

“Beef and Pie,” Fairies and Failure: The First English Dickens Opera

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In an essay written to accompany a recording of Bernard Herrmann’s opera, *Wuthering Heights*, David Simmons observed: “It is an interesting comment on the British literary tradition that so few of her novelists have provided suitable subjects for operatic setting” (2). There is much truth in this, notwithstanding important exceptions. In the eighteenth century the pioneering and influential novels of Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding inspired equally pioneering and influential operas, while in the nineteenth century Walter Scott probably exerted more influence on operatic plots than any other novelist. But certainly many major British novelists, including Jane Austen and George Eliot, have inspired next to no operas, and none that enjoyed substantial success. Charles Dickens stands somewhere between the extremes represented by Scott and Austen. I would estimate the total number of Dickens operas at around twenty, though if the definition of opera is stretched to include musicals and lighter kinds of musical theatre—and in practice it’s hard to say where the line should be drawn—that number could be doubled. Most of these were produced in the twentieth century: Dickens, very unlike Scott, did not appeal to the opera composers of his own time.

The only explanation I have seen for the comparative paucity of Dickensian opera is Robert Bledsoe’s, who in his short article on Dickens for *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* suggests that opera cannot “readily accommodate” Dickens’s “colourful and topical writing, and especially his social

commentary.” This is not very convincing. It is true that opera is not an obvious medium for “colourful” writing, but there have been hundreds of Shakespeare operas, and his plays are surely just as colorfully written as Dickens’s novels. It is also true that nineteenth-century opera rarely included direct social commentary beyond, say, expressing a general longing for freedom from oppression, but this hardly applies to twentieth-century opera (think of *Wozzeck* or *Peter Grimes*). Other factors seem more relevant. The most successful opera plots tend to be fairly simple, tightly focused on a small number of characters, with a dramatic shape determined by the major emotions of those characters. Accordingly, the greatest obstacles to the development of Dickensian opera have been the extraordinary intricacy of Dickens’s plots, the sheer number of characters who do something significant in those plots, and the generally uneven pace of the narrative, which seldom has a clear overall emotional shape. Added to this, Dickens’s many scene changes, which have endeared him to filmmakers, create huge and sometimes insuperable technical problems—it is surely no surprise that novels like *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Bleak House* have never been made into operas.¹ In the nineteenth century, furthermore, operatic conventions proved inimical. For most of the century it was normal for serious opera to treat subjects of historic interest and/or exotic appeal—not stories about modern people in modern Europe. This explains why, say, the novels of Dickens’s friend Edward Bulwar-Lytton proved far more attractive to opera composers than Dickens’s own (Wagner’s *Rienzi*, composed as early as 1840, is just the most famous of the Bulwar-Lytton operas). On the other hand, comic opera conventionally treated modern subjects, but comic opera could not accommodate the more serious and tragic aspects of Dickens’s art, which accordingly fell between two operatic stools.

Having considered the general difficulties facing the development of

Dickensian opera, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that two of his shorter novels have proved outstandingly attractive to opera composers: *The Cricket on the Hearth* and *A Christmas Carol*. (Intriguingly, none of the other Christmas books appear to have inspired operas or musicals.) These two stories have appealed at very different times, though. Four operas based on *The Cricket on the Hearth* were composed between 1873 and 1908, and a fifth was written, but not composed; remarkably, all these were written before any other Dickens story was given operatic treatment.² On the other hand, the first *Carol* opera was not produced until 1962, since when there have been at least six others.³ *A Christmas Carol* has always been among the most popular of Dickens's works, and the reason it took so long for its operatic potential to be mined is matter for another study. The present essay is concerned with the great popularity of *The Cricket* around 1900, and in particular with the first completed operatic adaptation in English, with lyrics by Julian Sturgis and music by Alexander Mackenzie. Published in 1901, though not performed until 1914, this can claim to be the first English Dickens opera, and the only one composed before the First World War. As a *Cricket* opera it was preceded by Giuseppe Galignani's pioneering Italian version (1873) and Karl Goldmark's German (Austrian) version (1896), as well as an abandoned English version written by Francis C. Burnand (see appendix). It was followed by Riccardo Zandonai's Italian version (1908).

Before discussing who Mackenzie and Sturgis were, and why and how they adapted *The Cricket on the Hearth* for operatic purposes, it is worth surveying in general terms the difficulties faced by adapters, and the attractions of the work which led them, nevertheless, to attempt to overcome those difficulties, in some cases successfully. The major problem was that the dramatic potential of *The Cricket*, as Dickens wrote it, is very limited. The

story's central narrative thread is supplied by Tackleton's impending marriage to the reluctant and much younger May Fielding, who is rescued from him at the eleventh hour by her old lover, Edward Plummer. Tackleton experiences a very late, Scrooge-like conversion, and reconciles himself to the loss. This simple sequence of events supplies the ground for everything else that happens, but Dickens shows little interest in the Tackleton-May-Edward plot. May hardly appears in the story at all, while Edward, though present, is disguised as an old man, and for most of the story is a witness of events rather than a participant. The most obviously dramatic action in this plot, Edward's marriage to May even as Tackleton is on his way to the church, is not described at all, and the reader only discovers what has happened when Edward and May turn up at the end as man and wife. Dickens's real interest is, instead, in the impact of the disguised Edward's arrival on the idyllic marriage of John Peerybingle the carrier and his much younger wife, Dot. Edward, disguised, reveals who he really is to Dot (as the reader discovers at the end), drawing her into a clandestine communication which her husband sees and misunderstands. In Dickens's telling of the story, the dramatic crisis is not whether May can be rescued from marriage to Tackleton, but whether John can conquer his suspicion of his wife, and desire for revenge. But this is an internal crisis, which seems on the whole better described in prose than acted out on stage. The other strand of Dickens's story is focused on Edward's blind sister, Bertha, who lives in a fantasy world because of her father's well-meaning lies, but she does not obviously add to the dramatic possibilities of *The Cricket*.

When *The Cricket on the Hearth* first appeared in 1845, there was the usual rash of theatrical adaptations in Britain (Glancy 205-9), but this points much more to Dickens's immense vogue than to the intrinsic dramatic qualities

of the novel. None of these early adaptations enjoyed enduring success. In fact, in the period before opera composers turned their attention to the work there was only one really successful stage version: Dion Boucicault’s *Dot* of 1859. When the *Athenaeum* came to notice *Dot*, the reviewer pointed out that it “differ[ed] from preceding adaptations” in that Boucicault had dealt “freely and dramatically with the story ... thus avoiding that obscurity and mystery which, in its original state, were calculated to puzzle rather than to please an audience” (536). In general Boucicault shifted the focus of the story much more towards the May-Tackleton-Edward plot, a shrewd move in terms of generating continuous dramatic interest. In *Dot*, May Fielding becomes a principal character, introduced in the first act agonizing over whether she should fulfill her engagement to Tackleton. Similarly, the audience is made aware of who Edward is early on, and knows why he has adopted his disguise. The most successful operatic versions—those of Goldmark and Zandonai—followed Boucicault’s lead, preferring clear emotional conflict to “obscurity and mystery.” Sturgis and Mackenzie stuck closer to Dickens, but still found it necessary to include a first act song for Edward in which he reveals his youth, and enduring love for May.

Although *The Cricket on the Hearth* was awkwardly undramatic in terms of its plot, one of the story’s principal attractions for librettists and composers was, nevertheless, the compactness and tidiness of that plot, with its straightforward emotional shape (happiness: crisis: happiness). Other key attractions were the economic distribution of the main roles (three young women, three older men, one younger man), and the limited number of locations (which can easily be reduced to two: the Peerybingles’ house, the Plummers’ house). No other Dickens novel combined these advantages except the unpopular *Battle of Life*. (The contrast with *A Christmas Carol* is revealing

here: the *Carol* has one very dominant role—an older man—and many smaller parts; it also involves a number of startling changes of place and mood.) All the adapters clearly welcomed these features. Gallignani's pioneering version showed what was possible by skillfully reducing the story to just three singing parts (John, Dot, Tackleton) with one silent role (Edward), and two locations (the Peerybingles' house, Tackleton's house). Gallignani's adaptation had no direct influence on the later operas, but the other adapters clearly appreciated the qualities in the original story which had appealed to him.

Another feature of *The Cricket* which the adapters liked was its simple, homely charm. The story is a sustained hymn to hearth and home, with John's conquest of his jealousy, and Dot's subsequent vindication, triumphant evidences of the power of the domestic virtues. As Ruth Glancy writes, the book "epitomiz[es] what Dickens and many Victorians saw as the ideal ... the happy home" (xxiii). Yet, as she adds, *The Cricket*'s saturation with "Victorian" values makes it "a dated book," "now completely out of favour." This Victorianism surely explains why the *Cricket* operas were all composed early on, and why they have largely been forgotten. All the operatic versions seized the chance to paint a domestic idyll, though it is illuminating to note that the final *Cricket* opera, Zandonai's, was far less sentimental than the earlier versions, with much more emphasis on economic adversity, much less Dickensian heartiness. Here Tackleton is stripped of his comic aspects, and undergoes no last minute conversion. This modernizing of the "Victorian" element is no doubt one reason why Zandonai's is the only one of these operas, to the best of my knowledge, to have been revived in recent times. The Sturgis-Mackenzie version, though written earlier, was first performed after Zandonai's, and made no attempt to modernize the sentimental homeliness of the original story.

Yet another attraction of *The Cricket* was the fairy element. Compared to the earlier Christmas books, *A Christmas Carol* and *The Chimes*, there is not much supernatural action. Nevertheless, at the end of the first part, or “Chirp,” we read that as John settles down by the fire for the evening, the cricket, the “Genius of his Hearth and Home,” comes out “in fairy shape, into the room, and summoned many forms of Home about him” (211). More importantly, when John sits up all the following night brooding over his wife’s apparent infidelity, “The Cricket on the Hearth came out into the room, and stood in Fairy shape before him. . . . the Presence stood beside him, suggesting his reflections by its power” (248-49). Fairies then come “trooping forth” to keep John’s mind focused on positive images of Dot. The reader does not need to believe in the reality of the fairies, of course; rather, the descriptions fancifully spiritualize what is essentially a process of association. The operatic adapters responded to these passages in strikingly different ways. The Italians, Gallignani and Zandonai, showed no interest in the fairies, and in the crisis scene simply showed John struggling between fond memories and recent suspicions. On the other hand, both the Hungarian-Austrian Goldmark and the British Sturgis and Mackenzie seized the excuse to have a chorus of fairies, and to enlarge the fairy presence in the story.

All the *Cricket* operas can be approached as revealing answers to problems of operatic composition in the countries and periods in which they were produced. (In every case the story can be recognized as a rather unusual choice.) There is no space here for a discussion of the Italian and German versions from this perspective, but I do want to position the English *Cricket on the Hearth* in the complex, divided world of late nineteenth-century British musical theatre. The 1860s had been a decade of what might be called generic meltdown, as the Pyne-Harrison Opera Company collapsed in 1864 and

Britain began to be invaded by French operetta. The previous three decades, one of the most coherent periods in the whole history of British musical theatre, had seen the so-called “romantic ballad opera” established as the standard form of musical-theatrical entertainment. The technical features of this kind of opera have been thoroughly analyzed by George Biddlecombe; suffice it to say here that these operas were semi-serious in general orientation, with stories of love, deception, betrayal and revenge typically given a happy ending, and music that aimed at a sort of reconciliation of Rossinian and Donizettian opera with the British love of the free-standing, strophic song, or “ballad.” They employed a good deal of spoken dialogue. After 1864 there was a watershed that this type of opera did not survive, though the most successful works of the mid-century continued to be revived.⁴ Paul Rodmell has observed that “Few British works were premiered between 1865 and 1882, and the exceptions were all operettas, for instance the earlier works of [Arthur] Sullivan and [Frederic] Cowen’s *Pauline* (1876)” (“Tale of Two Operas” 77). This slightly exaggerates the case. *Pace* Rodmell, *Pauline*, which was presented by the recently founded Carl Rosa Company (created 1873), is not an operetta, but a work generically akin to French *opéra comique*; Cowen’s opera, though, is very much the exception that proves the rule.⁵ In the early 1880s the situation changed, probably, as Rodmell suggests, not so much because of anything that had occurred in Britain, but because Charles Villiers Stanford’s first opera, *The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan*, had proved a success in Germany in 1881. After Stanford’s modest international triumph several British composers followed him into what might loosely be termed “grand opera” (that is, a kind of opera which took its general stylistic orientation from Meyerbeer’s Parisian works), a genre that was starting to feel distinctly old-fashioned, but which still had great cultural prestige. Some

enjoyed moderate success, some none at all, but all proved that the popular audience for musical theatre had decisively gravitated to operetta: this was, after all, the decade of Gilbert and Sullivan’s greatest popularity. Sullivan himself was closely involved with the most ambitious project to establish a new school of “English Grand Opera” (Jacobs 324) in a specially-built Royal English Opera House, but his *Ivanhoe* (1891), though outstandingly successful by the standards of serious opera, was not enough to change the general direction of British musical theatre; the Royal English Opera House was soon sold off to become, ignominiously, a music hall. The ultimate failure of *Ivanhoe*, and Richard D’Oyly Carte’s attendant scheme to put on serious opera for long runs, left open the question dogging British musical theatre since the 1860s: could serious, or even semi-serious, opera recapture part of the audience lost to operetta?

No one better illustrates the contradictions and fractures in the British musical theatre of the late nineteenth-century than the Scottish composer Alexander Mackenzie (1847-1935). “Few lads can have had such exceptional chances of hearing the amount and variety of music as were mine,” he wrote in his autobiography, adding “in Opera alone my schooling was extensive” (*Musician’s Narrative* 34). His recollections fully bear this out. After early experiences of seeing *The Beggar’s Opera* and Bellini’s *Norma* in Edinburgh as a boy of five or six, by the age of twenty, after several years in Germany and several more in London, he had accumulated more opera-going experience than all but a few of his British contemporaries. He was well acquainted with a wide range of British, French, German, and Italian opera, and his autobiography suggests that he was remarkably Catholic in his tastes: anything well done he admired, without troubling himself with questions of whether one kind was better than another. Thus he appreciated everything from Balfe

to Wagner, Offenbach to Verdi. In London he spent several years playing in theatre orchestras, becoming intimately acquainted not only with British operas, but with lighter kinds of musical theatre, variety theatre, and even the emerging music hall culture. Looking back on the 1860s he recalled: “These were the days of rollicking ditties, such as, ‘In the Strand;’ ‘Slap-bang, here we are again;’ ‘The Perfect Cure;’ ‘Champagne Charlie,’ etc., all of which, and much else of a similarly stimulative nature, it was my nightly task to thump out while seated *on the stage*” (58). From the most serious to the most popular theatrical music, the young Mackenzie absorbed it all.

As a composer, Mackenzie’s early efforts were mainly in the field of instrumental music, but in the 1880s he followed Stanford into grand opera with *Colomba* (1883) and *Guillem the Troubadour* (1886). Stephen Banfield characterizes both as “bland” and “eclectic” (64). Despite its lack of individuality, *Colomba* enjoyed about as much success as a serious opera in English, not composed by Sullivan, could achieve, but *Guillem* was “a near-disaster” (White 368), mainly because of a poor libretto. The critical reaction to the latter work, Mackenzie wrote, “deterred me from any further operatic attempts for long” (*Musician’s Narrative* 144). Already, however, he was showing some interest in writing in a more popular style, and had entered into a curious agreement with Lewis Carroll to make an operetta based on *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*: in the end Carroll never supplied a libretto and the project was abandoned (*Musician’s Narrative* 114-15). Not until 1897 would Mackenzie write an operetta. The Gilbert and Sullivan partnership had finally collapsed after *The Grand Duke* (1896), and D’Oyly Carte, who had produced their work for over twenty years, was attempting to put together a new team. Francis C. Burnand was asked to supply a libretto, and Mackenzie, oddly given his lack of experience, was invited to set it. The result was *His*

Majesty, or The Court of Vingolia, which ran for a disappointing 61 performances at the Savoy Theatre in 1897. The critical consensus is that the failure had more to do with the confused and overlong libretto than with Mackenzie’s well-judged music (Gänzl 1:633). Nevertheless, Mackenzie made no further effort in this direction, and turned instead to *The Cricket on the Hearth*. As documented below, this was even less successful than his earlier musical theatre works, however, and Mackenzie again changed direction, going on to write *The Knights of the Road* (1905), a short operetta aimed, astonishingly, at the music hall market (meaning that Mackenzie the composer, uniquely I think, had touched every base in the musical theatre world of his times). There was to be one final, more serious opera, *The Eve of St. John* (1917).⁶

While Mackenzie’s career shows a fascinating oscillation between more serious and more popular forms of musical theatre, his collaborator on *The Cricket on the Hearth*, Julian Sturgis, can be more consistently associated with serious opera, and especially with operas adapted from literary texts. Sturgis (1848-1904) established a reputation as a minor novelist in the late 1870s, and turned to libretto-writing as a sideline. His first was *Nadeshda* (1885), set by Arthur Goring Thomas: a serious opera well received by critics, but not a success with the public. The libretto was adapted from *Nadeshda*, a poem by the Swedish-Finnish poet Johan Ludvig Runeberg. Here it appears Sturgis’s career as a librettist could easily have come to an end, were it not that in 1889 W. S. Gilbert, determined not to write the serious opera that Sullivan was itching to compose, recommended he try Sturgis instead: “The best serious librettist of the day is Julian Sturgis. Why not write a grand opera with him?” (Jacobs 282-83). Reading *Nadeshda* it is genuinely hard to know if Gilbert was serious in his judgment or not. But Sullivan took the

advice, an approach was made, and Sturgis accordingly became the librettist of *Ivanhoe*. Despite the astonishing success of the opera, by the standards of its genre, the libretto was not judged as conducing much to its popularity, and there was no rush to secure Sturgis's services for further operas. Toward the end of the decade he returned to libretto-writing for the last time, producing *Much Ado About Nothing* for Stanford presumably at around the same time as he wrote *The Cricket on the Hearth* for Mackenzie. (Both operas were published, and the former performed, in 1901.) *Much Ado* employs many of Shakespeare's own lines, making Sturgis arguably the first British librettist to reflect something of the tendency toward *Literaturoper* ("literature opera") that was gathering momentum in Europe. It may consequently have been Sturgis who pressed for a *Cricket* opera that for the most part faithfully follows Dickens's own telling of his story.

Putting their careers together, it is not difficult to trace the currents that led Mackenzie and Sturgis to collaborate on *The Cricket on the Hearth*. Mackenzie had tried his hand at both grand opera and Sullivan-style operetta, and had missed the mark, though not by very much, in each case. He was looking for something in between: something more "operatic" than *His Majesty* but of more general appeal than his early operas. An obvious model would have been *Shamus O'Brien*, a lively "light" opera "aimed at the middle-brow theatre-goer" (Rodmell, *Stanford* 188), with which Stanford had finally enjoyed real commercial success in 1896. According to Mackenzie there was another factor at work, too: "it was not quite without an ulterior motive that my fancy turned to thoughts of a lighter genre of composition at this period. I was aware that a mawkishly-morbid, thoroughly un-British style, which I cordially detest, was rapidly influencing the minds of the talented young folk [the Royal Academy students] with whom I was in daily contact"

(*Musician's Narrative* 206). I take this to be a reference to either the French school of Massenet, or the young Italian school (*giovane scuola*) of Mascagni and Puccini, though however interpreted it is a puzzling comment.⁷ Sturgis specialized in literary adaptation, and it can be assumed that he had paid a good deal of attention to the debate over *Ivanhoe*, and been led to reflect on the future direction of British opera. He, too, must have realized that there was no future for operas in the *Ivanhoe* mold (as did Sullivan, incidentally; he never attempted anything like *Ivanhoe* again), and that if serious opera in English was not to be wholly swallowed up by operettas and musicals, and foreign imports, it needed to reinvent itself and find a direction between the creaky portentousness of grand opera and the lively triviality of operetta. According to Mackenzie, he proposed a collaboration to Sturgis, and it was the latter who suggested “a version of *The Cricket on the Hearth* as a promising subject for a wholesome and lively English comic opera” (*Musician's Narrative* 206). (Mackenzie does not state whether they were aware of Goldmark's great success with an opera on the same subject just a few years earlier.) Though Mackenzie's autobiography suggests that the collaboration took place a year or two later, Sturgis had completed the libretto by 19 April 1899.⁸

Given the enormous popularity of Dickens, one of the most widely-read authors in English, Mackenzie's reputation as a leading British composer, and Sturgis's well-known name, there was reason to hope that a Dickens opera would prove successful. In fact, though, the most remarkable fact about the Sturgis-Mackenzie *Cricket on the Hearth* is its almost complete failure. Things started promisingly enough: a bilingual vocal score was published in Leipzig in 1901, and the attractive overture was performed in London in 1902. But no production was forthcoming. According to Mackenzie, “The

Carla Rosa management made an offer for provincial purposes, but would not commit to a London production. I therefore, rightly or wrongly, withheld the opera” (*Musician’s Narrative* 207). It was eventually staged by students of the Royal Academy of Music in 1914, long after Sturgis’s death, for “a week ... of excellent performances (with a double cast)” (*Musician’s Narrative* 246). Corder notes, with poignant reference to the war, that “the male singers were hard to come by” (98). As Mackenzie was the Principal of the Royal Academy, this probably sent out the unfortunate message that *The Cricket* was being performed there because no one else wanted to do it. It was revived for two performances when the Royal Academy celebrated its centenary in 1922 (*Musician’s Narrative* 254). There seems to have been just one subsequent production, at the Glasgow Theatre Royal in 1923. The opera was then forgotten until the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra performed, and recorded, the overture in 1994. This was released on a Hyperion compilation of Mackenzie’s music the following year, to excellent reviews. The influential *Penguin Guide*, for example, reported that “Mackenzie’s ... lyrical gift is quite striking in the jolly, at times Sullivanesque *Cricket on the hearth overture* [sic] (which also shows his deft orchestral skill)” (806).

No doubt the intrinsic dramatic weaknesses of the opera, weaknesses which no amount of good music could redeem, contributed to its failure. These weaknesses will be discussed in a moment. But the performance requirements of the work may also have worked against it, and here a revealing comparison can be made, not so much with *Shamus O’Brien*, but with Sullivan’s *Haddon Hall* (1892). Sullivan wrote this “original English light opera,” as it was billed (Jacobs 340), when in retreat both from Gilbertian operetta and the “grand opera” of *Ivanhoe*—in other words it filled a place in his oeuvre comparable

to that of *The Cricket* in Mackenzie’s. *Haddon Hall* ran for over two hundred performances at the Savoy Theatre, and soon entered the repertoire of semi-professional and amateur companies. The plot is rather thin, and Sydney Grundy’s libretto, with a sort of heightened “Englishness” comparable to that of *The Cricket*, is somewhat clunky—but Grundy gave Sullivan the “human interest” he had long sought, and inspired him to write some melodious, romantic, eminently accessible music. The pros and cons of the two operas, both of which contain plenty of spoken dialogue to carry the plot forward, can be considered rather similar, and *The Cricket* even had the benefit of Dickensian association, so their very different fates are worth reflecting on.

Haddon Hall obviously had two outstanding advantages: Sullivan was by far the biggest name in British musical theatre, and his connection with the Savoy, where he was essentially the “house” composer, meant he was assured a first-class production. But *Haddon Hall* had another advantage, too: as a production guide to English opera pointed out in 1929, “[t]here is plenty of good chorus work, somewhat difficult perhaps, but very attractive” (Page and Billings 164). (The same guide, incidentally, does not list *The Cricket on the Hearth*.) Such “chorus work” not only allowed *Haddon Hall* to “fill” big theatres better, but endeared it to semi-professional and amateur companies, who generally have an enthusiastic chorus, but a shortage of trained principals. There was no intrinsic need for any chorus in a *Cricket on the Hearth* opera, of course—Zandonai’s version made only the briefest use of one⁹—and Mackenzie and Sturgis may have added a fairy choir not so much for artistic reasons as to attract companies with a chorus. But there was no way to give the fairies a very big role in what is otherwise a faithful telling of Dickens’s story. Mackenzie, much more than Sullivan, throws the burden of performance

on his six principals: four men, two women. In terms of principals, *Haddon Hall* requires hardly more: four men, three women. In some ways, then, *The Cricket* sends out rather contradictory messages: it seems, on one hand, suited to the intimacy of small theatres, and the size of small companies, but it demands, on the other hand, the musical resources of a large company. The Carla Rosa company's offer to take it on a provincial tour is a perfect expression of these contradictions. Stephen Banfield did not intend a damaging observation when he described *The Cricket* as a "good vehicle for a student or young professional cast" (64), but this again gestures at the problem described here. In this, as in many other cases, one recognizes that Sullivan had a shrewd grasp of the commercial realities of musical theatre that most of his classically trained contemporaries lacked.

Despite the awkward demands of the Mackenzie-Sturgis *Cricket on the Hearth*, one must assume that if its intrinsic merits were clear it would have been performed sooner, and more often. In fact, as suggested already, it is dramatically weak, and this has a good deal to do with its fidelity to Dickens. Galignani had stuck close to Dickens's development of the story, but he reduced it to operetta proportions, and his version—probably not intended to play for more than an hour—moves along briskly. But Mackenzie and Sturgis clearly wanted a full-length, two-to-two-and-a-half hour opera, and the difficulty they had stretching the material to these dimensions, without adapting the story in the way Goldmark and Zandonai did, is everywhere apparent. Only the fairy chorus is added, but, as just noted, it could not be given much to do, and was probably an ill-advised move anyway, giving the impression that Mackenzie was following Goldmark when fidelity to Dickens was his main claim to originality. The spoken dialogue in the opera was, as much as possible, taken straight from Dickens's novel; to this were added

Sturgis’s “charming and touching lyrics,” as Mackenzie considered them (*Musician’s Narrative* 206).¹⁰

The least satisfactory of the three acts of Mackenzie’s opera is the first. Dickens had divided his story into three parts, or “chirps,” and all the operatic versions more or less follow these basic divisions of the story. In “Chirp the First” Dickens is mainly concerned with establishing the familiar narrative voice he will use to tell his story, and introducing Dot, John, Caleb and Tackleton. The only things that actually “happen” are:

- i) The Peerybingles discover that Tackleton is going to marry May.
- ii) Edward, disguised, is brought into the Peerybingles’ home; his presence seems to disturb Dot briefly.
- iii) Tackleton invites himself to the Plummers’ party the following day.

At the very end, the narrator briefly hints that a “shadow” has fallen across the Peerybingles’ hearth. Any Italian composer would have balked at the idea of generating forty minutes or more of operatic entertainment from such scanty materials. Sturgis and Mackenzie resorted to the device of having each character sing a lengthy introductory number, so that after the opening fairy chorus there is a long series of solos, interspersed with spoken dialogue. Dot sings a tender lullaby; John a rousing carrier’s song which anticipates much of the mood of Vaughan Williams’s first opera, *Hugh the Drover* (“The stars above shine frosty bright,” *et cetera* [41]); Edward a plaintive song about his love of May; Caleb a song about the necessity of having money, and the difficulty of getting it; and Tackleton a slightly sinister comic song about “scrunching” crickets—and rivals. This lengthy series of extended solos

creates an impression of monotony and artificiality, as perhaps Mackenzie came to recognize. The copy of the vocal score now in Cambridge University Library used to belong to the Royal Academy of Music, and it has a considerable number of cuts marked, including the entirety of Caleb's introductory song. It is tempting to think these cuts were made by Mackenzie for the 1914 production.

Dramatically speaking, things get worse before they get better. The finale of Act One begins with a lengthy trio in which Edward, disguised, says goodnight, and Dot and John wish him goodnight in return. Sturgis's lyrics veer toward the downright silly:

Goodnight, fair dreams, and happy rest,
 Health, peace and honour to our guest,
 Goodnight till morning come again
 To light the drowsy window pane. (66-67)

Mackenzie, with misplaced ingenuity, expanded this "goodnight trio" as far as it could possibly go; it occupies an extraordinary eleven pages of the vocal score (60-70). (Edward, of course, is supposed to be as deaf as a post, and one can only smile at the operatic license which allows him to harmonize his part here so well!) The dramatic poverty of this episode—written, it may be noted, at around the same time as Puccini was working on *Tosca*—points not only to Mackenzie's lack of an essentially theatrical temperament, despite his practical experience of theatre, but also to the unsuitability of the largely unadapted *Cricket on the Hearth* as a subject for an opera. With Edward finally gone to bed, the act ends a little more strongly. Left briefly alone, John wonders what had disturbed Dot, and questions whether he was fair to

her in marrying her. She joins him, and they sing of their love for the cricket, “the fairy of our home” (80). The fairy choir joins in, and a mood of connubial fireside bliss is established.

Dickens’s “Chirp the Second” starts by introducing Bertha, then brings the Peerybingles over to the Plummers’ for what is revealed to be a regular event:

[Dot says] “I declared I wouldn’t go to Bertha’s without the Veal and Ham-Pie and things, and the bottles of Beer, for any money. Regularly once a fortnight ever since we have been married, John, have we made our little Pic-Nic there. If anything was to go wrong with it, I should almost think we were never to be lucky again.”

“It was a kind thought in the first instance,” said the Carrier: “and I honour you for it, little woman.” (225-26)

An interesting scene ensues. There is much Dickensian heartiness and festivity, yet this is constantly undercut by a whole series of dark undercurrents: Tackleton’s suspiciousness and malice; May’s awkwardness and embarrassment; Dot’s unhappiness that her friend should be marrying Tackleton, and anxiety for Edward; Bertha’s heartbreak; Mrs. Fielding’s pride. At the end occurs the story’s crisis: Edward (his identity still unknown to the reader) meets Dot in Tackleton’s “ware-room” (242), and briefly removes his disguise; Tackleton sees them together, and with malicious glee points them out to John. For any adapter, keeping the elements of hearty festivity and underlying tension in play at the same time is a considerable challenge. Gallignani made no attempt to do so, and instead chose to contrast a scene of the utmost jollity with John’s shattering discovery. Zandonai, by contrast,

conjured a dark, edgy scene with no room for Dickensian cheer. Goldmark, having chosen to drop the characters of Caleb and Bertha, did not treat the scene at all.

Sturgis and Mackenzie clearly aimed at something of the mixed mode found in Dickens, though the style of music they had chosen, with songs taking precedence over the rapid exchanges preferred in most modern operas, made it difficult to effect. A mood of hearty festivity is established as John and Dot enter the Plummers' house carrying a hamper:

A portly hamper now we bring
 And both together blythely sing,
 Good folk, good cheer!
 On your tablecloth we spread
 Beef and pie and homemade bread,
 And amber beer,
 And hail with happy songs of praise
 This greatest day of all the days
 That makes the year. (113-15)

The cheerful atmosphere is continued as Tilly Slowboy, the Peerybingles' servant, sings a comic song. The tone shifts, however, when Dot starts singing a plaintive little pastoral number, prompting Tackleton to join in with:

Where are your gay young lovers now?
 They toil for pence or beg for bread:
 And all forgot the lover's vow,
 And some are lost and some are dead. (128-29)

(The first line is adapted from Dickens, where Tackleton asks rhetorically “Where are your gay young bridegrooms now?” [232].) Edward contributes a reflection on the unfaithfulness of women when their lovers are absent, then he, Dot and Tackleton sing together:

The visions, the visions of the golden prime
Are brief as dews, as dews on upland lawn:
The singer dies before his rhyme,
The lover fleets with flying dawn. (129-30)

At this point it is easy to feel that the dramatic situation is being ignored in favor of purely musical considerations. These words are appropriate to the young, romantic Edward, and it is not inappropriate for Dot, who knows who he is, and sympathizes with him, to join in his lament. But for Tackleton the language and sentiment are totally out of character. Operatic convention would allow him to sing completely different words at the same time, and it seems odd that this opportunity to distinguish him from Edward was not taken. This points to a larger problem: Sturgis and Mackenzie obviously imagined this scene as one of festive jollity with some pastoral lament to express Edward’s injured feelings. No separate sound world is created for Tackleton, who is therefore not only characterized as jolly, and briefly here as a forsaken shepherd, but becomes part of a harmonious group, where the story demands disharmony. Dickens memorably describes Tackleton in this episode as having the “sensation of being as perfectly at home, and as unquestionably in his own element, as a fresh young salmon on the top of the Great Pyramid” (230).

The dramatic mistake just detailed was certainly no accidental oversight,

because it is repeated a little later. After the trio is complete, Caleb is invited to sing, and after a little persuasion sings a song about how grief can be overcome with laughter and drinking. Sturgis here improved a hint in Dickens, who makes several references to Caleb singing “a Bacchanalian song, something about a Sparkling Bowl” (218). Edward then sings a song “of age and youth” (137) intended to send a clear message to Tackleton and May. Having politely listened to the end, Bertha briefly introduces an unexpected note of real drama when she suddenly enquires, singing:

Whose voice is this who sang that song[?]

’Twas like my brother Edward’s voice. (141)

Dot, quick to react, immediately calls for “more singing!” and leads John, Edward and Bertha in a song which can again be described as essentially pastoral in a Victorian drawing room sort of way (“The lark on his breast takes the glory of morning” *et cetera* [143]). In fact, after the immediate crisis—and consequent rationale for more singing—has passed, one’s earlier suspicion that Mackenzie is conceiving this act more as a Victorian music party than a scene of simmering tensions only just kept in check is largely confirmed. It is certainly not the case that an opera reliant on songs is inevitably undramatic—*Carmen* alone proves otherwise; it is just that Mackenzie, perhaps misled by Sturgis, seems far more intent on writing nice songs than on interpreting the dramatic situation. After “The lark on his breast” ends, Bertha, May, Dot, Edward, John, Caleb, and Tackleton all join in a chorus:

Let friend drink to friend, let friend drink to friend

Till our hearts all are glowing,
 And thoughts are all winged like a bird that is free
 O friend I will pledge thee, o friend I will pledge thee,
 O love there’s no knowing,
 How glad in a moment we mortals may be. (147-50)

Once again it feels wrong that Tackleton, who is no one’s friend, should join in this with the others.

Toward the end of this central act the music starts to be used for better effect though. After a general toast is drunk to Tackleton and May’s marriage, Edward—surely centre stage far too much given his assumed character!—sings a sarcastic song about “December and sweet May” (156). He then tells Dot to follow him out, and leaves the room. At this point Caleb, true to his character in Dickens, starts singing his drinking song again, and Mackenzie, who to this point has seemed more like a talented song writer than a composer with theatrical instincts, pulls off a powerful *coup de théâtre*. It is as Caleb sings that Tackleton draws John to the window and asks, in agitated recitative:

Is that your deaf old man?
 Is that your ancient guest? (161-62)

Caleb’s song continues for another eighteen bars, with John silent, before Tackleton, determined to get a reaction, emphatically speaks the words “Look there” (163). The song still continues as John, again speaking rather than singing, says “Leave me alone, I tell you! I must have time to think” (163-64). Tackleton is obviously delighted, and shows it by loudly joining in with Caleb’s song:

We'll drown it in the bowl my boys,
 We'll drown it in the bowl. (164)

The chorus is repeated again, still louder, as John exclaims “God help me!” (165). Thus Act Two ends on a note of high drama, the very banality of Caleb’s song serving most effectively to heighten the devastating revelation.

Little happens in Dickens’s “Chirp the Third” as only two actions are needed to resolve everything: Edward must rescue May from Tackleton, and reveal who he really is to John. The central movement of this “Chirp” is essentially internal as John, with the help of the fairies, moves from vengeful jealousy to compassion and resignation, thus proving that he deserves his happiness with Dot. Sturgis and Mackenzie reintroduce their fairy chorus at the start of the third act: the “Cricket-fairy” of the home is tempted away to fairy revels, but elects to stay: “I must linger here / To teach man’s heart / By love or fear” (170). Whereas in the Italian operas John expresses his feelings in a long monologue, here they are initially expressed purely through his actions (as in the novel he picks up his gun, and so on), then he is lulled to sleep by the Cricket-fairy and presented with a series of endearing images of Dot, who, the fairies assure him, cannot be false. As dawn arrives, the fairies vanish, and John wakes up and sings a “Morning Hymn” which includes the prayer “God cleanse us from all wrath and sin / That that [sic] high peace may venture in” (187). This first part of Act Three extends the advances made at the end of Act Two towards a true integration of the musical and the dramatic. But after this Sturgis and Mackenzie seem to have run out of musical ideas, or ideas for music. The subsequent business with Tackleton and Dot is conducted in spoken dialogue, and the next musical piece is a lively “Wedding Bell Song” that Dot sings to welcome May’s wedding—when John is out of

the house. Immediately before the finale Edward is heard singing, offstage, a nostalgically patriotic song about “green and pleasant England” (199). It is recognized by Caleb, and the Plummer family is reunited. The finale itself is a song about the inevitable coming of happiness, sung by all the main characters, including Tackleton, with the chorus:

So fairy fair
 Be it thy care
 To keep all ills away,
 And fill the night with dreams of light
 Till dawns the happy day. (206)

So ends the first English Dickens opera. It should be obvious from this brief analysis that only Act Two was conceived in more or less continuously musical terms; the other acts relied heavily on spoken dialogue to establish situations and relationships, and to advance the plot. Much of the music in all three acts has an inescapably incidental feel.

Opera is, of course, a hybrid art form, and can be evaluated from dramatic, musical, and literary points of view. The most enduringly successful operas tend to score highly in all three areas, though sometimes an opera strong in just two will attain general popularity. In the case of the Mackenzie-Sturgis *Cricket on the Hearth* the only element that really impresses is the music, and even this assertion needs to be qualified with the reservation that it is in a highly conservative style, tending constantly towards detachable songs and closed forms at a time when European opera in general was trying to escape them. But Mackenzie genuinely loved Dickens, and he responded to the homely warmth and romantic charm of *The Cricket on the Hearth* with music

in the same spirit, even if he was seldom able to direct the flow of that music along genuinely dramatic lines: the opera is now more likely to be recorded than staged. Sturgis's lyrics are frequently stilted, as the passages quoted here demonstrate, and too often they seem quaintly "literary" in a way that jars with the much more down to earth spoken dialogue. And crucially, neither Sturgis nor Mackenzie was able to conjure anything more than isolated moments of real drama out of Dickens's story, unlike Goldmark and Zandonai and their librettists. The English *Cricket on the Hearth* is a collection of pleasant scenes with very little dramatic momentum. Though historically interesting, as the first English Dickens opera, and musically attractive, it established no convincing foundation on which future composers could build, and a full half century would pass before a fully satisfactory, and very different English Dickens opera was composed: Arthur Benjamin's *A Tale of Two Cities*, one of the winners of the 1951 Festival of Britain opera competition.

Appendix: An Abandoned English *Cricket on the Hearth* Opera

At some point in the mid-1890s Francis C. Burnand wrote a libretto based on *The Cricket on the Hearth*. Very little is known of this, but B. W. Matz, editor of *The Dickensian*, later reported, in an obituary notice, that "Sir Francis C. Burnand prepared an operatic book from *The Cricket on the Hearth*, for which Edward Solomon was to write the music. Owing to the death of the latter it was abandoned" (159). Solomon died in 1895. I have attempted to trace Burnand's manuscript, but without success. Some idea of the work's style and intended audience can be obtained from *Pickwick* (1889), a "dramatic cantata," an earlier collaboration between Burnand and Solomon. There is of course an intriguing connection with Mackenzie here, because, as noted above,

he had collaborated with Burnand on *His Majesty* in 1897. In subsequently working with Mackenzie, it seems likely that Burnand would have mentioned his abandoned *Cricket* opera, but there appears to be no record of such a conversation.

Notes

- 1 Another relevant factor is that Dickens’s endings often seem hurried, as a lot of loose ends get tied up in a few pages. Opera cannot readily accommodate so many late disclosures, and tends to prefer long, drawn-out endings.
- 2 Bledsoe lists the Julian Edwards (composer) and Stanislaus Strange (writer) *Dolly Varden* (1901) as a Dickens opera in the usually reliable *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. In fact this “Original Comic Opera,” as it was billed, took little more than the heroine’s name from Dickens (*Barnaby Rudge*). As Gänzl says, “[i]t had very little to do with its professed heroine, being more of a mish-mash of several old English pieces including *The Country Girl* [sic; actually *The Country Wife*]” (1:833).
- 3 The first *Christmas Carol* opera to be produced was composed by Edwin Coleman and broadcast by the BBC on 24 December 1962 (Guida 190). Bernard Herrmann’s earlier musical version for television, *A Christmas Carol* (1954), has sometimes been described as an opera, but can be considered so only if the definition of the genre is greatly stretched. Essentially a TV show with atmospheric background music and a handful of songs, it is nothing like Herrmann’s true opera, *Wuthering Heights*, composed between 1943 and 1951. Two *Carol* operas were premiered in 1963: Ján Cikker’s *Mr Scrooge* and Lino Liviabella’s *Canto di Natale*. Around 1980 a second group of *Carol* operas was composed (all entitled *A Christmas Carol*): by Norman Kay (1978? 1980?), Thea Musgrave (1979), Stephen Tosh (1980), and Gregory Sandow (1981). (The Kay opera is dated 1978 by Guida [203-4] but 1980 by Barnes [104]). The remarkable fact that three *Carol* operas were premiered in 1962-63, and four in 1978-81, appears to be pure coincidence.
- 4 The career which best reflects the seismic shock experienced by British opera in the mid-1860s is that of George Alexander Macfarren (1813-87). He was at the height of his powers after the very successful *Robin Hood* (1860), and 1864 saw the premieres

of two full-length, critically acclaimed operas: *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Helvellyn*. But in the remaining twenty-three years of his life Macfarren wrote just one further opera, *Kenilworth* (1880?), never performed. Macfarren's interest in treating British subject matter, unusual at the time, makes him a noteworthy precursor of the later Mackenzie.

5 In his later *Charles Villiers Stanford* Rodmell repeats the substance of this statement but drops the reference to operetta (83, n. 36).

6 In his autobiography Mackenzie mentions some abandoned operatic projects, but does not date them (243).

7 For a sketch of musical life at the Royal Academy at this juncture see Corder 88-90. It is all but impossible to detect any "mawkishly morbid" influences in Corder's list of works performed and composed. I suspect Mackenzie's remark was a disgruntled comment, from the vantage point of the 1920s, on the enduring international success and influence of Puccini's operas, which no British opera, of course, had come even remotely close to rivaling. Puccini has often been described as both "mawkish" and "morbid": Joseph Kerman, to take just one example, refers disapprovingly to "Puccini's eternal mawkish serenade" (255).

8 Royal Academy of Music MS 1249. This is a typescript libretto inscribed by Sturgis to Mackenzie.

9 In Zandonai's opera a Christmas hymn is heard offstage at the very end.

10 No libretto was published, and the vocal score, quoted here, does not contain the spoken dialogue (except where it is accompanied by music). As far as I am aware, that can only be found in the manuscript materials held at the Royal Academy of Music.

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