

# RETROSPECT OPERA



Solomon & Burnand *Pickwick*

[www.retrospectopera.org.uk](http://www.retrospectopera.org.uk)

Registered Charity no. 1164150

Newsletter #2, September 2016

**We're recording next week, at the National Opera Studio,  
Wandsworth, London!**

It seems a long time, in many ways, since we started fundraising for *Pickwick* back in January and we've certainly had our ups and downs since then. But August has been a particularly good month: whereas our first *Pickwick* newsletter, in June, reported over 90 donations, this second one now reports **over 130!** We are especially grateful for large donations from the Pickwick Pubs chain in Switzerland and the City Pickwick Club in London, which have taken us to 90% of our funding target. We feel we're on the home straight!

In our optimistic early days we hoped it might be practical to put on a semi-staged performance of *Pickwick* in London. It's looking unlikely, but we haven't totally given up on the idea. However, do remember that **Pickwick Club members and Friends are warmly invited to the recording sessions in London on 12th and 13th September (*really soon!*)**. This will be a wonderful opportunity to see the music performed and to meet the cast. **Anyone who has donated £100 or more is eligible and other supporters are most welcome to upgrade** for what promises to be a fascinating and enjoyable experience!

**Similarly, anyone who has donated less than £50, but now feels they would like to have their name displayed in the booklet of this**

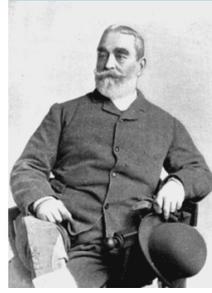
**historic release, is warmly invited to upgrade.** For supporters outside Britain, the pound is now very cheap!

*To donate to Pickwick:*  
[www.retrospectopera.org.uk/Donate.html](http://www.retrospectopera.org.uk/Donate.html)

Many of you have a particular interest in Dickens and/or the *Pickwick Papers* legacy and we've been promoting *Pickwick* as "the first great Charles Dickens musical." Some of you have been asking what happened to the Dickens musical after *Pickwick*, which predates Lionel Bart's celebrated *Oliver!* by some eight decades.

The short answer is: *not that much*.

A longer answer could begin by pointing out that in the nineteenth century *Pickwick Papers* inspired more music than any other Dickens novel. Burnand and Solomon's *Pickwick* was not so much a starting point as the conclusion of a process of trying to reduce the encyclopaedic expanse of the novel to a manageable size for stage representation. We judge them to have succeeded exceptionally well!



*Solomon (left) and Burnand*

Burnand and Solomon did not want to stop here, though. The published libretto of *Pickwick* hints unmistakably at a planned sequel, featuring other characters from *The Pickwick Papers*, and Burnand and Solomon actually commenced work on a musical version of Dickens's "Christmas book," *The Cricket on the Hearth*. Sadly, these projects were aborted after the tragically early death of Solomon on 22 January 1895. Had he lived, it seems likely he and Burnand would have founded a distinctive "school" of operetta versions of Dickens's stories. So when you listen to *Pickwick*, keep in mind that its creators were trying to develop a style of popular musical theatre that could be employed for other Dickens stories too.

*Pickwick* did inspire some copycat works developed from episodes in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Oliver Twist*, but none of these were remotely as successful as their model. And with these, British attempts at musical versions of Dickens largely ran out of steam.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Dickens musical effectively emigrated to America and the preferred text for musical treatment changed to *A Christmas Carol*. The first of these musical *Carols* was by Sarah Games Clark and Bryceson Treharne and published in 1936. Given the long chronological gap, and the fact that Games Clark and Treharne almost certainly knew nothing of the nineteenth-century British efforts, this rather feeble *Christmas Carol* has a claim to be the first "modern" Dickens musical. The first important American Dickens musicals, however, were the Maxwell Anderson / Bernard Herrmann *Christmas Carol* of 1954 and the Janice Torre / Fred Spielman *The Stingiest Man in Town* of 1956. Between *Pickwick* of 1889 and the

1954 *Christmas Carol* there is nothing of comparable quality in the musical tradition, though several good Dickens operas appeared in these decades.



*Harry Secombe and company in the 1963 Pickwick*

Momentum shifted firmly back to Britain with the appearance of *Oliver!* in 1960. One of the immediate fruits was *Pickwick* of 1963, a large-scale musical with book by Wolf Mankowitz, music by Cyril Ornadel, and lyrics by Leslie Bricusse. In this version, Mr Pickwick was sung by Harry Secombe who became, for a generation, by far the best known embodiment of Dickens's comic hero on stage.



On 13 August Retrospect Opera maintained a stall at the G&S Memorabilia Fair, part of the wonderful annual Gilbert and Sullivan Festival at Harrogate. We sold CDs of our first CD, Ethel Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate*, and promoted interest in Edward Solomon and *Pickwick*. This gave us a chance to meet a number of our supporters and we had some great conversations. Many of the other people who came by the stall had not heard of Solomon, despite having spent (in some cases) decades listening to Gilbert and Sullivan. This was a powerful reminder of how far Solomon has fallen into obscurity – in his own time he was judged second only to Sullivan in the realm of English comic opera. The onus is very much on us to make a case for him!

We can now announce that, having auditioned several boys, all of whom were excellent, we've invited **Alessandro MacKinnon** to sing the rôle of Mrs Bardell's son.

However, we're very sorry to say that Pamela Helen Stephen is ill and unable to sing Mrs Bardell – but **Gaynor Keeble** has stepped in at short notice and says she's really looking forward to it. Gaynor has sung rôles with Welsh National Opera, English Touring Opera, D'Oyly Carte, the Royal Opera House, and many others. She has a wide repertoire, with a particular affinity for comic rôles.

Apart from our own recording projects, we're interested in publicising all efforts to develop appreciation of British opera and operetta. We were excited to hear recently of plans to record John Joubert's *Jane Eyre* – an opera composed in the 1980s – this October. There is a Just Giving page set up for this and contributions, however small, are warmly solicited: see <https://campaign.justgiving.com/charity/eso2006/janeeyre>

It'll be clear from the note about Harrogate that our first CD, Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate*, is out – it was released on August 1. It's available for purchase either direct through our website, [www.retrospectopera.org.uk/CD\\_Sales.html](http://www.retrospectopera.org.uk/CD_Sales.html), (£14.95, post free in the UK), or through Amazon UK ([www.amazon.co.uk/Boatswains-Mate-Ethel-Smyth/dp/B01HIJX83Q](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Boatswains-Mate-Ethel-Smyth/dp/B01HIJX83Q) or search for Smyth + Boatswain's Mate), at £15.95. You can also write to us at Retrospect Opera, 82 Queens Road, Cheadle Hulme, Cheshire SK8 5HH, UK – cheques (in

sterling, drawn on a British bank please) are very acceptable!

There's a small piece about the recording in the latest BBC Music Magazine.

Sales are already proving steady, which is really encouraging. We're hoping to make it available through Amazon.com and some of the European Amazons, but Amazon don't make it easy to do things like that, and we may not be able to. But it's still possible to buy through Amazon.co.uk wherever you are in the world, and we can of course ship anywhere, no matter how you wish to purchase.



We are extending into the world of social media! We're now on Twitter @RetrospectOpera – if you do such things (and we know that many of you do) please 'follow' us. We're already on Facebook. We find that some sales have come through such routes, so it's clearly useful. 'Re-tweet' and 'like' us as much as you want!

Finally, Retrospect Opera is delighted to welcome **Christopher Wiley** as our new Publicity Officer. Chris is a senior lecturer in Music at the University of Surrey, and an acknowledged expert on Ethel Smyth. He wrote one of the essays in the booklet for our CD of Smyth's *The Boatswain's Mate* and is very much looking forward to becoming more involved.



*With thanks from the team at  
Retrospect Opera:  
David, Andy, Valerie and Chris*