MUSIC IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

John Rice

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Georgian London

"Whoever wants to achieve something in music nowadays goes to England," wrote the German composer Johann Mattheson in 1713. "The Italians exalt music, the French enliven it, the Germans strive after it, the English pay well for it." Many of the musicians who came to London from the continent of Europe during our period would have agreed with Mattheson. Whether they visited the city or settled there permanently, they made it one of Europe's liveliest musical capitals.

METROPOLIS ON THE THAMES

Seventeenth-century England, with its access to the Atlantic Ocean, its colonies in North America and the Caribbean, and its strong navy and merchant fleet, became Europe's leader in international trade. England consolidated its domination of the rest of the British Isles in 1707, when the kingdoms of England and Scotland joined to become Great Britain—a political entity whose viability was strengthened with the establishment of a new ruling dynasty, the house of Hanover, in 1714. The Treaty of Utrecht that ended the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713 confirmed Britain's gains at the expense of its Continental rivals.

Britain's wealth and power were concentrated in London, the meeting place of trade routes that spanned the globe. London led the world in trade and

manufacturing, and in the banking and insurance industries on which trade depended. Every year thousands of ships moved up and down the river Thames; huge quantities of raw materials and merchandise passed through London's docks and customs offices.

Ships involved in Britain's thriving slave trade sailed mostly out of ports on the west coast, but London's financiers invested in the business and reaped its rewards. Slavery also contributed to London's prosperity in other ways. Sugar from British colonies in the West Indies, the product of slave labor, became London's largest import. The sugar trade enriched not only the merchants who bought the raw sugar, refined it, and resold it, but also the owners of sugar plantations, some of whom lived in London.

With prosperity came expanding population: London grew from about 575,000 in 1700 to about 948,000 a century later, larger than any other city in Europe, and second in size worldwide only to Beijing. In the West End, developers laid out new neighborhoods, whose plans reflected the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Many of their wide, straight streets (different from the labyrinthine alleys of the medieval city) met at right angles or at rectangular plazas lined with elegant brick townhouses. One of the new urban plazas, Hanover Square, gave its name to London's most important concert hall.

The name of the concert hall and the square on which it was located paid tribute to the royal dynasty that presided over London's growth and prosperity. When Queen Anne died in 1714 without a direct heir, Parliament looked abroad for a prince to succeed her. George, elector of the German principality of Hanover and Anne's closest Protestant relative, was crowned king later the same year. His coronation marks the establishment of the Hanoverian dynasty. From his name and that of his successors, also called George, comes the adjective "Georgian," with which historians refer to distinctive elements of eighteenth-century British culture.

The Hanoverian kings did not control most aspects of cultural life in their capital. Their relatively small influence reflected both the limited power of the king in a parliamentary monarchy and London's size and wealth: many of its cultural institutions did not need the king's money. But in one respect London's music did mirror the court: many composers, instrumentalists, singers, and instrument makers came from abroad. Having imported a ruler, London thought nothing of importing the Continent's finest musical talent. The Germans George Frideric Handel and Johann Christian Bach settled in London; several of Italy's leading composers served as music directors; many of the best Italian singers appeared on the stage and in concert rooms; and English music lovers applauded both the child Mozart and the mature Haydn. (Wendy Heller discusses Handel and the Italian diaspora in *Music in the Baroque.*)

London's theaters, like those in other European capitals, operated under government control. The Licensing Act of 1737 reinforced existing patents that

allowed only two large, permanent theaters to present dramas in English: the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane and the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden (which in the 1730s replaced, and took over the patent from, an older theater at Lincoln's Inn Fields). Another theater, the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, specialized in the production of Italian opera. Built in 1709, and quite small in comparison with Covent Garden and Italy's principal theaters, it seated about 940 people. Despite its name, the King's Theatre was not owned or run by the Crown. The building itself was in private hands, and the Italian opera companies that occupied it operated under a succession of different managers. The opera's most important patrons were its subscribers, mostly members of the nobility, who paid substantial sums to rent boxes throughout the season.

BALLAD OPERA

On January 29, 1728, the impresario John Rich presented *The Beggar's Opera* at Lincoln's Inn Fields. An immediate success, it was performed 62 times during its first run. It maintained a place in the London repertory for the rest of the century, presented far more frequently and widely (all over Britain and in the North American colonies as well) than any other English opera.

The Beggar's Opera defined and established a new genre of musical theater in English: ballad opera, a spoken play interspersed with existing songs sung to new words. John Gay (1685–1732) wrote the words for *The Beggar's Opera* and chose the songs. The 69 musical numbers came from a wide variety of sources: mostly folk songs, including English ballads and traditional tunes from Ireland, Scotland, and France, but also vocal pieces by major composers such as Henry Purcell and Handel.

Historians disagree about how *The Beggar's Opera* differed from the masques, "English operas," and other forms of musical theater that Wendy Heller describes. Some have suggested it had no real precedent; others have argued that it reflects the influence of opéra comique, which emerged in Paris around 1715. As we saw in Chapter 6, early opéra comique consisted largely of popular songs strung together by spoken dialogue. French troupes performed opéra comique in London in the early 1720s, and these productions probably inspired Gay to put the rich folk traditions of the British Isles to similar use.

Gay presented familiar songs in unexpected dramatic contexts and with words that often amusingly contradict the sense of the original words, in a drama that undermines and makes fun of theatrical conventions in general and operatic conventions in particular. The title refers to the drama's frame: a pair of scenes at the beginning and end. In the opening scene a beggar who has written an opera introduces his work to an actor, proudly declaring that his work conforms to operatic conventions: "I have introduced the similes that are in all your

celebrated operas: the swallow, the moth, the bee, the ship, the flower, etc. Besides, I have a prison scene, which the ladies always reckon charmingly pathetic. As to the parts, I have observed such a nice impartiality to our two ladies, that it is impossible for either of them to take offence." But by making most of his characters thieves and prostitutes, and by making his hero a criminal and a libertine, Gay turned the world of Italian opera upside down.

In the final scene the beggar and actor reappear. The actor objects to the hero's impending death: such an ending would make "a downright deep tragedy. The catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an opera must end happily." The beggar agrees, allowing his criminal hero to go free. Thus Gay ends his drama by making fun of Italian opera's fondness for happy endings.

Macheath is a daring outlaw and a womanizer as insatiable and charming as the legendary Don Juan, who not only enjoys the company and the sexual favors of a group of prostitutes but also marries the virtuous Polly Peachum. Polly's father, a seller of stolen goods, plans to turn Macheath in to the authorities, so that when he is hanged Polly will inherit his money. Macheath is arrested and imprisoned, but Lucy, daughter of the jailer and one of Macheath's girlfriends, frees him. Lockit the jailer, thinking his daughter freed Macheath in exchange for money, demands that she share it. She tells him that she did it for love and explains (to the tune of Purcell's *If love's a sweet passion*) how Macheath seduced her. Gay replaced the plaintively erotic love poetry of Purcell's song with something bawdier:

Anonymous poem set by Purcell (*The Fairy Queen*, 1692)	Gay's parody
If love's a sweet passion why does it torment?	When young at the bar you first taught me to score,
If a bitter, oh tell me whence comes my content?	And bid me be free with my lips, and no more;
Since I suffer with pleasure, why should I complain,	I was kiss'd by the parson, the squire, and the sot.
Or grieve at my fate, when I know 'tis in vain?	When the guest was departed, the kiss was forgot.
Yet so pleasing the pain is, so soft is the dart,	But his kiss was so sweet, and so closely he press'd,
That at once it both wounds me, and tickles my heart.	That I languish'd and pin'd till I granted the rest.

Macheath, betrayed again, does not remain free for long, and Polly and Lucy plead for his life (Fig. 7.1). He is about to be taken to the gallows when the beggar and the actor suddenly intervene.

Figure 7.1: *A ticket for a benefit performance of* The Beggar's Opera, *showing the climactic scene in which Polly (on the left) and Lucy (on the right) plead for Macheath's life. Engraving by Sympson after a drawing by William Hogarth*

The phenomenal success of *The Beggar's Opera* led to the production of other ballad operas, few of them as daringly subversive as Gay's. Stricter enforcement of censorship laws pushed ballad opera toward more innocuous and less memorable fare. Like opéra comique, it borrowed its music increasingly from Italian opera, to the point where, by the 1760s, whole Italian comic operas were translated into English, with the recitative transformed into spoken dialogue. But the traditions of ballad opera prevailed in English dramas in which songs from a wide variety of sources were linked with spoken dialogue. One of the most popular of such operas was *Love in a Village*, which replaced the biting satire and gritty urban setting of *The Beggar's Opera* with a gently comic and sentimental picture of the English countryside. Thomas Arne (1710–1778) supplied the music, composing several numbers and collecting the rest from the works of other composers and from folk music. First performed at Covent Garden in 1762, *Love in a Village* delighted audiences for many years.

ITALIAN OPERA

Many of London's operagoers had developed their musical tastes during travels in Italy. They had heard the greatest Italian singers and were willing to pay what it took to bring them to England. The list of singers who appeared in the Haymarket is a who's who of Italian stars.

Composers of Italian opera also came to London in droves. Handel was the first of a splendid succession of composers from the Continent who served the King's Theatre as music directors or composers or in a more informal capacity (Table 7.1). Most came from Italy or had extensive experience there. Several spent the rest of their lives in England and contributed to music far beyond the Haymarket. Almost all (with the exception of Handel) were Catholic; their presence in Protestant London constitutes a compelling example of our period's division of musical roles (proposed in Chapter 1) between Catholic producers and Protestant consumers.

These musicians presented both their own works and operas from Italy. They also oversaw the production of *pasticci* (as defined in Chapter 4), as popular in London (accustomed to ballad operas and other dramas containing music from many different sources) as in Italy. The value Londoners placed on virtuoso singing, and the prestige leading singers consequently enjoyed, put them in a strong position in discussions with music directors about what arias they were to sing. The most important duty of a music director in the Haymarket was to display singers as brilliantly as possible. If this meant cobbling together the music of several composers, so be it.

The kinds of Italian operas performed in the King's Theatre varied according to the tastes and strategies of the impresario in charge and the abilities of singers under contract. Opera seria dominated the repertory into the 1760s. When the Mozart family visited London in 1764–66, the Haymarket presented only opera seria and the operatic season was organized around a single celebrated and highly paid *musico*, Giovanni Manzoli. The 9-year-old prodigy studied Manzoli's singing intently. A few months later, accompanying himself at the keyboard, Mozart improvised Italian arias in Manzoli's style. In the late 1760s Italian comedy began winning more attention from London audiences.

PICCINNI'S *LA BUONA FIGLIUOLA*

The great success of *La buona figliuola* (The Good Girl), a comic opera by Niccolò Piccinni (1728–1800) that reached London in 1767, did more than anything else to put opera buffa on a footing more or less equal to that of opera seria. "The music of this favourite opera appears always new," a critic wrote of *La buona figliuola* in 1774; "and we may venture to affirm that it will for ever remain the standard of true harmonical taste. The first motion of the overture never fails to call on the