collectivity with their fellow spectators/performers. Gilbert and Sullivan became a communal point of reference on the cultural
landscape, and their audiences became an interpretive community, of which one of the defining aspects was its ‘authentic’ Englishness.

Furthermore, the participatory nature of Savoy opera audiences’ involvement meant that many people were quite literally performing the version of Englishness that the Savoy operas were thought to represent. Whether they were conscious of it or not, that Englishness became part of their lives in a very immediate and personal way. In the process, they undoubtedly shaped and interpreted it according to their needs, and refracted it back into the public sphere in altered form.

**Conclusion**

The Savoy operas were clearly a “cultural terrain” upon which ideas about what it meant to be English were elaborated. The historical circumstances of the late nineteenth century produced an upper- and middle-class elite that perceived itself as being in need of a national culture and a national identity. Gilbert and Sullivan and their operas, designated as authentically English cultural products in a period when these were thought to be in short supply, filled that need. They acted as foci for a discourse that both defined and glorified English culture; and their extraordinary popularity seemed to prove that this national culture could at once unite and pacify the masses. Whether or not it actually did so is debateable. The fact remains, however, that by mocking the foibles of a specific English national community, Gilbert and Sullivan encouraged their audiences to imagine themselves as part of that community, and educated them in the symbolic content of the national culture. Institutions (the Monarchy, the Army, the Navy, the Police), character traits (amiable eccentricity, wry humour, gentleness, courtesy, shrewdness, integrity), cultural references (Merrie England, the rustic village, the undefiled countryside) and attitudes (patriotism, devotion to duty, love of pomp and circumstance, self-discipline, respectability) were all designated as ‘typically English.’ When Savoy Theatre patrons laughed at the parodies of all these things and many others,

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122 Eley and Suny, 8.
they implicitly constituted themselves as an ‘interpretive community’ with certain shared assumptions and mental associations: “We recognize the kernel of truth in the joke; we understand why this is funny.”

As popular musical theatre, the operas became a common point of reference on a cultural landscape that encompassed a wide social spectrum. They also allowed their audiences to interact with each other and with the cultural product in highly participatory and collective ways. Produced in a period in which amateur musical/theatrical activity was a very important part of social and cultural life (more so than before or since), they were able to involve a large population in the creation and re-creation of a specific version (or versions) of ‘Englishness.’ In doing so, they acted as media for the construction and articulation of national identity on a very concrete, every-day level. In this respect, the community-building power inherent in the simple experience of collective music-making or theatrical performance ought not to be underestimated. Both involve an individual emotional commitment to a collective enterprise; both involve putting oneself on the same mental wavelength as a group of other people, and forging a connection – even if only temporarily. In my view, there is no more tangible evocation of an “imagined community” than, for instance, the Savoy Theatre gallery gods – otherwise strangers to one another – joining in an impromptu pre-show sing-along. The connection thus created – based only on the fact that the singers all know the same words to the same tune – is nonetheless an emotional, visceral one. It allows those involved to skirt or elide the otherwise problematic, contradictory and constructed aspects of membership in the national community.

By concentrating on the workings of cultural nationalism as it focused around a particular set of cultural products (the Savoy operas), I have tried to show that the elaboration of national identity and national culture – while undeniably shaped by its larger historical and social contexts – is more complex than the imposition of an “invented tradition” on subordinate classes by an elite. Rather, it involves a flow of ideas travelling in many directions along a loose network of authors, composers,
managers, performers, and spectators, in which the boundaries between producer and consumer of
the cultural product are constantly shifting, and the identities formed are continually contested.
Ideas about nationality are forged in the interaction of all the aspects of cultural production, from
music, lyrics and staging to critical discourse, audience experience and amateur participation. The
example of the Savoy operas demonstrates how national belonging can be 'acted out' (both literally
and figuratively) in all kinds of everyday activities, from domestic music-making to collective hilarity
at the theatre. At its most basic level, an awareness of national identity requires a sense of kinship
with large numbers of other people of whom one knows very little. It is through communication
that such kinship is evolved; and it is often through cultural production that we communicate.
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Some of the reviews above are quoted as I found them in secondary sources; the rest were found at [www.sharkli.com/savoy/](http://www.sharkli.com/savoy/). This website, maintained by Helga J. Perry of the University of Birmingham, contains the Severnside Theatre Ensemble Savoy Opera Reviews Collection. The collection consists of transcripts and bibliographic information for contemporary reviews of all fourteen Savoy operas.

**Opera Recordings:**


Appendix A
The Savoy Operas: A Brief Chronology of ‘First Nights’ and Original Runs

*Thespis; or, The Gods Grown Old:* December 26, 1871 at the Gaiety Theatre, London; 64 performances.

*Trial By Jury:* March 25, 1875 at the Royalty Theatre, London; 300 performances.

*The Sorcerer:* November 27, 1877 at the Opera Comique, London; 178 performances.

*HMS Pinafore; or, The Lass That Loved A Sailor:* May 28, 1878 at the Opera Comique; 571 performances.

*The Pirates of Penzance; or, The Slave of Duty:* December 31, 1879 at the Fifth Avenue Theatre, New York City. Later premiered at the Opera Comique in London on April 3, 1880; 363 performances.

*Patience; or, Bunthorne’s Bride:* April 23, 1881 at the Opera Comique. Later moved to the newly-built Savoy Theatre; 578 performances.

*Iolanthe; or, The Peer and the Peri:* November 25, 1882 at the Savoy Theatre, London; 400 performances.

*Princess Ida; or, Castle Adamant:* January 5, 1884 at the Savoy Theatre; 246 performances.

*Mikado; or, The Town of Titipu:* March 14, 1885 at the Savoy Theatre; 672 performances.

*Ruddigore; or, The Witch’s Curse:* January 21, 1887 at the Savoy Theatre; 288 performances.

*The Yeomen of the Guard; or, The Merryman and his Maid:* October 3, 1888 at the Savoy Theatre; 423 performances.

*The Gondoliers; or, The King of Barataria:* December 7, 1889 at the Savoy Theatre; 554 performances.

*Utopia, Limited; or, The Flowers of Progress:* October 7, 1893 at the Savoy Theatre; 245 performances.

*The Grand Duke; or, The Statutory Duel:* March 7, 1896 at the Savoy Theatre; 123 performances.