

RETROSPECT OPERA



Solomon & Burnand *Pickwick*

www.retrospectopera.org.uk

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Newsletter #1, June 2016

Full steam ahead!

Recording is scheduled for the 12th and 13th September, at the National Opera Studio, Wandsworth, London.

Remember, Pickwick Club members (those who've been kind enough to donate £100 or more) are entitled to attend the recording sessions – contact us for more information.

Simon Butteriss is singing Pickwick, Pamela Helen Stephen is singing Mrs Bardell, Toby Stafford Allen is singing the rôle of the Baker, and our pianist is Stephen Higgins.

We're in the midst of auditions for Mrs Bardell's son (sung by a treble), and we'll probably have made our choice within a couple of weeks.

Simon Butteriss is one of the most highly acclaimed G&S baritones of today. He presented a fascinating series of radio programmes on George Grossmith last Christmas, and is an expert on this repertoire. He's also extremely funny! Pamela Helen Stephen is singing in this year's Proms (23 July – Michael Tippett's *A Child of Our Time*) and her repertoire ranges from Juno in Handel's *Semele*, to Carmen, to numerous characters in Britten operas, and to G&S. Toby Stafford Allen has also performed at the Proms, in *The Yeomen of the Guard*, with a repertoire extending to Schaubard in *La Bohème*, and beyond. Our pianist, Stephen Higgins, is also well known as a conductor and music director. He's been part of the music staff for English National Opera for six years, so has a very clear background in opera.

We're very privileged to have such a cast singing for us.

Pickwick is less than an hour long, so we have room for something else on the CD! The 'filler' work will be George Grossmith's *Cups and Saucers* of 1876.

Many of you will know of Grossmith (1847-1912), who is now most remembered as the star of a whole series of Gilbert & Sullivan productions, including his creation of the role of Ko-Ko in *The Mikado*. But he was also a skilled writer and composer in his own right, and *Cups and Saucers* is the most brilliant of his many 'musical sketches'. It is a hilarious spoof on the contemporary British fashion for all things Japanese.

There are just two characters: a British man and woman, who both collect Japanese pottery. It turns out, however, that the man is in fact producing fake 'Japanese' pottery because of Japan's inability to respond to the massive demands of the Western market. The work ends with a duet in which the pair decide to get married and live in Japan, where they will continue to produce ceramics!

The rôles will be sung by Simon and Pamela.

We're delighted to announce that the Inchcape Foundation have awarded us a grant towards *Pickwick* (they also gave us a grant towards *The Boatswain's Mate*), for which we are extremely grateful.

We're also delighted to have the enthusiastic support of Kurt Gänzl for our recording of *Pickwick*. Kurt, as many of you will know, is recognised as the number one authority on the history of light musical theatre, and is the author of such near-legendary reference works as *The British Musical Theatre* (1986) and *The*

Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre (1994; greatly expanded 2001).

We knew that Kurt knew almost everything about operettas and musicals; what we didn't know is that he once actually drafted a book on Edward Solomon! Kurt is firmly of the opinion that from the time of *Billee Taylor* (1880) – 'the biggest thing since *HMS Pinaford*' – until his death early in 1895, the British critics regarded Solomon as second only to Sir Arthur Sullivan in the field of British comic opera. It's all the more remarkable then that Solomon's music has never been recorded before! Whether Kurt's book on Solomon will ever see the light of day we don't know.

But we're excited to be able to announce that a very abridged version of that book will be included in the booklet accompanying our recording of *Pickwick*.

We're extremely close now to releasing our first CD, Ethel Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate*. You'll be able to obtain copies direct from our website, but we'll also be selling through Amazon. Please email Valerie on contact@retrospectopera.org.uk if you want to be put on the list for notification when we've actually released it. The double CD also includes Dame Ethel conducting extracts from the opera (recorded in 1916), and also her overture to *The Wreckers* (recorded in 1930).

Over ninety of you have donated to *Pickwick* so far, and we really appreciate your generosity!

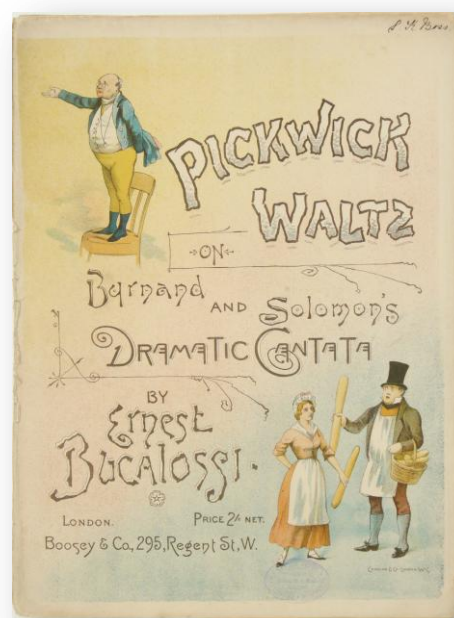
Thanks to all of you, and the Inchcape foundation, we're now about two-thirds of the way to our funding target. But we do need to raise quite a bit more! The surge of support from Dickens lovers, and Gilbert & Sullivan lovers, that we'd rather hoped for, has so far turned out more of a ripple. But we hope that that ripple can yet show surge-like tendencies!

The difficulty for us as fundraisers is always knowing who to approach: it's often the case that people who, on paper, would seem almost certain to have a strong interest, show no

interest at all, while people who do not obviously look like supporters come in really generously. If you have friends, relatives or colleagues likely to be interested in *Pickwick*, please do encourage them to support the project! We'll be very happy to send you some flyers if that would help. And we're always very happy to write to anyone recommended by existing supporters.

One of the tricky things is knowing what to call *Pickwick*, which its creators described (following the Gilbert & Sullivan *Trial by Jury*) as a 'dramatic cantata'. A considerable number of people have said things along the lines of 'I love Dickens but I can't stand opera!' Some have even dismissed Burnand and Solomon's charming little work as 'esoteric' – a word we doubt they would use for Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* or Leslie Bricusse's *Scrooge*.

For people with an existing knowledge of the Savoy operas, you can call *Pickwick* a short comic opera, or operetta, à la Gilbert & Sullivan. For anyone else, we strongly advise calling it a musical – it is fun, accessible, tuneful musical theatre in the tradition leading to *Oliver!* and *Scrooge*. Nothing for anyone to feel daunted by!



A piano solo version, by Ernest Bucalossi, of the Waltz from Pickwick, probably published in 1889



With thanks from the team at Retrospect Opera:

David, Andy, and Valerie