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Video Review by David L. Kirk

 **SULLIVAN *Patience*** • Blake Walter, cond; Catherine Schweitzer (*Patience*); James Rowe (*Bunthorne*); Christiaan Smith-Kotlarek (*Grosvenor*); Kathleen Butitta (*Jane*); Justin Wilder (*Murgatroyd*); Christopher Smith (*Duke*); Sarah Johnson (*Angela*); Susannah Brooks Jacobson (*Saphir*); Amanda DePons (*Ella*); Madison Savoyards O & Ch • MADISON SAVOYARDS (DVD: 125:09; CD: 125:12) Live: Madison 7/29/06

I don't know how to characterize the Madison Savoyards, Ltd. accurately. An organization approaching its 45th season, it is a community theater, but one with a singular purpose: a commitment to presenting the Gilbert & Sullivan canon augmented by Sullivan's (sans Gilbert) *Cox and Box* and *The Zoo*. Yet, Madison Savoyards have expanded the scope of their season from an annual summer production to include concerts and educational programs. Their summer productions have become increasingly sophisticated, which raises the caliber of their work into the realm of semi-professional. Over the last few years they have begun documenting their summer productions with audio and video discs. The CD and DVD under review, although not as slickly produced or recorded as most of



the competition, are much more than vanity recordings and merit serious consideration.

The CD has stiff competition, notably the 1961 D'Oyly Carte (with dialogue), the 1951 D'Oyly Carte (mono without dialogue), and the 1962 Glyndebourne conducted by Malcolm Sargent. All three offer superior sonics to the Madison, better balances, and better orchestras—especially the stereo sets. The D'Oyly Carte and Glyndebourne sets are studio recorded. The Madison CD was recorded in performance, and applause and laughter bring this work to life. The cast boasts some fine singers, especially Catherine Schweitzer as Patience, Christian (as printed in the CD card, but spelled Christiaan in other sources I found) Smith-Kotlarek as Grosvenor, and Kathleen Butitta as Lady Jane. The other soloists are quite good, and the chorus and orchestra are much better than found in many regional companies. It's more appropriate to compare the Madison Savoyards to the talents found at the Ohio Light Opera, which has also committed some G&S to disc. (Incidentally, not mentioned in any reviews I've read of OLO's *Yeoman of the Guard*, is—contrary to their claims of being the first *complete* recording of the work—the serious omission of *Were I Thy Bride*. Tsk! Tsk!) The OLO recordings can boast having sound with more immediacy and presence, but the Madison *Patience* brings us a company that is more thoroughly attuned to G&S and a level of performance that is more consistent. Evident with the Madison cast was *esprit de corps*, a unifying sense of ensemble. The biggest quibble I had with the Madison CDs was the decision to split act I between two discs, a sin also committed by Decca with the 1961 D'Oyly Carte. The Madison *Patience* act I runs 73:48, surely it would have fit on a single disc.

The DVD of this production also has some stiff competition. *Patience* is one of the better offerings in the Brent Walker series produced for television in the 1980s. Although filmed on a sound stage, it has the look and feel of a stage production, and (unlike several other G&S offerings in this series) is rendered complete. It's a joy to watch. It is essentially the same production presented by the Australian Opera, both based on John Cox's staging for the English National Opera in the 1970s. The Australian Opera production was filmed during performance in the mid 1990s. John Warlow's *Grosvenor* is reason enough to watch this entertaining video. If you like *Patience*, don't miss either one. But don't dismiss the Madison Savoyard's *Patience*, either. It is a solid performance and well worth the \$20 admission, especially since the purchase price helps the Madison Savoyards to continue their mission of

presenting G&S.

For the most part, the Madison is a traditional production; the only noteworthy departure is moving the setting to the dairy barnyard. Bunthorne's castle is visible in the distance. The same set is used for act II, instead of "a glade" as specified by Gilbert. There has been no attempt to update the lyrics or costuming, and it is happily free of shtick and contrived funny business. Slapstick never works in G&S, and most attempts to add campy silliness fail miserably. Director Terry Kiss Frank crafted an energetic, tasteful production and let W. S. Gilbert supply the humor. The only misstep (and a small one) was choosing to open the curtain before the end of the overture. It meant filling the stage with aimless pantomime until the Opening Chorus. Visually, the Madison *Patience* is an attractive, colorful production; the set and costumes work well.

The cast is adept at delivering Gilbert's humor. They know which lines, and often words, need to be emphasized and how to punch them without gratuitous overstatement. Nary a joke was lost. The diction, both spoken and sung, is exemplary, and most traces of Midwestern twang were expunged as the cast endeavored to sound English. A droll bit of whimsy was making Bunthorne's solicitor look like Arthur Sullivan.

Patience is Catherine Schweitzer's first major part with the company (her father is in the chorus). A voice major, now pursuing a graduate degree in music, Schweitzer has an exceptionally beautiful voice and good comic timing. Her understated (that's a compliment) approach to the role rivals Sandra Dugdale's appearance in the Brent Walker TV production. She is matched by Smith-Kotlarik's *Archibald Grosvenor*. Their duet, *Prithee, Pretty Maiden*, and the dialogue that follows are standouts in an evening filled with good singing and acting. Their vocal talents may be a cut above the rest of the cast, but there are no weak links, either.

The lighting was a bit harsh on some faces that tended to over-shine when caught in certain lights. I found the camerawork interesting. The production seems to have been filmed using only one camera positioned in the stage-right side of the house balcony. I wish more productions were filmed this way (*à la* Hitchcock's *Rope*). No cutting back and forth between cameras, no herky-jerky quick shots, no cross fades or other tricky nonsense. This one-camera approach was seamless and focused the attention where it should be—on the performance. The only missteps were zooming in for extreme close-ups. The clarity of the focus was lost and such intimacy was not needed; otherwise,

the camera followed the action and didn't call attention to itself.

I very much enjoyed the time spent with this Madison Savoyard production. The CD and especially the DVD have welcome places in my library, which has several shelves devoted to G&S. The stereo CD does not include a libretto, and the insert card contains only essential cast and crew identifications. No insert was included in the DVD sent for review, sound being 5.0 Dolby Digital surround, picture full frame. Bonus features on the DVD include a comparison of Lady Jane's performance at the beginning of act II to show how she deftly handled a mistimed bit of business, and an extensive slide show of photographs from the performance. The CD and DVD, each priced at \$20, can be ordered through the Madison Savoyard's Web site at www.madisonsavoyards.org or through Amazon.com (search Gilbert and Sullivan Patience or Madison Savoyards). If owning both is too much for you, I recommend the DVD over the CD. The entire performance is on one disc, and, for an amateur group, the production is too good to miss seeing. **David L. Kirk**

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