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978-1-107-42907-9 - *The Beggar's Opera: Its Predecessors and Successors*

Frank Kidson

Excerpt

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THE *BEGGAR'S* OPERA

INTRODUCTION

THE perennial success of *The Beggar's Opera*, which has retained its popularity for nearly a couple of centuries, forms a record in dramatic productions. The causes of this popularity have varied with each generation, and the original source of its favour has long ago been lost and given place to one quite different from what the author expected or perhaps desired. It is very doubtful if John Gay saw more in his work than an ephemeral satire on passing phases of the day. He could not have foretold that the piece would run even the sixty-three nights of the season at Lincoln's Inn Theatre, and, while he may have expected that some abuse would be hurled at the satire contained in the opera, he certainly did not think that the creation of Macheath, his gang, and women followers would be denounced as incentives to vice and immorality. It has been the fate of *The*

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Beggar's Opera to draw forth much mistaken invective, while the lesson which Gay undoubtedly wished to teach was ignored or unnoticed.

I have said that the causes which have made the piece such a favourite with all classes and with generations that have widely differed in thought were many, and it is my task in the following pages, before dealing with the opera itself, to try to realise them for the reader. In view of this it becomes necessary to refer to the state of the musical drama in England during the reigns of Queen Anne and of George I, with some notice of earlier productions.

In the early part of the eighteenth century that portion of the nation which ever sought its musical art from other countries welcomed opera as it appeared on the Italian stage, and applauded its transfer to the English boards with all its company of foreign exponents. This class of opera was in full swing when Gay offered his piece to the public. The 'man in the street' was silent and to a certain extent uncatered for. He kept away from the Italian operas and confessed that they were things he could not understand or appreciate at their true value—if value they had. At any rate he had little sympathy with what he called the 'squallings' of these foreign men and women in a language which he did not understand and to music of which he

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had an equally poor opinion. *The Beggar's Opera* had an appeal to the ordinary man not only for its wit, its satire, its picturesqueness, but, musically, for the pretty, simple airs that were plentifully besprinkled throughout it. Every man and woman could sing them, and that they were favourites, apart from their place in the opera, is shown by the popularity of many of them for a century and a half after their original publication. Of such airs as 'Cease your funning' instrumental arrangements are plentiful among the music sheets of sixty or seventy years ago, and the lively melody 'If the heart of a man is depressed with cares' was kept alive in Victorian drawing-rooms by its use for the 'bowing figure' in the Lancers.

The great run of the opera's recent revival at Hammersmith, with its touring companies and full houses wherever performed, shows how ready we of the twentieth century are to appreciate its pictures of old-time life, its old-time satire, its quaint dresses, picturesque dances, and sparkling music, simple though that music be. *The Beggar's Opera* is so much of a classic that we may easily grant that the present run will not end its career on the English stage, and we may expect revival after revival, each possibly with what may be termed a 'new reading' as each actor-manager sees it in his own light. He would be a vandal

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indeed who would tamper with its music, but who can tell whether or no such vandal may arise? In the course of its passage down to our time the opera has had its ordeals, and actors and managers have played not very kindly tricks with it. Fortunately for the present day representation, the producers have gone to the original source and discarded modern innovations and omissions. For the piece has suffered its martyrdom at the hands of country managers of stock companies, who have used it in their need for after-pieces and other exigences. There were no acting fees to pay, no author to appease for the mutilation of the piece. Like Shakespeare's work, it was common property and was able to stand all the ignominy that such persons put upon it and to sustain its effect in spite of inartistic tamperings. Managers always found it a safe 'draw,' no matter whether Polly could, or could not, sing the airs allotted to her; whether or no Macheath was inadequate, the piece drew its audience in every provincial theatre a hundred and less years ago.

Popular songs of the day were interpolated and little heed taken of the unities of the story, and every budding Polly Peachum, no doubt knowing of the good fortune of her predecessor in the past, dreamed silently of the duke who was going to take her from the stage. Lavinia Fenton was

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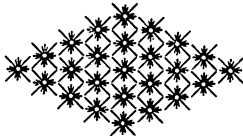
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an unknown woman, young and pretty perhaps, but chance turned her into a duchess, and so....But no duke after that of Bolton sought a Polly Peachum of a later date, and the Pollies of the provincial stage had to be content with what fortune granted them.



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OPERA IN ENGLAND PRIOR TO
THE BEGGAR'S OPERA

BEFORE we can fully realise the enormous influence *The Beggar's Opera* had upon the English stage in regard to musical pieces, it will be necessary to deal, at least briefly, with the musical drama before Gay's production was staged.

How the English stage became overridden by foreign productions is one of those mysteries that will never be solved. The sturdy English character which was supposed to prevail in the eighteenth century and to repudiate 'anything foreign' was not greatly in evidence among the more cultured, for this class accepted without a murmur—save one of satisfaction—foreign music, foreign singers, foreign dancing-masters, and much that was really alien to the nation.

In the reign of Elizabeth and in that of James I masques were a great feature in Court entertainments. They were performed also at Lincoln's Inn, Gray's Inn, and similar places, while equally elaborate ones were done at the houses of the nobles. Ben Jonson was author of many of these masques, and the notable *Comus*, written by John

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Milton for his friend Henry Lawes, shows us the type that was in vogue. Milton's *Comus* was written for an entertainment at the house of the Earl of Bridgewater and performed by his children and their music-master, Henry Lawes, in 1634. How Thomas Augustine Arne, then a young man, in 1738 wrote fresh music to Milton's words (with additions to the words by Dr Dalton), and the exquisite quality and beauty of that music, are matters perhaps outside the present essay. It is sufficient to know that the masques of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were dressed in costume, and had scenery, properties, and music. Each had a plot, frequently founded on some classic story or legend. That of *Comus* was founded upon the incident of one of the Earl's children being lost in a wood. How much these masques differed from the operas of later date is not very clear; at any rate, the dividing-line cannot have been very definite or certain.

During the Commonwealth (in 1642) stage-plays were prohibited, and the musical, as well as the legitimate, drama was under a cloud. At the same time private musical entertainments of the order of masque or opera were in vogue to a limited degree. At this time the opera in Italy was in a very flourishing state and had taken a particular and well-understood form.

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Sir William Davenant had been the producer of many masques and musical entertainments, and he obtained permission from Cromwell to open a semi-private theatre at Rutland House for the performance of these and similar pieces. One was *The first dayes Entertainment at Rutland House, by declamations and musick after the manner of the ancients*. This was performed in 1656, and as the words were in Italian the Protector very sagely allowed it because he opined it could have no harmful influence, being in a language not generally understood. The music for this piece, whatever its character, was supplied by Henry Lawes, Dr Charles Coleman, Henry Cooke, and George Hudson. It has been asserted that this was the first attempt at opera in England, but it is doubtful whether it can be ranked as one; a stronger claim can be made for another of Sir William Davenant's productions, *The Siege of Rhodes*. This was acted at the semi-private theatre at Rutland House, Charterhouse Square, in 1656. It was again acted at a theatre which Davenant opened in Lincoln's Inn Fields. In this performance more elaborate setting was given, with a second part added. After the Restoration John Evelyn, under the date January 9th, 1662, records that he saw the second part of *The Siege of Rhodes*.

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The printed libretto of *The Siege of Rhodes* refers to the composers who were claimed to be 'the most transcendent of England in that art, and perhaps not unequal to the best masters abroad.' The audience are informed that the music is 'recitative and therefore unpractised here, though of great reputation amongst other nations.' The composers were H. Lawes, Matthew Lock, Dr Coleman, H. Cooke, and G. Hudson.

Of the many masques and musical entertainments that Davenant produced, the above-named *Siege of Rhodes* appears to have been the most famous and the most popular. He followed this success by *The Cruelty of the Spaniards in Peru*. This was in 1658, and Evelyn saw it on May 5th, 1659. He describes it as 'a new opera after the Italian way in recitative music and scenes, much inferior to the Italian composure and magnificence; but it was prodigious that in a time of such public consternation such a vanity should be kept up or permitted.'

It was in Davenant's pieces that female actors are said to have been first seen on the stage. Both he and his son, Dr Charles Davenant, must be given credit for their activity in producing musical plays and, as it were, paving the way for the operas and musical dramas that Henry Purcell glorified by his music.

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But Davenant, although he led the way, was not the only producer of musical plays or operas at this period. James Shirley's interlude, *The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses* (1659), and a musical drama, *The Marriage of Ocean and Britannia*, by Richard Flecknoe (1659), were two that may be classed as operas or masques. Shirley wrote a number of masques and interludes which were produced between 1633 and 1659. The brothers William and Henry Lawes chiefly supplied the music.

When Charles II came to the throne in 1660 the ban on the theatre was removed, and his known taste in theatrical performances and music gave great encouragement to the drama, musical and otherwise.

It is not my purpose to follow closely the record of the musical drama in England before *The Beggar's Opera* saw the light, but a general idea of what had been the staple fare in this class of work may be useful in understanding what a great revolution Gay's opera made, and how these pieces of the pre-Restoration and Restoration periods led up to the operas that John Gay ridiculed.

As is well-known, Charles, during his absence from England, had acquired a French taste in art, especially in that of music. He brought over with him to his Court a number of French performers