



The Gondoliers or *The King of Barataria* Gilbert & Sullivan

Italy

In 1889 Sir Arthur Sullivan took a holiday. He went to Monte Carlo, where he lost a packet at the roulette tables, and moved on to Venice. There he relaxed. The Italian sun, the beautiful city, the long lazy days on the lagoon in a gondola, eased the strain of overwork and he came home, eager to write a new comic opera. That meant a libretto by William Gilbert. He and Gilbert had already written eleven operas together, most of them huge box office hits, and the two men were household names. (We still call their shows 'Gilbert and Sullivan', though nowadays people can't always remember who wrote the music and who the words). Sullivan returned anxious for a new story and was delighted when Gilbert offered him one set in Venice. It completely caught his mood, and the eventual opera, *The Gondoliers*, turned out to be the sunniest, happiest, opera he ever wrote.

Never Never Land

Gilbert too seemed to relax as he wrote the words for *The Gondoliers*. He filled the stage with flower girls, gondoliers and two pairs of lovers so alike you can hardly tell them apart. Nothing seems to trouble these fortunate Venetians. Grand Inquisitors loom up from the shadows, honeymoons get interrupted, massacres and kidnappings happen off stage, but nobody turns a hair – there's always time a dance, or another tenor aria. Even so, Gilbert, had intended to give the show a little more bite. He knew that Venice was unique amongst European states for being a republic and he wanted a chorus of 'red hot republicans' on stage. But Sullivan wasn't in the mood, and political satire took a back seat as the characters beamed at the audience and sung yet another lilting tune.

Before the Show

In spite of the laid back atmosphere, *Gondoliers* has got a plot and, to understand it, it's helpful to know some Baratarian¹ history. Twenty years before the start of Act One the King of Barataria married his infant son to the equally infant daughter of a Spanish nobleman, the Duke of Plaza-Toro. The marriage remained a state secret (and the babies hadn't got a clue what was going on anyway). Shortly after the ceremony the King became a Wesleyan Methodist 'of the most bigoted and persecuting sort'². The Inquisition, horrified at the thought of a Methodist Barataria, kidnapped the King's son, took him to Catholic Italy and left him in the care of a Venetian gondolier, Baptisto Palmieri. It seems that Baptisto added the Prince to a cot already occupied by

¹ The opera's subtitle is 'The King of Barataria'. The island of Barataria is entirely imaginary.

² In the relative religious calm of the late nineteenth century Gilbert would have expected his audience to smile at this remark: Methodists share with Quakers the reputation for being the mildest, most peaceful, Christians going.

his own small son - and muddled the children up at once. At all events, he never knew which kid was which, so he raised them both as gondoliers, and called them Marco and Giuseppe.

For twenty years Baratavia simmered with rebellion and, two weeks before the opera, the Methodist monarch and his Wesleyan court were all assassinated in a revolution. At which point the Head of the Inquisition (the Grand Inquisitor) moved swiftly to Venice, hoping to find the young King, re-unite him with his wife, and get the royal couple to Baratavia as soon as possible. But, to his exasperation, he found Baptisto dead (of drink) and was left with the impossible task of identifying the true King.

The Cast

The Gondoliers of the title are **Marco** (tenor) and **Giuseppe** (baritone), sons (apparently) of Baptisto Palmieri and both enthusiastic republicans. They are in love with **Gianetta** (soprano) and **Tessa** (mezzo-soprano), and marry the girls half way through Act One. This is unfortunate because of course one of them is the King of Baratavia and has unwittingly committed bigamy. (Baptisto never thought to tell his lads about the Royal muddle). To make matters worse, the Plaza-Toro family, arrive hot foot from Spain, anxious to claim the husband of their daughter. They are **The Duke of Plaza-Toro** (baritone), the **Duchess of Plaza-Toro** (contralto), their daughter **Casilda** (soprano) and their 'suite', the drummer boy **Luiz** (tenor). They are received by the **Grand Inquisitor**, Don Alhambra del Bolero (bass baritone), who has had the bright idea of summoning the King's elderly nanny (**Inez**, contralto) to come and identify her former charge. Unfortunately, she lives in the mountains round Cordova and takes all opera to arrive.

The Story

Act I

The first act is set in Venice. Gilbert wanted his characters to enter and exit by gondola and called for a backdrop showing the Venetian lagoon, or at least a canal, with a row of prop gondolas waiting in the wings.

Getting Married

Some flower girls are plaiting flowers and singing about the handsome gondoliers, Marco and Giuseppe, with whom they are all in love. The young men row in and greet the girls in Italian. (This is one of the few occasions in Gilbert and Sullivan when the words are in a foreign language, fortunately they're not very important, "Good day! What nice flowers!" about sums it up). The gondoliers agree to play blind man's buff with the girls and marry the ones they catch, which sounds ridiculous, until you realise that Marco and Giuseppe have every intention of cheating: they catch Gianetta and Tessa.

Complications

Everybody exits as another gondola arrives containing the Duke and Duchess of Plaza-Toro, Casilda their daughter, and Luiz, their 'private drum'. They've come to find the King of Barataria and the Duke tells his daughter, for the first time, about her royal marriage. To his surprise, the only response he gets is a wail: "But I've nothing to wear! We're practically penniless!" But, the moment her parents are offstage, Casilda falls, with genuine emotion, into the arms of Luiz. He is the son of Inez, the nurse of the kidnapped King, and knows all about the missing child; he is also secretly engaged to Casilda and is as appalled as she is at the news.

Clearing things up

The Plaza-Toros re-appear with the Grand Inquisitor who reassures the family that there is no doubt at all about where the King was left, or who he was left with, or how he got muddled up. In fact, "In the entire annals of our history, there is no circumstance so entirely free from all manner of doubt whatsoever..." Which isn't much comfort to Casilda. In the meantime, he intends to send Luiz to find his mother and (here Don Alhambra looks very Inquisitorial), "if she finds any difficulty in making up her mind, the persuasive influence of the torture chamber will jog her memory."

A proposition

The stage clears as Marco, Giuseppe, their brides and a chorus of flower girls and gondoliers enter after the double wedding. Tessa sings "When a merry maiden marries" (a song that practically sums up the beguiling sunny atmosphere of the show) and even the appearance of the Grand Inquisitor doesn't damp the young peoples' spirits: in fact Giuseppe slaps him on the back and tells him to clear off. Don Alhambra is greatly offended and the matters are not improved by Giuseppe boasting about his Republican dad and lecturing him on the equality of man. But the Inquisitor has a trick up his sleeve. "Dear me, how unfortunate," he says, "one of you may be Baptisto's son, but the other is no less a personage than the only son of the late King of Barataria..." "WHAT?!" say everyone. "But as you're both Republicans, of course you'll abdicate at once." At which point the gondoliers drop their republican principles at the speed of light. "Well," says Giuseppe, "When I say I detest kings, I mean I detest *bad* kings..." And with that clearly understood, the gondoliers agree to go to Barataria and reign jointly, until it can be worked out which of them is the real King. There is only one snag, ladies are not admitted.

Bachelor Kings

There is general dismay and, though the men are still determined to go to their new kingdom, we get a sequence of touching farewells as the couples say goodbye. The Grand Inquisitor slips away, the embargo has been imposed to clear the way for Casilda, but he obviously feels this isn't the time to tell the chaps about their Queen.

Democratic Kings

In come the rest of the gondoliers, deeply suspicious about Marco and Giuseppe's good fortune. However our heroes have had time to think things through and offer their friends positions in a kingdom in which everybody will be a nobleman,

"The aristocrat who banks with Coutts,
The aristocrat who hunts and shoots,
The aristocrat who cleans our boots,
They all shall be equal be!"

With that clearly understood, the men clamber on to another of Gilbert's prop boats, an 'Xebeque', and sail off to Barataria – leaving the girls behind.

Act II Barataria

The curtain rises on Marco and Giuseppe, sitting on their thrones, busily polishing their crown and sceptre. They are surrounded by courtiers (all ex-gondoliers) and it becomes quite apparent that the only people who do a stroke of work in the palace are the Kings themselves. However, they seem to be enjoying themselves, and Giuseppe sings a patter song about the life of a working monarch. (Patter songs are a feature of Gilbert and Sullivan, they are set to an infectious rhythm and so delicately scored that you can hear every word.) There is only one fly in the ointment, the wives they have left behind, and Marco sings a pleasant tenor aria "Take a pair of sparkling eyes" as he daydreams about Gianetta.

A Surprise Visit

At which point, enter the entire female chorus. They've been hanging about in Venice and couldn't bear to wait another moment, so they've borrowed a boat – and here they are. (History doesn't relate how they sailed it, or how far Barataria is from the mainland). Tessa and Gianetta rush forward, and the Kings immediately invite everybody to a celebratory dance and banquet. They break into the dance at once, a rather exhausting cachucha³, only to break off as the Grand Inquisitor makes a surprise appearance.

A Reality Check

Don Alhambra looks with disapproval at the retreating court and reprimands the Kings for dancing with servants. "I saw a groom dancing," he says, "and a footman!" "Yes," says Marco, "that's the Lord High Footman." The Don is not impressed, and tells the Kings about an earlier monarch who tried to run his country on republican principles, and failed miserably. The story is told to a lively tune in which Sullivan had a lot of fun illustrating the words. Listen out for a hornpipe as Don Alhambra describes the sea teeming with admirals, and the Scottish reel that accompanies the Scotch drink, 'toddy'. Having brought the Kings to their senses, he reveals the real reason for his visit. The Plaza-Toros have arrived.

³ A Spanish dance: perhaps Barataria is close to Spain?

Arithmetic

Marco and Giuseppe are deeply unimpressed and the Inquisitor is forced to tell them about the early marriage to Casilda. Unfortunately Gianetta and Tessa have crept back and erupt on to the stage in disappointment. Don Alhambra retires, to let them sort it out themselves, while Giuseppe tries to be mathematical, "It's quite simple" he says, "two husbands have managed to acquire three wives, that's two thirds of a husband to each wife". This doesn't go down well and the four sing the quartet, "In a contemplative fashion" as they try to sort out the difficulty. This is a wonderful piece. The basic tune is quiet and contemplative but, as each character comes forward with an agitated solo line, the two girls start to bicker, at which point everybody begins to row; there is a musical explosion, and a rather awful silence, "Quiet calm deliberation," they sing, "disentangles every knot."

The Duke of Plaza-Toro Ltd.

A fanfare heralds the entrance of the Plaza-Toros, who enter looking a great deal more prosperous than they did in Act I. They settle down to wait for the Kings and Casilda takes the opportunity to remark that she will never be able to love her husband. "Oh, I don't know" says the Duke, looking vaguely in the direction of the Duchess, "it's surprising what unprepossessing people one can love, if one puts one's mind to it..." "I loved your father" says the Duchess, and swings into a aria to explain how this apparently impossible feat was achieved. At the end, Casilda (who is clearly fed up with everything) says she hopes that when the King sees what a shady family he's married into, he'll give up the contract altogether. The Duke is aghast, "Shady!?" he cries. And we discover the reason for his new found wealth. He has turned himself into a limited company. He and the Duchess sing a duet, which has a bite even today, about how they trade on their position to make money. It ends:

In short, if you'd kindle
The spark of a swindle,
Lure simpletons into your clutches -
Or hoodwink a debtor,
You cannot do better
Than trot out a Duke or a Duchess!

Plain Speaking

In come the Kings, to greet Casilda – and be lectured by the Duke on their appalling lack of class. Giuseppe is regretful, he was brought up on a gondola and the only bit of politeness he knows is to take off his cap to a customer. The Duke beams, in that the case the boys need an etiquette lesson, and he throws in a dancing lesson at the same time as they sing, and dance, a Gavotte. The Duke and Duchess exit and, after a couple of false starts, Casilda and the Kings tell each other frankly how much they dislike their arranged marriage. Tessa and Gianetta, entering as usual at the ideal moment, reinforce this sentiment, and the five of them break into the exasperated quintet which starts the finale.

The Solution

The Grand Inquisitor calls everybody to the stage. Luiz has returned from Cordova with his mother and the old lady is ready to tell them who is the real King. She is breathless from her journey and everybody circles her in agitation “Speak woman speak! We’re all attention. The news we seek, this moment mention!” By this time the audience are as caught up as the cast and there is a general hush as Inez begins her solo... But what she says, we’ll leave you to discover. You can only see *The Gondoliers* for the first time once – and it would be a pity to spoil it!

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