

Japanese Orientalism in Britain:
As Seen through the Eyes of W.S. Gilbert and
Arthur Sullivan in their opera, *The Mikado*.

by Nicole Penley

“The Orient was almost an European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences.”¹ The Orient, during the nineteenth century, referred to all cultures to the east of Western Europe, from Turkey and the Middle East through Asia and the Pacific Islands.² Currently, the term Orientalism, especially in the Arts, is used to describe music and art that was influenced by these eastern cultures but had been filtered through European models. As a result, these pieces often tell more about the European cultures than they do about the culture that they were modeled after. *The Mikado* (1885) is not only one of Gilbert and Sullivan’s most popular operas, but it also can illustrate how the British populace viewed the Orient in general and the Japanese in particular.

Relations between Britain and Japan began in earnest, when, in 1857, Queen Victoria presented the Emperor of Japan with a warship as a token of friendship. In return, the Emperor graciously allowed a complete Japanese village to travel to England in order to study Western civilization. When the colony of Japanese was formed at Knightsbridge in 1885, the Japanese were not only able to learn about the British, but the British were able and quite

¹ Edward Said in an excerpt from his study, *Orientalism*. Michael Beckermann, “The Sword on the Wall: Japanese Elements and their Significance in *The Mikado*,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 73 (1989), 317.

² It should be acknowledged that in current scholarship, Orientalism has negative connotations and is rarely used except in reference to nineteenth-century European attitudes towards Eastern cultures. Edward Said defines the Orient as existing for the West, being constructed by and in relation to the West. It is the mirror image of what is inferior and alien (“Other”) to the West. In the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* online catalog, musical Orientalism is defined as the dialects of musical exoticism within Western art music that evoke the East or the orient; the latter taken to mean the Islamic Middle East, or East and South Asia, or all of these together.

willing, to learn all about the Japanese.³ In fact, a display of Japanese arts and crafts at the 1862 International Exhibition in London had already inspired a vogue for Japanese design.⁴

The popularity of the Japanese village at Knightsbridge is also evidenced by the great amount of publicity that it received. In February of 1885, the *Illustrated London News* ran an article on the transplant of a complete Japanese village to Knightsbridge.⁵

The village contained approximately one hundred men, women, and children, along with all the shops, teahouses, theatres, and places of worship that made up this village in Japan. The *Times* also ran ads inviting people to visit the village and even providing times when traditional Japanese entertainment would be available.⁶

The Mikado, the 9th joint production by Gilbert and Sullivan, premiered during the height of British interest in Japanese arts and culture. Therefore, when *The Mikado* premiered on the 14th of March of 1885 it was an instant success. In fact, *The Mikado* was so successful that it enjoyed an opening run of 672 performances and prompted Gilbert's publisher to request a book version of the story to be written, although due to many factors, including World War I, the book was not published until 1921.

Gilbert's depictions of the Japanese in his book, *The Story of The Mikado*, are particularly indicative of the way that the Japanese were viewed throughout British society and indeed as "Orientals" were viewed in Western culture. Gilbert begins by describing the people of Japan as "brave beyond all measure, amiable to excess, and extraordinarily considerate to each other and strangers."⁷ From this description, Gilbert moves on to explain the evolution of Japanese society, beginning from the time in which they regarded the Mikado as "four-fifths a King and one-fifth a god," until they gradually discarded many of their "peculiar tastes, ideas and fashions."⁸ Gilbert also concludes that the Japanese discarded many of these particular tastes when "they found out that they did not coincide with the ideas of the more enlightened countries of Europe."⁹

³ Cunningham Bridgeman, "The Making of *The Mikado*," *Gilbert and Sullivan Archive*, <http://boisestate.edu/gas/mikado/html/mikado.html>, October 26, 2002.

⁴ D'Oyly Carte Web page, http://www.doylycarte.org.uk/Operas/The_Mikado.htm, March 13, 2003.

⁵ Beckerman, "The Sword on the Wall," 305.

⁶ *Times* (London), 16 March 1885.

⁷ Sir W.S. Gilbert, *The Story of the Mikado* (London: Hazell, Watson and Viney, 1921), p. 1

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

From the very beginning of his book, Gilbert is placing Japan on a different social level than Britain and the other European countries. He seems to be saying that the Japanese are a wonderful people, who wish to be more like the British, but they simply do not fit into the rigid class structure which shaped British society.

Once the reader understands clearly how Japan fits into the social hierarchy of the world, as known by the British populace, Gilbert then launches into an analysis of the British government towards the Japanese. Gilbert begs his audience to "bear in mind" that the British government is "(in their heart of hearts) a little afraid of the Japanese" due to the major defeat that the Russians suffered at the hands of the Japanese during the Russo-Japanese War. He goes on to explain that this fear is not "entertained by the generality of the inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland . . . but is confined mainly to the good and wise gentlemen who rule us, just now."¹⁰ Gilbert excels at writing for his audience. Obviously, this book was intended for the inhabitants of the British Empire, as much of Gilbert's humor is directed at both the ruling classes and the Japanese.

In *The Mikado* itself, Gilbert's characterizations of the Japanese characters often make them seem as two-dimensional as the figures painted on Japanese dishes. In fact, the opening chorus sings, "If you want to know who we are, we are gentlemen of Japan: on many a vase and jar, on many a screen and fan . . ."¹¹ Because Gilbert wants the audience to know that the characters are not meant to describe the Japanese, he craftily positions his characters in such a way that although they appear to be Japanese, they are actually caricatures who have much more in common with British than with Japanese society.

Although the characters in this opera are intended to be caricatures of the British, Gilbert still inserts remarks which could be considered directed at the Japanese both into his libretto and in his book. Yum-Yum's dialogue before her solo, "The sun, whose rays are all ablaze," in the Second Act has her declaring, "Sometimes I sit and wonder, in my artless Japanese way, why it is that I am so much more attractive than anybody else in the whole world."¹² This statement could be taken to imply that the Japanese were viewed as innocent and unsophisticated in their dealings with the British. Whether or not the statement was intended to be derogatory or complimentary is unclear.

¹⁰ Ibid., 2. It should be realized that the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 occurred after *The Mikado* was written. This excerpt from the book was obviously a later addition and not part of the original story.

¹¹ W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *The Mikado, Authentic edition* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1980), pp. 15-16.

¹² Ibid., 145.

In the third verse of "The Criminal Cried," Pooh Bah, the Lord High Everything Else, sings, "Now tho' you'd have said that he was dead (for its owner dead was he), it stood on its neck, with a smile well-bred and bowed three times to me!"¹³ This verse caricatures the perpetually smiling, obsequious stereotype of Asian men and women. Although for many people in the audience, the Japanese Village at Knightsbridge would be their only contact with the Japanese, the use of this stereotype serves to reinforce the idea of two-dimensionality for the characters in the opera and the Japanese in general.

An excerpt from Gilbert's book, *The Story of the Mikado*, translates the name Yum-Yum into English as:

"The full moon of delight which sheds her remarkable beams over a sea of infinite loveliness, thus indicating a glittering path by which she may be approached by those who are willing to brave the perils which necessarily await the daring adventurers who seek to reach her by those means."¹⁴

Gilbert then comments on the compactness of the Japanese language, "when all those long words can be crammed into two syllables – or rather one syllable repeated."¹⁵ This excerpt also appears to have been influenced from contact with the Japanese and not resulting from caricatures of the British.

A second excerpt from the book reveals another way that the British viewed the Japanese. As the Japanese warriors led the procession of the Mikado into Titipu, they wore "red and black armour, and helmets which concealed their pretty faces."¹⁶ An interesting word choice, "pretty" is not necessarily the first word that would be considered when describing armed troops. It does, however, bring up the bias that many people in the British Empire had against Asian cultures. They believed that Asian men looked feminine especially because of their lack of facial hair and their clothing, which often consisted of brightly-colored silk robes. It was actually considered a great sacrifice when the lead male roles consented to shave their facial hair in order to appear more authentically Japanese in the production. As for the clothing, the brightly colored silks and the similarity to women's clothing made the men uneasy.

Many of the reviews following the first performances of *The Mikado* deal almost exclusively with the costumes and the effect that they had on the audiences. The *Punch* article, "Before the Curtain," contains an anecdote

¹³ Ibid., *The Mikado*, 185.

¹⁴ Gilbert, *The Story of The Mikado*, 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶ Ibid., 91.

whereas the actor who played Ko-Ko (the Lord High Executioner), Mr. George Grossmith, was having problems connecting with his audience. In the Second Act, Mr. Grossmith gave a “kick-up” and showed his “white-stocking’d legs” after which the audience felt relieved because they found out what had been missing all along, his legs. Whether or not the audience really felt uncomfortable seeing the men in the kimonos, which would be considered dresses by the majority of audience members, or whether Mr. Grossmith was uncomfortable wearing them, there is no clear evidence either way. Below is a sketch of George Grossmith in his role as Ko-Ko found in the *Punch* article.¹⁷

Japanese clothing, however, was considered to be unflattering not only to the male sex. William Beatty-Kingston in his article, “Our Musical-Box,” described the costumes as “unbecoming to men and women alike – especially the latter . . . imparting to the prettiest girl’s figure the seeming of a bolster loosely wrapped up in a dressing-gown.”¹⁸ This blurring of the lines between the sexes was a major issue for the audiences and reviewers that attended these productions. The reviewer from the *London Times* states, “Mr. Grossmith and Mr. Barrington walk and sit as if petticoats had been their ordinary garb since infancy.”¹⁹ A reviewer from *The Academy* exclaims, “he [Mr. Barrington] pads about the stage with the half-feminine courtesy and softness which belong to the cultivated male in the Land of the Rising Sun.”²⁰ These statements refer to the point we already made about how the British felt those Japanese males were feminine.



The reviewers of *The Mikado* all exclaimed how authentic the costuming and the mannerisms were in the production. Realizing that it wasn’t enough simply to set the opera in Japan, Gilbert found living models in the village at Knightsbridge. A Geisha and a male dancer were given permission by the directors of the Knightsbridge Village to teach the actors and actresses at the Savoy Theatre how to move, act and dress like the Japanese.

When it came time to rehearse the opera, it was evident to Gilbert that the Savoy actors and actresses, had to undo their training in the “noble dignity of action which distinguishes the English stage” and be transformed into Japanese

¹⁷ Nibbs, “Before the Curtain,” *Punch* 88 (1885), 145.

¹⁸ William Beatty-Kingston, “Our Musical-Box,” *The Theatre*, New series 5 (1885): 186-90, <http://www.sharkli.comsavoy/mikado/mik4.html>, October, 17, 2002.

¹⁹ *Times* (London), 16 March 1885.

²⁰ “The Stage: ‘The Mikado’,” *The Academy*, New Series 27 (673): 230-231, <http://www.sharkli.com/savoy/mikado/mik3.html>, October 17, 2002.

who were not the "ideal of perfect grace and loveliness."²¹ The Geisha and the male dancer were employed by Gilbert in order to complete this transformation. The Geisha taught the actresses how to walk, run, and dance in "tiny steps with toes turned in, as gracefully as possible" as well as how to "spread and snap a fan either in wrath, delight, homage, and how to giggle behind it."²²

The Japanese tutors taught not only mannerisms, but also were instrumental in choosing the costumes and make-up. The Japanese were consulted in all costuming decisions and only Japanese fabric was used in the costumes. Some of the costumes used in the production, were genuine "Japanese ones of Ancient date."²³ In fact, Katisha's gown was approximately

two hundred years old and the Mikado's robes and headgear were faithful replicas of the "ancient official costume of the Japanese monarch."²⁴

Copies were made of the armour and masks that belonged to the Mikado's bodyguards, because the originals would not fit anyone over the height of four foot five inches.²⁵

The make-up was attended to by the Geisha; addressing details such as hair, eyes and facial features. Hair was a problem, especially for the male actors who had much more facial hair than their Japanese counterparts. Mr. Richard Temple, who played the character of the Mikado,

allowed his eyebrows to be shaved off and huge, false ones to be painted on



²¹ Bridgeman, "The Making of *The Mikado*."

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

his forehead in the fashion of former Mikados. This picture is believed to be of Richard Temple as the Mikado on the cover of a book of piano music based on music from the opera, *The Mikado*.²⁶ In this picture, one can see the oversized eyebrows and the authentic costume of the former Mikados of Japan.

The fan, which can be noticed in the two previous pictures, plays a very important role in the both the costuming and the action of this opera. Everyone in the cast carries a fan, both the women and the men. The Three Little Maids use them to flirt, Pooh-Bah uses his to wave away his admirers, and Ko-Ko uses his to illustrate the beheading of a guinea pig. H. M. Walbrook in his book, *Gilbert and Sullivan Opera: A History and a Comment*, claims that "on the first night the audience was almost as fascinated by the fans as by those who so gracefully managed them."²⁷ The fans also made an impression on the author



of the *Punch* article, "Before the Curtain," for he includes a sketch that he called "The Two Fanny Japs at the Savoy," which is intended to represent Gilbert and Sullivan in full Japanese regalia.²⁸ The fan that Gilbert, the man on the right, is carrying bears a picture of Mr. D'Oyly Carte, the owner of the Savoy Theatre. The artist who sketched this picture has given Sir Arthur Sullivan, the composer of the music for this opera, music notes on his robes and fan and has also given him a conductor's baton.

The music that Sir Arthur Sullivan composed for *The Mikado* also falls into the category of Orientalism because

although it is based on a genuine Japanese theme, it has been altered to make it sound more English. There is a consensus among historians that the "Miya Sama" melody is an authentic Japanese tune. It has been traced back to the Restoration War of 1867-68 between the Bakufu or Tokugawa Army, which opposed the Mikado, and the Restoration Army, which supported the new

²⁶ Paul Seeley, "The Japanese March in 'The Mikado'," *The Musical Times* CXXVI (1985), 455.

²⁷ H.M. Walbrook, "Gilbert and Sullivan Opera: A History and a Comment (Chapter X: A Japanese Opera)," *Gilbert and Sullivan Archive*, <http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/mikado/html/mikado.html>, October 26, 2002.

²⁸ Nibbs, "Before the Curtain," 145.

Emperor, Meiji.²⁹ During this war, Commander Shinagawa of the Restoration Army commissioned a march so that he could teach his troops to march in time. The resulting march, "Miya Sama," eventually found its way to London and into the hands of Sullivan.

Due to the large number of rumors that have been published about Gilbert, Sullivan, and their operas, it has been difficult to track down exactly how the "Miya Sama" tune found its way to Sullivan. It is possible that the song came into his hands by way of the Japanese Village at Knightsbridge, although there is no documentation of any musical exchange occurring. Another possibility was published in 1907 when *The Globe* published an article claiming that Mr. Richard Temple, the actor who played the Mikado in the opera, gave the tune to Sullivan.³⁰ This claim, however, also can not be verified. The one reference to Japanese music that historians can find occurs in Sullivan's diary on January 6, 1885. The entry is simply, "Went to see A. B. Mitford – got some Japanese musical phrases from him."³¹ Since this entry is the only reference to Japanese music, it can be concluded that the "Miya Sama" melody came to Sullivan by way of Mitford, who had been Secretary at the British Legation in Tokyo and most likely encountered it there. Further documentation exists in the form of a letter written by Gilbert to Mitford only days after the first production where Gilbert writes, "I must thank you again for your invaluable help."³²

Sullivan, however, does not use the original "Miya Sama" words or melody in *The Mikado*. He decided to use only the first of four verses and also changed some of the words to allow the singers to articulate more clearly from the stage. For example, the words "hira-hira" in the original were changed to "pira-pira" to give the singers a stronger attack.

This disregard for the meaning of the text shows that Sullivan did not have translation of the text, or if he did, he showed no compunction in adapting it to suit the needs of his opera. There have also been disagreements over the years as to how to translate the refrain and whether or not Sullivan knew of them. Ian Bradley, author of *The Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*, suggests that "tokoton" is a Japanese slang word for "the finish" and suggests that there are "possible obscene connotations."³³ Kiyoshi Kasahara with the Institute of Cultural Science at the University of Tokyo, however, refutes this idea. He

²⁹ Seeley, "The Japanese March in 'The Mikado'," 455.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 455.

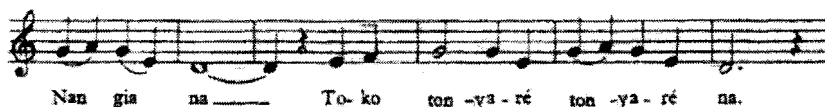
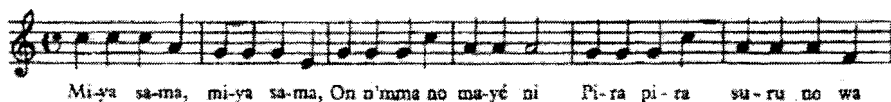
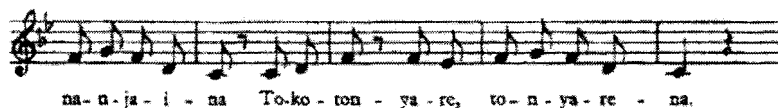
³¹ This diary entry actually appears in two separate sources. Seeley, "The Japanese March in 'The Mikado,'" 456 and Beckerman, *The Sword on the Wall*, 312.

³² Jane W. Stedman, *W.S. Gilbert: A Classical Victorian and His Theatre*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 225.

³³ Seeley, "The Japanese March in 'The Mikado'," 455.

believes that “tokoton-yare, ton-yare-na” is simply an “onomatopoeic representation of the sound and rhythm of drums” and has no direct translation.³⁴

Sullivan also chose to alter the original “Miya Sama” melody. Below is the original, written by Commander Ohmura, and the melody as it appears in the opera, written by Sir Arthur Sullivan. Obviously, the two versions are still very



The rhythms have barely been altered - retaining the steady marching beat - and the general shape of the lines has also been maintained. In fact, Sullivan has chosen a tune that sounds Japanese because it has so many repeated notes and is based on a pentatonic scale (D-E-G-A-C) but also can be easily altered to make it sound English for the same reasons. Since much of England's folk music is inherently pentatonic and many of Sullivan's previous accompaniments are based on repeated patterns and notes it was not a large step for Sullivan to incorporate this Japanese melody into his new opera.

If Sullivan's views on Japanese music were similar to those held by the reviewers of the opera, there can be no doubt why Sullivan chose to make the music in this opera sound so English. *The Monthly Musical Record* ran a review in which the author congratulates Sullivan on his avoidance of Japanese music, especially

³⁴ Ibid., 455.

“songs constructed out of the Japanese scale which could only be sung in the Japanese manner, accompanied by that pleasant combination of mewling, squalling in falsetto voice, and thumping on a flabby drum.”³⁵

The *Times* also claims that Sullivan acted wisely in choosing not to include genuine Japanese music in the opera, although for a slightly different reason. Since, as the author of the review claims, there were perhaps “30 persons among the audience who had so much as heard of a pentatonic scale or a Koto (a 13-stringed dulcimer),” then it was a wise decision not to include genuine Japanese music in the opera.³⁶ The British opinion of Japanese music being so low, it is no surprise that Sullivan chose to Westernize the “Miya Sama” melody.

Many of the reviewers, however, were wrong in believing that the only two numbers in the opera that contain Japanese material are the overture and the march for the Mikado. Sullivan actually uses musical motives from the “Miya Sama” melody and places them throughout the opera. There are songs when the Japanese material is clearly audible (“Miya Sama”), when it is submerged (“The Sun Whose Rays”) and also when it vanishes altogether (“Sing a Merry Madrigal”).

Sullivan breaks the original melody into fragments, or leitmotifs, which represent the Japanese every time they are played. The first is an open fifth and the second is a repeated



note figure. Both of these leitmotifs can be found throughout the opera, either in this original form or ornamented. For example, the open fifth opens both the opera and the “Miya Sama” melody, but it is also present in “If You Want to Know Who We Are,” i.e. starting on D and moving up to the G.³⁷

³⁵“The Mikado,” *The Monthly Musical Record*, Gilbert and Sullivan Archive, <http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/mikado/html/mikado.html>, October 26, 2002.

³⁶ *Times* (London), 16 March 1885.

³⁷ Gilbert and Sullivan, *The Mikado*, 15.

Another aspect of Japanese music that is used by Sullivan in *The Mikado* is monophony.

The English have a long

tradition of choral music, specifically pieces such as the English madrigal, of which there is an example in this opera. Such a long standing tradition means that pieces such as "If You Want to Know Who We Are," where all the voices are singing in unison, are extremely unusual.

By taking a look at the overall form of the opera, Sullivan's designs are revealed. In his article "The Sword on the Wall: Japanese Elements and their significance in *The Mikado*," Michael Beckerman has provided a chart which outlines the numbers in the opera which contain those pseudo-Japanese elements with stars.³⁸ With this chart, it is easy to see how Sullivan is able to make a cohesive whole out of such little Japanese material. First, Sullivan makes certain

that the overture is made up of

Overture						Act 1											Act 2													
16	13	23	12	23	11	16	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*									*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	

only songs that contain the "Miya Sama" musical material. Next, he spaces out those songs which are derived from the "Miya Sama" melody throughout the opera, making certain that he begins and ends each act with these songs. These opening and closing songs reinforce the Japanese sounds in the ears of the audience, convincing them that the entire opera sounds the same way. The chart also shows that Sullivan spaced two more songs (16 and 19) into the middle of the longer Second Act to further reinforce the sounds of Japan.

All of these characteristics, musical, dramatic, and literary, combine to make *The Mikado* the masterpiece that it has become over the last century. It makes sense, however, to ask what the Japanese themselves would have thought of *The Mikado* at the time of its premiere. Records show that the Japanese who were helping train the actors and actresses at the Savoy found it flattering that the British would write an opera about them.³⁹ Beckerman, however, believes that the title of the opera would have humiliated the Japanese because in their culture the Japanese were not allowed to even speak the name of their exalted god-like Emperor.⁴⁰

Chorus
TENORS & BASSES in Unison

If you want to know who we are, —

³⁸ P. 314.

³⁹ Bridgeman, "The Making of *The Mikado*."

⁴⁰ Beckerman, "The Sword on the Wall," 315.

The Japanese could also have objected to being portrayed as bloodthirsty. It is true that all of Gilbert and Sullivan's operas contain references to violence, usually hanging, but this story is unusually filled with talk of beheading, boiling in oil, and being buried alive. In fact, there are more references to cruelty and violence in *The Mikado* than in all the other Gilbert and Sullivan operas combined.⁴¹ Not all of the violent references, however, seem to illustrate Japanese tendencies. In fact, some of these references, such as the dialogue between Ko-Ko and Yum-Yum between numbers 14 and 15, are obviously meant as commentary on British-Indian relations.

Ko-Ko: I've just ascertained that, by the Mikado's law, when a
married man is beheaded his wife is buried alive.

Nanki-Poo and Yum-Yum: Buried Alive!

Ko-Ko: Buried alive. It's a most unpleasant death.⁴²

This excerpt could easily be seen as Gilbert's reference to *satie*, the tradition in India where a widow throws herself onto her dead husband's funeral pyre thereby committing suicide. Inserting a commentary on British-Indian relations within an opera on Japan is an indication of how Western Europe portrayed all eastern cultures as Oriental without regard for their individuality.

Edward Said contends that Orientalism is not only a passive mode of depiction, it also is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."⁴³ Gilbert and Sullivan's opera, *The Mikado*, fits well into this definition. There is nothing real about the Japan that Gilbert and Sullivan created. They researched the history, the music and the culture and created a wonderland that resembled Japan.

Everything from people to music in this pseudo-Japan that they created had to first be filtered through Western models. "The elusive, omnipotent Mikado is turned into a slightly wacky English gentleman, the stylized Geishas are transformed into giggling schoolgirls, and even the Lord High Executioner is reduced to a lowly, craven tailor."⁴⁴

These characters, which were the most Japanese of all the characters in the opera, had to be made readily identifiable to the British public, therefore they were given identities of common English stereotypes. Even the music in the opera lost its Japanese qualities in order that it might sound more the way that Western culture thought Japanese music should sound. The only true

⁴¹ Ibid., 316.

⁴² Gilbert and Sullivan, *The Mikado*, 157.

⁴³ Beckerman, "The Sword on the Wall," 317.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 318.

Japanese article left in the opera is the clothing and even that could be considered to be purely ornamental.