

# Oxford Music Online

## Grove Music Online Beggar's Opera, The

article url: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/O002751>

### Beggar's Opera, The.

Ballad opera in three acts arranged by **JOHANN CHRISTOPH PEPUSCH** to a libretto by **JOHN GAY**; London, Lincoln's Inn Fields, 29 January 1728.

---

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| Macheath <i>celebrated highwayman and womanizer</i>   | tenor/baritone |
| Peachum <i>a seller of stolen goods</i>   | bass           |
| Mrs Peachum <i>his wife</i>   | soprano        |
| Polly Peachum <i>his daughter and Macheath's wife</i>   | soprano        |
| Lockit <i>a corrupt gaoler</i>  | baritone/bass  |
| Lucy Lockit <i>his daughter and Macheath's mistress</i>   | soprano        |
| Filch <i>a thief in Peachum's employment</i>  | tenor          |
| Diana Trapes  | soprano        |
| Beggar  | speaking role  |
| Player  | speaking role  |
| Macheath's Gang (Matt of the Mint, Jemmy Twitcher, Crook-Finger'd Jack, Wat Dreary, Robin of Bagshot, Nimming Ned, Harry Paddington, Ben Budge), Women of the Town (Jenny Diver, Mrs Coaxer, Dolly Trull, Mrs Vixen, Betty Doxy, Mrs Slammekin, Suky Tawdry, Molly Brazen), constables, Drawer, Turnkey |                |
| <i>Setting</i> London in 1727   |                |

---

*The Beggar's Opera* took London by storm, and it remains one of the most frequently performed operatic works in English. There was no precedent or model for the work. Gay was a disappointed seeker of court patronage at the time of the première. A friend of Pope and Swift, he had written seven mostly undistinguished plays and a fair quantity of verse.

The ballad opera form that he created virtually out of nothing consists of spoken dialogue interspersed with thematically relevant songs, taken from a variety of mostly popular sources. Of the 69 songs, 28 have been traced to English ballads and 23 to popular Irish, Scottish and French tunes. The remaining 18 are drawn from Purcell (3), John Barrett (2), Jeremiah Clarke (2), Handel (2), Henry Carey (2), Bononcini, John Eccles, possibly Geminiani, John Wilford, Pepusch, Frescobaldi and Lewis Ramondon. The overture is based on 'One evening, having lost my way', an air in Act 3. The musical arrangement is usually credited to Pepusch, but there is no definite evidence to support this statement. Most of the tunes were extremely familiar to the original audience, and Gay was clever at creating ironic overtones and interplay between the music and his new lyrics. For example, the heroic overtones of the original words for Purcell's melody clang oddly against the very ugly sexual realities of Polly's 'Virgins are like the fair Flower'.

Gay offered the work to Drury Lane, where it was refused by Colley Cibber, perhaps because of its genuine oddity or because of its unflattering allusions to the Whig Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, in the characters of Macheath and Peachum. John Rich agreed to mount it at Lincoln's Inn Fields, where its success was unprecedented in the history of the London theatre. It received 62 performances during its first, partial season and was immediately pirated. The first production created a popular craze for *Beggar's Opera* fans, playing cards, porcelain figures and illustrations (Hogarth's are the best known). The piece was performed in London every season for the rest of the century and productions were mounted in the 18th century throughout the English-speaking world, including Dublin, Dover, Norwich, Bath, Newcastle, Canterbury, Bristol, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Jamaica, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Providence, Newport, Baltimore, Richmond, Williamsburg, Norfolk and Charleston. It was less often performed during the 19th century but returned to hit status in the famous Frederic Austin arrangement given at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, on 5 June 1920 – a production that ran a startling 1463 nights and was frequently revived.

In 1928 Bertolt Brecht created a German adaptation with music by Kurt Weill, *Die Dreigroschenoper* ('The Threepenny

Opera'). Despite that work's enormous international popularity, *The Beggar's Opera* continues to hold the stage. Loewenberg reported numerous productions before 1940, and since then they have, if anything, multiplied. The work has been revived regularly in the commercial theatre in London and New York, as well as in the National Theatre, London. It has also been made into a film by Sir Laurence Olivier (1953). Most late 20th-century productions have been executed with little comprehension of the musical and dramatic style of the original, which was designed for performance by actors rather than singers.

The first edition of *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) gave the tunes of the songs, the second (also 1728; see [not available online]) added the overture on four staves, and the third (1729) included the basses of the songs, and also the text and songs from Gay's sequel, *Polly*. No MS orchestral parts of *The Beggar's Opera* survive, but parts for other ballad operas suggest that the songs were performed with short orchestral preludes and postludes derived from the tunes themselves; perhaps because of economy these were never published. Thus the third edition of *The Beggar's Opera* is almost a full score, for such songs were normally accompanied by strings alone with only the harpsichord to fill in between tune and bass. More elaborate accompaniments have been provided by Linley, Addison, Hatton, Austin, Dent, Bliss and Britten, among others.

Introduction (followed by the overture). The Beggar explains his 'Opera' to the Player: 'I have introduc'd the Similes that are in all your celebrated *Operas* ... Besides, I have a Prison Scene which the Ladies always reckon charmingly pathetick. As to the Parts, I have observ'd such a nice Impartiality to our two Ladies [i.e. Polly and Lucy – a jibe at the Faustina–Cuzzoni rivalry], that it is impossible for either of them to take Offence. I hope I may be forgiven, that I have not made my Opera throughout unnatural, like those in vogue; for I have no Recitative'.

ACT 1 *Peachum's house* Peachum is going over his accounts and gives us his view of the world: 'Through all the Employments of Life / Each Neighbour abuses his Brother ... All Professions be-rogue one another ... And the Statesman, because he's so great, / Thinks his Trade as honest as mine'; doctors, priests, lawyers and statesmen live by 'Cheats', just as he does. Filch enters with questions about various thieves in Peachum's employment who have been arrested. Peachum says Black Moll may plead her belly (i.e. pregnancy); that he will collect the £40 reward when Tom Gagg is hanged, etc. Peachum returns to his review of his affairs, going over a list of thieves with whom he deals, including '*Robin of Bagshot*, alias *Gorgon*, alias *Bluff Bob*, alias *Carbuncle*, alias *Bob Booty* ... he spends his Life among Women' – and hence should be impeached for the reward (this is a manifest allusion to Walpole). Mrs Peachum enters, and the two of them discuss the dashing Captain Macheath. She regrets that 'the Captain hath not more Discretion. What business hath he to keep Company with Lords and Gentlemen? He should leave them to prey upon one another'.

Peachum expresses horror at the idea of his daughter's marrying and putting her husband in possession of the family secrets, and goes off to berate Polly and warn her against matrimony. Filch enters and gives Mrs Peachum the seven handkerchiefs he has just stolen at the opera. He admits that he has promised Polly he will not tattle on her, and Mrs Peachum takes him off for a drink while she worms the truth out of him. Polly and her father enter, with Polly insisting that 'A Woman knows how to be mercenary, though she hath never been in a Court or at an Assembly. ... If I allow Captain *Macheath* some trifling Liberties, I have this Watch and other visible Marks of his Favour to show for it'. In an air she tells us that 'Virgins are like the fair Flower in its Lustre ... when once pluck'd, 'tis no longer alluring, / To Covent-Garden 'tis sent, (as yet sweet,) / There fades, and shrinks, and grows past all enduring, / Rots, stinks, and dies, and is trod under feet'. As Polly comments, 'A Girl who cannot grant some Things, and refuse what is most material, will make but a poor hand of her Beauty, and soon be thrown upon the Common'. Mrs Peachum, however, enters 'in a very great Passion' singing 'Our Polly is a sad Slut!', having discovered the horrible truth: Polly has secretly married Macheath. Her parents abuse her ('Do you think your Mother and I should have liv'd comfortably so long together, if ever we had been married? Baggage! ... thou foolish Jade, thou wilt be as ill-us'd, and as much neglected, as if thou hadst married a Lord!'). Polly defends herself: 'I did not marry him (as 'tis the Fashion) coolly and deliberately for Honour and Money. But, I love him'. Mrs Peachum is horrified: 'Love him! worse and worse! I thought the Girl had been better bred', and has to be revived with two stiff drinks. Peachum realizes that they 'must all endeavour to make the best of it', and proposes that Polly 'Secure what he hath got, have him peach'd the next Sessions, and then at once you are made a rich Widow'. Polly protests that her duty to her husband forbids this; her mother says her duty to her parents requires obedience: 'Away, Hussy. Hang your Husband, and be dutiful'. Alone for an exaggeratedly 'pathetic' scene, Polly imagines the execution at Tyburn ('I see him at the Tree! ... even Butchers weep!'). She has hidden Macheath in her room, and they take romantic leave of each other in a series of five songs, including 'Pretty Polly, say' and 'O what Pain it is to part!'. Macheath swears fidelity, and Polly assures him 'I have no Reason to doubt you, for I find in the Romance you lent me, none of the great Heroes were ever false in Love'.

ACT 2 *A Tavern near Newgate* Macheath's gang are discovered congratulating themselves upon their 'try'd Courage, and indefatigable Industry' and saying that all of them would die for the sake of a friend ('Show me a Gang of Courtiers that can say as much'). Macheath enters and explains that he will have to go into hiding. To the strains of the 'March in [Handel's]

*Rinaldo* ' they sing 'Let us take the Road' and disperse. Macheath remains chatting with the Drawer, singing 'If the Heart of a Man is deprest with Cares, / The Mist is dispell'd when a Woman appears', while women are fetched. Macheath frolics, sings and dances with the whores. Jenny sings 'Before the Barn-door crowing, / The Cock by Hens attended'. The women signal Peachum, who enters with constables and arrests Macheath.

Macheath arrives at the prison in Newgate, where Lockit demands 'Garnish' in return for lighter fetters. Macheath laments his condition, especially when Lucy Lockit enters and berates him. He promises to marry her at the first opportunity and denies his marriage to Polly. In another part of the prison Peachum and Lockit try to settle their joint accounts, proclaiming that 'Business is at an end – if once we act dishonourably', – piety quickly degenerating into a quarrel in which they 'collar' one another and threaten impeachment and hanging. Just as Macheath is trying to persuade Lucy to help him raise money to escape ('Money well tim'd, and properly apply'd, will do any thing'), Polly enters and proclaims herself his wife – to Lucy's fury. Macheath sings 'How happy could I be with either, / Were t'other dear Charmer away!'; Polly and Lucy sing 'I'm bubbled', and Peachum enters and hauls Polly off. Macheath tries to explain himself to Lucy, who agrees to help him escape and concludes the act with 'I like the Fox shall grieve, / Whose Mate hath left her side'.

**ACT 3 *Newgate*** Lockit abuses Lucy – not for letting Macheath escape, but for failing to get paid for it. While Macheath is in a gaming house, Peachum and Lockit plot his recapture in Peachum's Lock. Diana Trapes enters and tells them how to find him. Back in Newgate, Lucy has 'the Rats-bane ready' for Polly. They exchange insincere commiserations; Polly drops the poisoned glass when Macheath is hauled in again; Lucy concludes grumpily that 'she was not happy enough to deserve to be poison'd'. The two women squabble furiously over the unhappy Macheath (though Peachum says 'Away Hussies! This is not a time for a Man to be hamper'd with his Wives'). 'A Dance of Prisoners in Chains' covers the trial, offstage. Macheath, in the 'Condemn'd Hold', seeks consolation in drink and sings ten rousing songs in quick succession to bolster his spirits, concluding with 'Since Laws were made for ev'ry Degree ... I wonder we han't better Company, / Upon Tyburn Tree!' (to the tune of 'Green Sleeves'). Macheath expresses distress that Jemmy Twitcher should testify against him, saying glumly 'Tis a plain Proof that the World is all alike, and that even our Gang can no more trust one another than other People'. Polly and Lucy enter to take leave of their husband, but when 'Four Women more ... with a Child a-piece' are announced Macheath says 'This is too much'; he is ready to be hanged.

At this point we return to the frame with the entry of the Player and the Beggar. The Beggar says he intends to have Macheath hanged for the sake of 'doing strict poetical Justice'. The Player objects that this would make 'a down-right deep Tragedy. The Catastrophe is manifestly wrong, for an Opera must end happily'. The Beggar accepts the objection and orders a reprieve, saying that 'in this kind of Drama, 'tis no matter how absurdly things are brought about ... All this we must do, to comply with the Taste of the Town'. The work concludes with a dance and an air, 'Thus I stand like the Turk, with his Doxies around' (to the tune 'Lumps of Pudding').

*The Beggar's Opera* has been called everything from 'a sentimental lollipop' to 'a terse social fable'. Most critics have been anxious to find as much significance and serious satire as possible in the work. It is witty at the expense of a number of obvious targets, notably Sir Robert Walpole, the conventions of Italian opera at the Royal Academy of Music in the 1720s, the generic customs of both tragedy and comedy of sentiment, and society's structure and conventional assumptions. The radical inversions of high and low life are startling and amusing, and the many comparisons of humans with animals ('Of all Animals of Prey, Man is the only sociable one', 3.ii) must have disconcerted the original audience. In elementary ways, however, the work fails to function effectively as a satire on its obvious targets. Gay offers no genuine alternatives: he demeans high life, but without suggesting that low life is better. Macheath's revelation that 'the World is all alike' seems to reflect Gay's own view of things – and if all the world is irremediably corrupt, then there is little point to satire, which attacks evil in support of the good. The tone is lighthearted, but the ultimate ideological implications are exceedingly bleak – far more so than in *Die Dreigroschenoper*, where evils are angrily attacked on the assumption that the world can be changed.

*The Beggar's Opera* may fairly be called 'frivolously nihilistic'. Ironically, it is almost always now staged as a period romp, and appears to have been given in an equally superficial way during the 18th century. Other kinds of production are possible, as David Freeman demonstrated in his Opera Factory production of 1982, replete with punk rock additions but giving the text the ugliness and despair that are almost always masked in performance by surface jollity.

See also **BALLAD OPERA** and **DREIGROSCHENOPER, DIE**.

**Robert D. Hume**

