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## CD Review by David L. Kirk

**SULLIVAN *The Sorcerer*** • Gary McKercher, cond; Ryan Thorn (*Marmaduke*); James Schaffner (*Alexis*); Jesse Hoffmeister (*Dr. Daly*); James Rowe (*John Wellington Wells*); Kathleen Buttita (*Lady Sangazure*); Julie Hutchinson (*Aline*); Jessica Warmington (*Constance*); Ilona Pinzke (*Mrs. Partlet*); Madison Savoyards O & Ch • MADISON SAVOYARDS 47093 (107:50) Live: Madison 7/28/2007

**SULLIVAN *Cox and Box*** • Gary McKercher, cond; Justin Wilder (*Cox*); James Schaffner (*Box*); Ryan Thorn (*Bouncer*); Madison Savoyards O • MADISON SAVOYARDS 46976 (38:09) Live: Madison 7/28/2007

**SULLIVAN *The Sorcerer. Cox and Box*** • Madison Savoyards • MADISON SAVOYARDS 46807 (DVD: 146:04) Live: Madison 7/28/2007

The Madison Savoyards, Ltd., as their name indicates, is a community theater based in Madison, Wisconsin, that primarily limits their repertoire to the Gilbert and Sullivan operas. In July 2007, they added the Sullivan and Burnand “triumviretta” *Cox and Box* to their repertoire as a curtain-raiser to the main event *The Sorcerer*.

*Cox and Box* was Sullivan’s first opera (1866). The librettist, F. C. Burnand, adapted the dialogue from a popular one-act play, *Box and Cox*, and wrote lyrics for nine musical numbers. The work, lasting about an hour, proved to be quite successful, which prompted Sullivan to add an overture and orchestrations. D’Oyly Carte shortened the running time by nearly 30 minutes, this adaptation, generally known as The Savoy Version, is the one used by the Madison Savoyards.

*The Sorcerer* (1877) was Sullivan's seventh opera, his third with Gilbert. It is essentially a comedy of manners, but the politeness is a thin veneer for Gilbert's barbs at class-conscious, snobby people. The joke that motivates the story is simple: villagers unknowingly drink a love potion in the first act and fall in love with the wrong people in the second act. The instigator of this mayhem, Alexis, is the only villager who doesn't drink the potion. He is dismayed when his fiancée, Aline, and the elderly Vicar fall in love, but horrified when his patrician father, Sir Marmaduke, takes up with the socially inferior Mrs. Partridge. *The Sorcerer* is the most subtle of the G&S operas and requires a delicate touch. I once heard a term, "Outrageous understatement," which works well as a guide to staging *The Sorcerer*. For the most part, the Madison Savoyards respect the special needs of this opera. A few times comic business steps over the threshold and turns to slapstick, but usually the reins are tightened and the balance of "outrageous understatement" and "keep it lively" is restored. Some pieces of business are oddly motivated (Sir Marmaduke's page, Hercules, suddenly seems to be J. W. Well's assistant), and occasionally there is business just for the sake of business (especially during the patter song).

In *Cox and Box* the iron griddle is repeatedly pulled out of the fireplace without the benefit of oven mitts or hot pads. During the "Buttercup" duet, Cox takes the griddle from the fire and mimics playing the guitar. Even with my pretenders turned on, I still wondered why it wasn't hot and dripping with bacon grease. The bit of strumming a pretend guitar is fine, only I wish some other article had been found, a bed warmer or a tennis racket, perhaps. The business is carried to a successful and funny conclusion, however, when Box squeezes a pillow to the line, "I play the concertina." These are minor quibbles; overall the director delivers straightforward productions. Two pieces of Gilbert's faulty plotting always jump out at me whenever I encounter *The Sorcerer*: why didn't Aline have to sleep for 12 hours for the potion to take effect, and why does Lady Sangazure (who drank the potion) fall in love with Wells (who didn't)? Part of the answer lies in G&S's decision to rewrite the opera for the 1884 revival. Originally, the potion took effect in 30 minutes and the first act ended with a *brindisi*, "Eat, drink, and be gay," and all philter drinkers fell down insensible. Act II opened in a "Market Place in the Village," with all "Peasants dancing, coupled two and two," singing "Happy are we in our loving frivolity." Gilbert failed to account for the philter's increased gestation period when Aline

drinks it in the revised second act. As to Lady Sangazure's infatuation with Wells, well—that's life in Topsy-turveydom!

Occasionally, a few performers indulge in mugging and physical high jinxes that are at odds with Gilbert's sedate, class-conscious setting, but thankfully not often. What works best are the subtle jokes: a collection of people, patricians and commoners, all on their best manners at a hoity-toity social event, who think getting a cup of tea and a bun is reason enough for a jolly song; gleeful Alexis bounding around the stage and anxious to promote love and marriage, contrasted with his wary fiancée, Aline, who's not so sure love potions are a good idea. A clever bit of whimsy is Aline's costume: on the day of her betrothal she is so anxious to snag Alexis that she's already donned her wedding dress.

Gilbert's droll wit needs a knowing cast to put it across; I think he would be pleased at how well the Savoyard's handle the dialogue. I wanted Jesse Hoffmeister, the Vicar, to slow down and hold for laughs, but he has a lovelorn sigh that's priceless. Ilona Pinzke plays Mrs. Partridge to a T. In spite of her proper Victorian decorum, she's as subtle as a Mack truck trying to get the Vicar to marry her daughter, Constance (Jessica Warmington), who blushinglly hides her affections like a neon sign. A few performers are somewhat challenged for stage presence, but overall the acting is quite good. The singing voices are outstanding for a community theater, and several are of professional caliber. Particularly impressive are James Schaffner (imported to Madison from the New York City Opera to fill a last-minute casting need) and Julie Hutchinson as Alexis and Aline. Both are excellent singing actors. Hutchinson's eager-to-wed, eager-to-please ingénue, Aline, is a constant pleasure. Most of the principals either have or are working towards degrees in voice and music, and all principals bring a rich assortment of experience in musical theater to the Madison stage.

James Schaffner, Ryan Thorn, and Justin Wilder appear in both operas, which provides viewers with an opportunity to see their versatility. Schaffner transforms himself from the journeyman printer in *Cox and Box* to a gleefully earnest Alexis (of the Grenadier Guards), sporting a toothy grin that beams across the footlights. Thorn makes an equally distinctive transition from the happy-go-lucky Bouncer (*C&B*) to the sedate, elderly Baronet, Sir Marmaduke. The traditional sets and costumes, appropriate to their Victorian origins, are attractive and colorful. A 26-member orchestra accompanies the proceedings. The Madison Savoyard's have recorded several of their

summer productions and made the CDs and DVDs available for sale either through amazon.com or the Savoyard's Web site. (The review of *Patience* appears in *Fanfare* 30:6.) There has been improvement to the sound by adding microphones; only occasionally does a cast member walk off-mike and become somewhat remote. Still, nearly all of the words, both sung and spoken, are captured and understood. One of the few times I didn't catch the words was in the "Love-me, hate-me" duet, when it sounded like topical references were substituted for "One tree hill" and "Rosherville." These productions, like last year's *Patience*, were filmed using only one camera. The viewer has the sense of being in the theater and having a good seat in the balcony. The picture is full screen.

The only video alternatives are the two operas as part of the Brent Walker TV series from the 1980's. *Cox and Box* is paired with *Trial by Jury*, *Cox* being the better of the two (Frankie Howerd's funny business as the Judge is detrimental to *Trial*). Comparing the Brent Walker videos with Madison's production is difficult. The Walker's were filmed on soundstages with elaborate scenery, many changes of settings, a symphony orchestra, a chorus of dancers who mime the words sung by the Ambrosian Opera Chorus; and (I presume) a much larger budget. Along with *Patience* and *Princess Ida*, they are the four best of the Walker series. Don't miss them; but the Madison show is the real thing. It's live on stage, as Gilbert and Sullivan intended. Hearing the enthusiastic laughter and applause makes you feel part of the event and shows how people who love what they're doing put on a good show. One young lady appears with her arm in a cast, but, hey, the show must go on!

The Ohio Light Opera (Albany Records) recorded a two-CD set of *The Sorcerer*, with dialogue, that is quite good and offers comparable competition to Madison's CDs. Both are live recordings; however, there is no audible evidence of an audience on the OLO recording. I found the OLO to be more uniformly cast, and it sounds as if OLO has a larger chorus, but there is spontaneity with Madison and the appreciative audience brings the Madison performance to life—reminding us of what a witty libretto Gilbert wrote. OLO splits the first act between two discs, but Madison presents each act complete on its own disc. The dialogue is tracked separately from the musical numbers on the OLO, but not on the Madison CDs. OLO includes a libretto, Madison does not. Madison performs the second act finale as G&S wrote it; OLO adds a reprise of "If you marry me," and the recently deceased Wellington Wells

briefly reappears to sing a snippet of his patter song.

Madison has released each opera separately on CD (see headnote), or combined on one DVD. My recommendation: go for the DVD. Not only do you get both operas on a single disc but the DVD sound is 5:1 as opposed to two-channel stereo on the CDs; and best of all, you get to see the fun they're having on stage. **David L. Kirk**

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