



Synopsis, Roles & Ranges

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"The Pirates of Penzance" (or "The Slave of Duty")

This show is a comic opera in two acts, with music by Arthur Sullivan and libretto by W.S. Gilbert. The official premiere was in New York on December 31st, 1879.

The story concerns Frederic who, having completed his 21st year, is released from his apprenticeship to a band of tender-hearted pirates. He meets Mabel, the daughter of Major-General Stanley, and the two young people fall instantly in love. Frederic finds out however, that he was born in Leap Year, the 29th of February and so, technically, he only has a birthday every four years, each Leap Year on February 29th. His apprenticeship indentures state that he remains apprenticed to the pirates until his 21st birthday, and so he must serve for another 63 years. Bound by his own sense of duty, Frederic's only solace is that Mabel agrees to wait for him faithfully.

There are also other subplots at work: the Pirates, upon seeing Mabel's sisters at play, decide to capture them, so that they may then take them to the nearest clergyman and marry them on the spot. The Major-General, the girls' father, saves them from this fate by claiming he is an orphan and, as the Pirates make it a practice of never "mistreating" an orphan, they are compelled to let him go.

Ruth, Frederic's nursery maid, wants to marry Frederic but he rebuffs her after seeing the younger, more beautiful Mabel. So she teams up with the Pirates when they attack Major-General Stanley's home, Tremorden Castle, after learning Major-General Stanley was never an orphan. The constabulary, lead by their bumbling Police Sergeant, try to defend the castle but are easily overcome. Then the Pirates are persuaded to yield to the Police Sergeant in Queen Victoria's name

and THEN Ruth reveals that the Pirates are all "noblemen who have gone wrong." All is forgiven and Frederic and the Pirates can marry the daughters! The End.

It is an optimistic, joyful work that requires optimistic and joyful people to express it. It is the likability of the cast as "people", their capacity to enjoy the full-out singing required, their sincerity, energy, and their warmth that will make "The Pirates of Penzance" work.

Roles & Ranges:

The pirate King - Baritone (range is from G (G2) an octave and a half below middle C (C4) to G (G4) above middle C; in other words, G2 to G4) Swashbuckling, athletic, and handsome leader of The Pirates of Penzance. An adventurer and sentimental, romantic fellow. He wants to be a pirate just to have his shirt open, the wind in his hair, and to stand around like Captain Jack Sparrow. Also not too bright, his idea of manhandling women is to carry them off to a preacher and ruthlessly marry them on the spot. He would never really hurt anybody, especially not orphans as he and his band are all orphans themselves "and know what it is." However, he does become quite angry at the Major-General.

Mabel - Coloratura soprano (Range is two octaves up from C4, i.e., C4 to C6, but sometimes with extra top notes. Mabel's top note in the production is Eb6) Young (17-20) and beautiful, very much a young woman of the 19th century. She is genuine and utterly sincere as she captures the love of young Frederick. Her naivety and innocence make her a sweet and funny character.

Frederic - Tenor (Range is from C3 to C5. Top note in the production is Bb5.) Young handsome, manly, and genuine. The feelings between Ruth, his nursery maid, and him are deep feelings, they care for each other on the most profound level. That is why he can attack her so vehemently at the one moment for having grey hair, and at the next put his arms around her to sing a very beautiful duet. However, his feelings for Mabel are true love at first sight. He is funny because he is so sincerely trying to do the honorable thing; he truly is the "slave of duty", which is a running joke throughout the show, as well as the subtitle of the show. For him, duty is before all.

Major General Stanley - Baritone (range is from G2 to G4) He is "dignified respectability", in the truest sense of those words. He is "vivid", with the warmth and good humor one would expect from Santa Claus. Quirky with military discipline, but believable.

Ruth - Contralto (Range is from F3 to F5) She is a proper English nanny and has raised young Frederic "properly" to be a gentleman. It is from her that he has learned to be so polite and honorable and to cherish respectability... and to give himself over wholly and completely to love. The feelings between Ruth and Frederic are the deep feelings of - almost - mother and son. They care for each other on the most profound level. She wants to marry Frederic though he resists because he suspects she isn't as beautiful as she suggests.

Sergeant of Police - Bass (range is F2 to F4) Obeys his duty and the law, but is a coward at heart. The choreography will call for a good dancer in addition to good vocal ability.

Samuel - Baritone (range is G2 to G4) The Pirate King's right hand man, he is sincere, earnest, and simple-minded.

Edith - Soprano (Range is C4 to C6) One of Major-General Stanley's daughters.

Kate - Mezzo-soprano (range is A4 to A6) One of Major-General Stanley's daughters.

Isabel - Soprano (Range is C4 to C6) One of Major-General Stanley's daughters.

Chorus of Daughters - Contraltos (F3 to F5) and Sopranos (Range is C4 to C6) The more vivid and individual each daughter is, the better. Big voices are essential as there are more Pirates and Constables than daughters. Very little vibrato is often recommended. A chest, or "belt", voice is used for many passages to achieve the clarity of young girls while maintaining sufficient vocal power. Comedic understanding and basic dancing ability will be required.

Chorus of Pirates - Baritones (range is G2 to G4) and Tenors (Range is from C3 to C5) Simple minded, tender-hearted souls. Big, full-out singing is what is thrilling about the Pirates. The choreography calls for basic dancing ability in addition to strong vocal ability and a keen comedic sense. Pirates can be played by males or females.

Constables - Constables are either Bass (range is F2 to F4) or Baritones (range is G2 to G4) They obey their duty and the law, but are cowards at heart. The choreography calls for good dancers in addition to good vocal ability and a keen comedic sense. Constables can be played by males or females.