




Archive

- Magazine Issues
- Conductors
- Performers
- Ensembles & Orchestras
- Instrumentalists
- Instruments
- Search
- Singers
- Voices
- Vocal Roles
- SACDs
- Reviewers
- Labels
- Feature Articles
- Composers & Works
- Collections
- Jazz
- Videos
- Bollywood & Beyond
- Book Reviews
- Want Lists
- Hall of Fame

Related Articles

- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Issue 33:6 July/Aug 2010](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Composers](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Barry Brenesal](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [SULLIVAN](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [MADISON SAVOYARDS](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Catherine Schweitzer](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Daniel Graupner](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Donovan Armbruster](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Governor Harris](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Jesse Simpson](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Jim Rowe](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Leigh Akin](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Madison Savoyards O & Ch](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Michael Alexander](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Ryan McEldowney](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Sarah Z. Johnson](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Cholmondely](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Dame Carruthers](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Elsie](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Fairfax](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Jack Point](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Leonard](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Meryll](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Phoebe](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)
- [First](#) [Prev](#) [Wilfred](#) [Next](#) [Last](#)

DVD Review by Barry Brenesal

 **SULLIVAN** *The Yeomen of the Guard* • Michael Alexander, cond; Jesse Simpson (*Cholmondely*); Ryan McEldowney (*Fairfax*); Governor Harris (*Meryll*); Jim Rowe (*Leonard*); Donovan Armbruster (*Jack Point*); Daniel Graupner (*Wilfred*); Catherine Schweitzer (*Elsie*); Sarah Z. Johnson (*Phoebe*); Leigh Akin (*Dame Carruthers*); Madison Savoyards O & Ch • MADISON SAVOYARDS 854441323 (DVD: 151:42) Live: Madison July 2009

Recently I had the pleasure of reviewing the Madison Savoyards' moderately successful *Mikado*. It's far more difficult to make the more ambitious *Yeomen of the Guard* work, however, for a variety of reasons. One is the number of serious characters, including Cholmondely, Fairfax, and Carruthers, who could have stepped out of a play rather than the usual G&S topsy-turvy satire, and who require good, solid acting as a result. Another is the problem of communicating the work's dark humor and grim undertone. It's all too easy to play up Shadbolt for nothing but laughs, for example, or treat Fairfax as a mental and moral lightweight from the first—despite the fact that neither is actually written that way. I'm afraid this production succeeds fully on neither count, but it does offer some good performances, and a decent evening of theater.



The Yeomen of the Guard
DVD; NTSC

 Buy from amazon.com

Let's start with the best, and that would be Donavan Armbruster. It's difficult to make this role work, as too often the performer seems spry and innately clever, despite the deliberate laboriousness of Gilbert's lines. Armbruster instead turns Jack Point into a Willie Loman of English Renaissance jesters: over-parted, over-the-hill, and gifted with a wonderfully pleading cadence when seeking praise or a job, as though he were begging his audience to give him a chance. His use of his wagon of props in "I've Wisdom from the East" was both natural and just vaguely off, like a well-heeled second-rater—which Point is. Solid marks for this character study that's also attractively sung.

Also on the positive side is Catherine Schweitzer, who has a clear, very pleasant soprano, with a good, easy ring at louder levels. She delivers her dialogue effectively and builds character well, but "'Tis Done! I Am a Bride" offers no discernable emotional content to the very expressive words. Sarah Z. Johnson in turn overplays Phoebe's familiarity with Shadbolt, stroking, tickling, and kissing him repeatedly to get information, and acting more like a college girl with her boyfriend than someone dealing with a dangerous but useful brute whom she loathes. (It's an important point in the work.) But she sings well, and invests her songs with a continuation of her character.

Let's take a moment, too, to praise Ryan McEldowney's bright, gleaming tenor, with fine enunciation, and Governor Harris's reliable, finely trained baritone, though he possesses no histrionic ability. Michael Alexander leads a disciplined, vital performance. Note, too, that Alexander joins the general movement toward restoring a pair of numbers that were cut, respectively, before and directly after the first performance in 1888. One in particular, Sergeant Meryll's "A Laughing Boy but Yesterday," is given a fine performance.

Good, too, is Leigh Akin as Dame Curruthers. Her strong, authoritative voice makes much of "When Our Gallant Norman Foes," though there's some evidence of the vibrato loosening; still, she covers well. Unfortunately, that song suffers from a directorial interpretation that works against her. Midway in the first verse, a ghoul in grey wanders in, moves to the block and puts his head down, then gets its symbolically cut off, to a loud, electronically enhanced moan that overpowers Akin's voice. As if that's not enough, he shows up again in the second verse. Both appearances are unfortunate decisions, since this number, like Azucena's "Stride la vampa" in *Il Trovatore*, has the ability to grasp and hold viewers by sheer personality. Each has great atmosphere, and neither needs distracting "help."

It's the same issue I had with the Madison *Mikado*: a basically

sound, strong directorial hand, good at blocking large groups and giving sound advice to young performers (never easy in an amateur company, where it's even harder than with professionals), but one that sometimes doesn't trust the words and music to carry the audience. The gestures given to Daniel Graupner, working with a large stool during his restored song, "When Jealous Torments Rack My Soul," helped create a sense of massiveness on his part, if he'd only remembered to stay in character and not try repeatedly to play the male ingénue. So was this version of the act II finale, a metaphorically appropriate one that catches Jack Point between the outer and inner tower entrances as they close while he collapses. But then there was Akin surrendering the stage to the ghoul, and the end of "How Say You, Maiden," with Cholmondely and Jack Point going wildly out of character, forming a bridal arch for Elsie and Shadbolt to pass beneath at its conclusion as she leaves. There's more of that too.

The Yeomen of the Guard has a large dollop of darkness in its mixture, as lovers of this opera know well. Its principals live, scheme, worry, and love fiercely in the shadow of the executioner's block. Three protagonists end up in what will almost certainly prove disastrous marriages, two of them blackmailed into doing so. A man about to be executed saves his fortune from a scheming relative by marrying a woman he's just met; another loses his love in a fateful decision based on an amalgam of pity and greed, and possibly loses his life in the bargain. Unfortunately, matters aren't helped along in this production by poor acting. In particular, Simpson can't speak or move on stage, and McEldowney's small-scaled Fairfax acts frivolously from his first entrance, in contradiction to both words and music. Graupner and Johnson play their roles as though they were in a modern musical set in suburbia (though she does a far better job of it). I certainly credit the Madison Savoyards and their cast with talent and drive, but for all that it's been staged by the company three times since 1964, I think they may have overreached themselves. This *Yeomen* provides genial entertainment, but the production has an unfocused quality that only fitfully brings the opera to life.

As with the company's recent *Mikado*, the view is from a single camera angled down from slightly above stage and one to one side, in the audience. It follows the action, and typically doesn't swivel when it doesn't need to, which makes a good deal of sense. Visual definition is good, though the audio is problematic: too soft, even at maximum volume on the average television, with a lack of balance that probably means few microphones were deployed. Be sure to turn up the volume on both your TV and your preamplifier if you buy this DVD. You will need to.

In sum, is this worth buying? I think so, but admit that it probably won't be the case if you're on either side of a narrow divide. Those who have repeatedly seen *The Yeomen of the Guard* live might find this production less than competitive by comparison, while those who have never seen it and want a professional introduction should turn to the 1982 Brent Walker version, now on Acorn Media 5408. (It has many good things mitigating against some heavy cuts and a clearly under-rehearsed Joel Grey as Jack Point.) But when Schweitzer, Johnson, Akin, Rowe, or especially Harris sings, when any of the first three act, and when Armbruster does either, this production flares into life, unless the direction gets in the way. The choice is yours. **Barry Brenesal**

This article originally appeared in Issue 33:6 (July/Aug 2010) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Related Articles				
First	Prev	<i>Issue 33:6 July/Aug 2010</i>	Next	Last
First	Prev	Composers	Next	Last
First	Prev	Barry Brenesal	Next	Last
First	Prev	SULLIVAN	Next	Last
First	Prev	MADISON SAVOYARDS	Next	Last
First	Prev	Catherine Schweitzer	Next	Last
First	Prev	Daniel Graupner		
First	Prev	Donovan Armbruster	Next	Last
First	Prev	Governor Harris	Next	Last
First	Prev	Jesse Simpson		
First	Prev	Jim Rowe		
First	Prev	Leigh Akin		
First	Prev	Madison Savoyards O & Ch	Next	Last
First	Prev	Michael Alexander		
First	Prev	Ryan McEldowney		
First	Prev	Sarah Z. Johnson		
First	Prev	<i>Cholmondely</i>		
First	Prev	<i>Dame Carruthers</i>	Next	Last
First	Prev	<i>Elsie</i>	Next	Last
First	Prev	<i>Fairfax</i>	Next	Last
First	Prev	<i>Jack Point</i>	Next	Last
First	Prev	<i>Leonard</i>	Next	Last
First	Prev	<i>Meryll</i>		
First	Prev	<i>Phoebe</i>	Next	Last
First	Prev	<i>Wilfred</i>		



Google Search

Search WWW Search

www.fanfarearchive.com

[FANFARE MAGAZINE HOME](#)

Copyright © 1977-2010 by Fanfare Inc.

[Comments?](#) [TOP OF PAGE](#)