

Opera Per Tutti and Chagrin Studio Orchestra to join forces for *Pirates of Penzance*

by Mike Telin



When Gilbert & Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* premiered in New York on December 31, 1879, the two-act comic opera was immediately popular with audiences and critics alike. Today *Pirates* remains one of Gilbert & Sullivan's most-performed operas. This weekend, [Opera Per Tutti](#) will present three performances of the amusing pirate story at the [Chagrin Valley Little Theatre](#) on Friday and Saturday, September 12 and 13 at 8:00 pm and Sunday, September 14 at 2:00 pm. Steven Eva will conduct the Chagrin Studio Orchestra in this fully-staged production.

Given the popularity of *Pirates of Penzance*, how does a stage director add his or her own artistic stamp to the work? "That's a good question," Opera Per Tutti artistic director Scott Skiba said during a recent telephone call. "I don't know if I have a stamp to put on it. I just want audiences to become immersed in the work and not be aware of the director. There is a lot of slapstick and there are a lot of funny gags, but they are all driven by the characters and their relationships with one another. I think *Pirates* is absolutely brilliant. Audiences don't have to get the political humor from Gilbert & Sullivan's time in order to understand the opera."

Skiba also believes it is the somewhat ridiculous plot that makes the opera so endearing. W.S. Gilbert's libretto tells the story of the 21-year old Frederic (played by Benjamin Bunsold), who has been indentured to an unlikely band of pirates since his infancy. Frederic meets Mabel (Maribeth Crawford), the daughter of Major-General Stanley (Zachary Risk), and the two young people fall in love. Of course the plot gets complicated when it is discovered that Frederic was born on the last day of February in a leap year. Since he is technically only five, his indentureship to the pirates must continue

for another 63 years until he is officially 21. Fortunately for Frederic, Mabel agrees to wait for his release.



Pirates also features one if not *the* most recognizable of patter songs, “I am the very model of a Modern Major-General.” “Whether you know it or not, you *do* know this song,” Skiba said. With its fast tempos and quick rhythmic patterns, Skiba points out that it takes a special kind of singer to produce a great performance of the song. “It is impressive to have somebody stand in one place and deliver rapid-fire text with beautiful crisp consonants and round vowels, but when there is the element of character that is driving it all, that takes the performance to the next level. One moment you’re flirting with the audience and then you’re letting them in on a little secret in another. And Zachary Rusk is doing a great job. He’s a big guy with great energy and command, with a face that lights up with joy.”

Another aspect of *Pirates* that makes seeing a production so enjoyable is the important role of the chorus. “This is an ensemble piece that is full of real characters, and the intimacy of the Chagrin Valley Little Theatre will make people feel like they are part of the action. I’m making the most of every inch of available space. So the performances are going to be pretty exciting.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com September 9, 2014.

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