

# The Beggars Opera

By John Gay (1728)

# Revision of Serious Opera up to 1740

- 1. 1700-1711 the decade of 'English Opera' (none of which is opera in the true sense more a continuation of the theatrical masque tradition) – composers Weldon, Eccles, Daniel Purcell. The two theatres. Attempts to introduce full length Italian opera (*Arsinoe, Rosamond, Thomyris Queen of Scythia, Camilla*) – mostly done in English but some had their arias sung in Italian.
- 2. Handel arrives and puts on *Rinaldo* (1711), then returns with new opera (*Teseo*) next year and stays. In 1714 Anne dies and George takes over. *Acis and Galatea* (theatrical masque) composed and put on around this time.

# First Academy

- Put together the Royal Academy of Music with grant of £1,000 from the king with Handel in charge – subscription operas each season at The Kings Theatre. Lasts 1719-28.
- Senesino, Faustino and Cuzzoni the main attractions. Handel averages a new opera each year - 13 of his are produced out of a total of 30 – other composers are also commissioned. *Radamisto* and *Giulio Cesare* are examples from this period.

# Collapse and revival

- 1. 1728 Handel is exhausted and no opera was put on that season. But Handel then went into partnership with Heidegger to collect money for a new Academy. Handel goes to Italy to recruit new singing stars – Carestini, Strada as well as old ones. 6 new operas up to 1733 and many revivals of old ones.
- 2. A rival company is set up in opposition to Handel's Academy – calling itself the *Opera of the Nobility* – they lure away Handel's best singers Senesino, Cuzzoni and then bring Farinelli over – his debut in *Artaserse* by Boshi and Hasse. Farinelli makes a great impression. Rival composer in Bonocini.
- 3. *Ariondante* and *Orlando* from this period

# The Final Struggle

- Handel continues with Opera until 1740 but it is a great struggle as there was insufficient interest to maintain two rival companies.
- Three seasons at new theatre at Covent Garden.
- Handel has a stroke from overwork and general burn out and has to spend summer of 1737 abroad recovering – which he does.
- Finances are desperate and Handel is losing money fast – gradually Handel realises that he can make money out of Oratorio which is a much more acceptable form of musical entertainment to the general British public.
- Last operas in 1738, 1740-1 with *Imeneo* and *Deidamia*. They were not successful and thereafter Handel turned to Oratorios almost exclusively.

# The alternative music theatre forms available in London

- Huge tradition of popular music theatre throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Afterpieces, Pantomimes, Burlesques (satires with music by Arne, Lampe and Carey) and 'English Operas' all continue the tradition of music in the theatre established at the Restoration.
- Fairs also had theatre shows – 'Southwark Fair' the most famous – where popular music theatricals were staged in temporary booths and halls.
- Most were ad hoc and sort lived – but music music was composed for them and often it was published in some form for people to learn and sing at home.
- Most of the material was light-hearted and meant to humorous.

# Beggar's Opera

- John Gay's *Beggars Opera* is the best known and most enduring of these forms. It was the first ballad opera and established the form.
- Throughout the 1730s other ballad operas were written and performed to try and recreate the success of the Beggar's Opera. *Polly* a sort of sequel was banned. Others include *Flora*, *The Cobbler's Opera*, *The Wedding*, *Penelope*, *The Devil to Pay*, *The Devil of a Duke*.
- Also attempts at a Pastoral version in *The Gentle Shepherd*

# Ballad Opera

- It was a satirical play with lots of popular tunes (over 60) an overture and some incidental music for dancing. It needed a full cast of actor/singers and some spoken parts.
- John Gay was a provincial poet who had lost all his money in the South Sea Bubble and was embittered by the experience.
- The prevalence of fraud and corruption especially in high society in the 1720s had created a sense of moral decay. The Opera truly reflected the times.

# Context

- 1. South Sea Bubble – large number of unsuspecting people lost all their money – but the insiders made vast sums.
- 2. Prime-ministership of Huger Walpole seen as a new and morally bankrupt development.
- 3. George I was happy to let Walpole rule in his name. And George II at first did so also. Walpole did so by bribery and control of his party `The Wigs' through nepotism and preferment.
- 4. Age when criminals seemed to get away with it – money was made fast and lost easily – criminals were often seen as heroes.

## ... More

- The main characters can be seen as based on Walpole and his cronies. (Walpole = Locket the 'prime minister' of Newgate). Walpole's wife and mistress in Polly and Lucy.
- It is also a critic of Italian opera – opera in reverse for the bottom of society not the top.
- Silly ending where the beggar has Macheath (based on Jacq Sheppard) let off his hanging just on a whim. Peacham based on Jonathon Wilde.
- An unexpected success and was responsible in part for the demise of Handel's Royal Academy.
- First put on at Lincoln's Inn Fields 29 Jan 1728. 'A Newgate Pastoral, among Whores and Thieves'

# The Beggar's Introduction

- `I have introduc'd the Similes that are in your celebrated Operas: the Swallow, the Moth, the Bee, the Ship, the Flower &c. 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 ladies that it is impossible for either of them to take offence. I hope I may be forgiven, that I have not made my Opera thoughtout unnatural like those in vogue; for I have no Recitative: excepting this, as I have consented to have neither Prologue nor Epilogue, it must be allow'd an Opera in all its forms.

# Music by Dr Pepush

- Some ten characters have singing parts – the songs are short with possible instrumental introductions.
- The only large orchestral piece is the overture which incorporates a popular number in the second section.
- The music is mostly popular song tunes of the day with new words plus some music taken from popular Italian operas like Rinaldo by Handel.
- Published with bass lines.
- The characters move between dialogue and song as in a modern musical. It is the forefather of the modern musical in every way.

## ... More

- 1. Push one of many German musicians in England that, like Handel, came to make a living and stayed and settled.
- 2. Wrote a few other Ballad operas and theatre music and some instrumental music but is best known for the Beggar's Opera.
- 3. At first no great singers involved but as it turned into a great and lasting success it was taken up by many great singers.

# Successors

- It has constantly been revived and reinterpreted.
- Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* is the best known but there is multitude of imitators.
- In the eighteenth-century they did in every way – Cross dressed, from the Polly's prespective, etc.