

# The Sapphire Necklace



or, The False Heiress

Opera (unperformed)

Written by H. F. Chorley

Composed by Arthur Sullivan

*Introduction and 2 excerpts first performed at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham, London on the 13th April 1867*

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## The Sapphire Necklace – notes and speculation

by William Parry

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*Thespis* (1871) the first collaboration of Gilbert and Sullivan, is often held as the great mystery, the most significant loss, in the list of Sullivan's works. A mystery it may be, but not as intractable as the question of *The Sapphire Necklace* (composed 1862-4?), written to a libretto by the critic Henry Fothergill Chorley (1808 – 1872), who went on to collaborate with Sullivan on *Kenilworth*. We don't even know for sure what the opera was about; what then do we know? This essay is an attempt to put as much of the evidence as possible in one place, and to offer some general thoughts thereon.

The opera doesn't come off very well in Arthur Lawrence's authorised biography of Sullivan, being itemised in the index as "The Sapphire Necklace". Lawrence (p. 59) quotes Sullivan's famous letter of 30 August 1863 from Belfast, in which he reveals with great excitement the first inspiration for what was to become his *Irish Symphony*; "soon afterwards", we hear, came a note, "the joint production of Miss Dickens and Mrs Lehmann, to tell me that Dickens is perfectly enchanted with the minuet theme in my opera – at the beginning of the overture, which Mrs Lehmann continually plays to him at his request. He even thinks it quite sufficient to make the opera a success". Lawrence describes the libretto – presumably reflecting Sullivan's own views in later life – as proving "quite unsuitable for stage presentation, and most of the music has been utilised in other works" (p. 60). This is most of the commonly known background sketched in for us. It is worth noting here that the earliest biography of Sullivan, Charles Willeby's in his *Masters of English Music* (1893), says only "at this period he lost a lot of time in writing an opera entitled *The Sapphire Necklace*, the libretto of which, by Mr Chorley, proved quite unsuitable for stage representation. The overture is all that now exists of it, the remainder of the music having been utilised in other works" (pp. 18 – 19). The obvious verbal similarity between sections of both quotations reminds us just how close Lawrence and Willeby were in writing their own biographies some six years later.

We turn now to Herbert Sullivan and Newman Flower, who, while not to be trusted in all respects, are at least able to fill in one or two of the gaps in our knowledge of *The Sapphire Necklace*. They it is who tell us that Chorley had started work on the libretto before the trip to Paris made by Sullivan, Chorley, Dickens and the Lehmanns at the end of 1862 – this was the trip on which Sullivan famously met Rossini. It seems that much of the composition had occurred between the period before the Paris trip, the earliest point when Sullivan would have had anything to set, and the Irish trip, for "the setting of the work was nearing completion when Sullivan returned from Ireland" (p. 46). This assertion seems in part based on a letter from Sullivan to his mother at this time: "the Finale is the thing I stick at, as there is another storm to make in it, and having done one already, it is hard to make another which shall be quite different" (ibid). This said, it is quite possible, thinking of Sullivan's later working methods, that he was attacking the finale *out of sequence* and that this did not mean that the work was largely complete by Autumn 1863. Making comments on the libretto not unlike those alluded to before, Sullivan and Flower make the same claim as Willeby and Lawrence

about *The Sapphire Necklace* that “the greater part of its music was subsequently used in other works”. Unless and until an autograph score of the work turns up, it will be impossible to prove or disprove this assertion, but it is worth remembering that Sullivan and Flower made exactly the same claim about *The Zoo* (p. 79), and in this case they were wholly wrong. This question too is one to which we shall return.

Something of the work's later history was examined by Terence Rees in *Sullivan's Royalty Contracts* in the Spring 1973 edition of the *Gilbert and Sullivan Journal* and summarised as follows in Jacobs (p. 432):

An opera, *The False Heiress* was sold for £275 to Metzler, the publisher, on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1868; Sullivan bought back the score and “*all rights of publication and performance*” on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1880, but granted the firm “*the rights of publishing and performing the song ‘Over the roof’ from the said opera*”.

Assuming that we are indeed right to draw the conclusion, as we surely must, that *The False Heiress* is *The Sapphire Necklace* retitled (or subtitled), as there would not have been the opportunity for Sullivan to have written another unperformed opera, it is impossible to say at what stage, and in what context, the opera's other name began to be used.

We do know that the aforementioned overture, whose minuet was so admired by Charles Dickens, was performed at the Jenny Lind-sponsored “Grand Orchestral Concert” on 11 July 1866; as far as I know this was the first performance of any extract from the opera but it may be that there are earlier examples. The most important concert, however, as far as the opera as a whole was concerned, was the Crystal Palace concert on 13 April 1867 under August Manns. Here no fewer than three excerpts from the opera were performed:

- SELECTION FROM THE MS. OPERA,  
‘THE SAPPHIRE NECKLACE’ *Arthur S. Sullivan*  
a. INTRODUCTION (Orchestra) – Sunset.  
b. RECITATIVE AND PRAYER. MISS EDITH WYNNE. [‘They come not yet!’]  
c. SONG. MISS EDITH WYNNE. [‘Over the roof’]

The only other extract from the opera of which we know, and which was not performed at the April 1867 concert, is the madrigal ‘When love and beauty’; this was published by Novello as late as 1898 (this work was performed in May 1900 when Sullivan presided over the Madrigal Society's Anniversary Festival (Jacobs p. 398). Of these four, therefore, ‘Over the roof’ and the madrigal were published; the overture, frequently revived in Sullivan's lifetime, was published, but only in a military band arrangement by Charles Godfrey Jr.; the recitative and prayer was never published.

The words of ‘Over the roof’ and ‘When love and beauty’ are reproduced on pages 2 and 3 below and are both in Chorley's awful Tudor-Romantic style; both deal generically with matters of beauty, love and marriage, though we will return to one or two details later. For us, the most potentially enlightening lyrics are from the unpublished recitative and prayer (often incorrectly transcribed as ‘Then come not yet’), which were printed in the concert programme for the performance on 13 April 1867 (reproduced on Page 1 below).

We will return also to what these lyrics may or may not imply later. It is perhaps now time to ask the question; what was *The Sapphire Necklace* about? A long-held view is that the opera was on no less a subject than Mary Queen of Scots. Confirmation of this seems to come from a series of newspaper reports which emerged in the second half of 1883:

*Glasgow Herald* Monday 17 September 1883 (“from our own correspondent – London, Sunday Night”):

*“The Italian Opera directors seem awakening to the fact that special efforts are now required to keep alive a form of art which many of our most thoughtful critics believe to be gradually decaying. The intelligence will be received with considerable interest that Mr Gye has made an offer to Sir Arthur Sullivan for a new Italian opera. It is rumoured Sir Arthur hopes to get it finished by next season. The opera will, of course, be ‘Mary Stuart’ which the composer began in early life, but has never completed. The libretto, the story of which is founded on the history of the unhappy Queen of Scots, was written by the late H. F. Chorley. For many years reports have been current that Sir Arthur Sullivan proposed to finish the opera – first for Mr J. H. Mapleson, and afterwards for Mr Carl Rosa. It is hoped that this time rumour will be justified by results.”*

*Pall Mall Gazette* Monday 24 September 1883:

*“There is a report that Sir Arthur Sullivan’s grand opera on Mary Stuart – a work begun long before the Savoy connection was formed – may be expected next season at the Italian Opera, of all places in the world.”*

The same report was repeated in *The Leeds Mercury* (which obviously took an interest in all Sullivan-related news) and in other London and provincial papers during the following few weeks.

Before we try to draw a few conclusions, the final fascinating piece of evidence comes from correspondence between Sullivan and Bendall during the composition of *Victoria and Merrie England*. A letter of 21 January 1897 has Sullivan saying “I can do without the bit from *The Sapphire Necklace* as I have a page or two of the score here – enough to show me the cast of the scoring” Jacobs (p. 378).

### **Was the subject of the opera Mary Queen of Scots?**

The newspaper reports of 1883 seem emphatic that *Mary Stuart* was the work of Chorley and, as we know of no other *opera* on which Chorley and Sullivan collaborated, it is tempting to believe that these reports must be true. It may, though, be the case, that the Chorley-Sullivan opera of the 1860’s has been confused and conflated with another, later project to compose an opera on Mary Stuart.

Knowing Sullivan’s predilection for historical-romantic subject matter, and in particular British history, the subject of Mary Queen of Scots *feels* right. We have a madrigal, which feels right. But what of the other internal evidence? ‘Over the roof’ is pretty generic stuff, its theme, summed up by the words “there love can prevail over pomp and pride”, is that love is blind to wealth and does not change; ‘When love and beauty’ is pretty obviously about a wedding. “May all who wed in truth with happiness be crown’d”. Neither of these uncomplicatedly romantic songs conjure up Mary, or her court: and for which of Mary’s marriages – to Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, or James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell – could ‘When love and beauty’ possibly seem appropriate?

The recitative and prayer move us back in the right direction: Mary had been a prisoner on more than one occasion – famously Bothwell’s prisoner at Dunbar, then at Lochleven (both 1567), and subsequently in England; “compelled to feign, to purchase the poor share / Of peace and freedom which my tyrant grants me” sounds not unpromising in the context of Elizabeth’s treatment of Mary. And Mary was, in every sense, a false heiress – next in line should Elizabeth die, yet false in her dealings with Elizabeth’s enemies. In every other sense, though, the lyric of the recitative and prayer feels wrong, unless we are to assume that the opera would have been broadly sympathetic to Mary.

### **Why was the opera called *The Sapphire Necklace*?**

To have written an opera about Mary Stuart and not called it *Mary Stuart* (as per the 1883 rumours), seems perverse (had Sullivan and Chorley wanted a title that did not conflict with Donizetti’s opera of the same name, many more obvious options would have been available; even *The False Heiress* seems somewhat strange in the context). Three possibilities therefore suggest themselves. Firstly, that *The Sapphire Necklace* was never the real title of the opera, but one used to mask, for whatever reason, its actual subject matter. Secondly, that *The Sapphire Necklace* was indeed the opera’s title, and that the opera was indeed about Mary Stuart, but that it concerned some event in her life involving a necklace. No particular story of this kind seems to have come down to us, so it could have been Chorley’s invention, or might still be found in some very obscure romance of the nineteenth century. Thirdly, that the opera was not about Mary Stuart at all, but some other story which nobody has yet identified.

### **Did Sullivan finish the opera?**

Here there is conflicting evidence. When Sullivan conducted the overture to *The Sapphire Necklace* at the Crystal Palace towards the end of 1886 it was described as belonging “to an opera which has not yet been produced, portions only having been given in concert performance” (Jacobs p. 252). This wording suggests a near-complete work, and is backed up by what Sullivan and Flower said in their biography. One also wonders whether Metzler would have wanted to part with £275 for an incomplete opera back in 1868. Against this, the press reports of 1883 suggest a work “never completed”. We should probably assume, therefore, that the work was indeed *largely* complete by 1868.

### **Did Sullivan use his music from *The Sapphire Necklace* in other works?**

All our sources seem to agree that this was the case. Sullivan repurchased his manuscript from Metzler in May 1880; this date coincides suspiciously with the period of composition of *The Martyr of Antioch*: is there a connection? It is possible that Sullivan, panicking about progress on his cantata envisaged that he might be able to borrow from his old unperformed opera. It is equally possible that he simply had enough money at this point to buy the score back, in the knowledge that the work was not performable (though this makes the rumours of performing the opera in 1883/4 even more strange). The only evidence of reuse that we have is taken from the 1897 letter to Bendall; somewhere in *Victoria and Merrie England* there is a snatch or two from *The Sapphire Necklace*. One has to acknowledge that, without a better knowledge of the earlier opera, it is almost pointless to speculate as to the nature of that recycling. But note that Sullivan refers specifically to “the cast of the scoring” as if it is an orchestral texture that he is borrowing – could this be the Scots colouring at the opening of Scene 3, or perhaps an aspect of one of the (two?) storms in *The Sapphire Necklace* borrowed for the *Victoria and Merrie England* storm in Scene 4? It is worth adding that, if Sullivan did indeed reuse other music from the opera, then he is unlikely to have done so between 1868

and 1880 when Metzler owned the copyright. I also tend to think that Sullivan was so resourceful in his setting of words that, by and large, in composing operas, it would have been easier for him to compose a new melody than to recycle an old one. I have tended to take the same line on *Thespis*.

### Conclusions.

I personally find it almost impossible to reconcile the surviving lyrics of *The Sapphire Necklace* with an opera that might have been like Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda*. If the Queen of Scots was a central figure in the opera – plausible given Sullivan's and Chorley's interest in the period – then it might have been as part of a pastoral or masque, akin to Chorley's *The May Queen* (music Sterndale Bennett) or *Kenilworth*. The overture does not sound to me like the opening of a tragic work – its second two thirds are tripping and bustling in a quite distinctive manner. It is tempting to assume that the press reports of 1883 were misinformed, and that, if Sullivan did indeed contemplate an opera on Mary Stuart, it would have been essentially unconnected to his earlier efforts with Chorley (his views as to the unsuitability of the libretto could hardly have changed so much between 1883 and 1899). The *Pall Mall Gazette* cannot have been on its own in wondering whether the Italian Opera was the best place to launch Sullivan's historical opera, and perhaps, if there were any truth in the rumour, this is why it was a non-starter. The context of the 1883 press reports may have been Sullivan's dissatisfaction with *Princess Ida* and the first intimations of his wanting to do other things away from the Savoy. Were it not for the press reports of 1883, there would be little or no internal or external evidence to suggest that *The Sapphire Necklace* had anything to do with Mary Queen of Scots at all; we are left finally uncertain, on current evidence, of the opera's subject matter. Finally, we shall perhaps never know if, and to what extent, music from the (probably largely complete) *Sapphire Necklace* found its way into other works, but at least part of the opera still existed in 1897 and was used in *Victoria and Merrie England*. It would be nice, by the way, to think that the original parts of the overture, a fine work so often performed in Sullivan's lifetime, might still await discovery, but it is hard to imagine that the score itself survives.

Before closing, I should note that one of Chorley's cherished dreams was an opera based on Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* – he seems to have offered such a project to both Mendelssohn and Gounod. Did he ever put this idea to Sullivan too?

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## **Overture.**

### **No.1. - Introduction - Sunset**

### **No.2. - Recitative and Prayer - "They come not yet" - Soprano.**

#### **Recit**

They come not yet! O weary Time! O cruel slavery! Why must I suffer thus?  
Wear out my youth and hope in this detested prison house?  
Compelled to feign, to purchase the poor share  
Of peace and freedom which my tyrant grants me.  
A fearful destiny!  
Look down on me, spirits of pity, from yon evening sky;  
Let not my life wear out in this wide land;  
Let me not all forget the good I knew.  
Was that the answer of a seraph's wing,  
That with refreshing air my temples fanned?  
Was that a voice like those of better times,  
That whisper'd words of comfort to mine ear,  
Saying "Bright days shall come"?  
Let me hold fast such merciful companionship by prayer!

#### **Prayer**

Ye, who in this hour of battle strife  
To the brave and pure heart give aid;  
Ye, who through the wilderness of life  
Guide the pilgrim faltering and afraid;  
Angels, who on high your record keep,  
Give me one good deed before I sleep.  
While the evening gilds the mountain brow,  
Though the vale a robe of shadow wear,  
Many a heart afar uplifted now  
Hears the Ave bell, and joins in prayer;  
Angels who o'er sorrow vigil keep,  
Pity and protect me while I sleep.

### **No.3. - Song - Soprano.**

Over the roof and over the wall -  
Grow, grow -  
The jessamine grow -  
For ever and ever more white and tall  
(No matter the dwelling be high or low!)

For yet palace be lofty  
And moat be wide,  
And mailèd the bridge  
And lordly the towers.  
There love can prevail over pomp and pride,  
Like the cherished beauty of those sweet flowers.

Ah! Love, love, love!  
Love will not alter under the sun  
While the woods grow and the waters run.

Down by the meadow - down to the sea -  
(Flow, flow,  
The river will flow!)  
The turf may be green, or wither'd the tree -  
(But the heat is the same on the cobble below!)

For whatever the season  
Around that deep stream,  
Be it snow-white winter or summer hot,  
There is love - tho' a wand'rer as some might dream,  
Who passes and passes yet changes not!

Ah! Love, love, love!  
Love will be master under the sun  
While the woods grow and the waters run.



#### **No.4. - Madrigal.**

When Love and Beauty to be married go,  
Phoebus, without a cloud, smiles on the pair.

Though rosebuds pant and blow,  
The birds all sing aloud,  
Tumultuous Boreas, whom the cedars bowed,  
Tamed, like wane of gentle song doth flow,  
Saying, till echo doth repeat the sound,  
"May all who wed in truth with happiness be crown'd."

It is not wealth and state that smooth the way,  
Nor bid the desert bloom.

The ploughman at his furrow can be gay,  
The weaver at his loom.  
Where Honour's lord, content his wife hath room,  
And hearts keep light if even heads are gray,  
Singing, till echo doth repeat the sound:  
"May all who wed in truth with happiness be crown'd."

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