

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

The Beggar's Opera (1948)

Synopsis

Mr. and Mrs. Peachum, who fence stolen goods for a living, discover that one of their principal clients, the highwayman Captain Macheath, has secretly married their daughter, Polly. They confront Polly, who admits it. Mr. and Mrs. Peachum resolve to kill him for his money, leaving their daughter a wealthy widow, but Macheath has disappeared: he and Polly have decided it wise to part ways temporarily. However, Peachum sets a honey trap in a tavern to catch Macheath, a notorious womanizer, in hopes of profiting from Macheath's downfall. Macheath is captured and brought to Newgate Prison – but escapes by seducing Lucy, the jailer Lockit's daughter, and promising to marry her. Lockit and Peachum discover and re-capture Macheath, and plot to collect and split the reward due his captors upon his execution.

Things get worse for Macheath, who is now suspected of impregnating four women, and he prepares to face the gallows. Yet because the audience demands a happy ending, Macheath is reprieved and is reunited with Polly.

Notes

In 1946, Benjamin Britten, along with other prominent English musicians, formed the English Opera Group (EOG) for the primary purpose of presenting his and other British composers' operatic works, and, perhaps more notably, as a response to the need for musical theatre that was something other than grand opera. The first three years of the EOG found Britten incredibly busy not only as a composer, but also as conductor, producer, administrator, and fundraiser. The Beggar's Opera was the third of a 'trilogy', that began with *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring* for the EOG. Noting this extraordinary creativity in the years of 1946-1948, Britten biographer Donald Mitchell writes, "Three operas at the rate of one a year – the cumulative total of their duration represents some 5 hours 49 minutes of continuous music according to the composer's own timings! – is prodigality indeed."

In the original Beggar's Opera of 1728, John Gay satirized injustice and the pervasive corruption in politics. But the work also took on the London public's insatiable taste for Italian opera, notably those of Handel, who had been thriving in London since 1710.

John Gay provided the libretto for the original, but he did not write the tunes. Instead he used popular songs of the day, creating what became known as a 'ballad opera'. The opera contains twenty-eight traditional ballads or folksongs, twenty-three Irish, Scottish and French songs, and the rest drawn from Purcell, Handel, and several others, including church hymns, making a total of sixty-nine. Gay's Beggar's Opera overture was attributed to the Baroque composer Johann Christian Pepusch.

Britten's Beggar's Opera is no simple adaptation of Gay's ballad opera. He wrote an entirely new overture, and created re-compositions based on the original tunes, giving each a sophisticated and often highly contrapuntal treatment. Britten himself remarked, "I feel that most previous arrangements have avoided their toughness and strangeness and have concentrated only on their lyrical prettiness." Indeed, Mitchell posits, "the only history we need to know in the

context of this 1948 version of *The Beggar's Opera* is Britten's."

With regard to the highly contrapuntal settings of the duets and trios especially, Britten opined in a letter to his partner, tenor Peter Pears, "I must stop myself too much 'canonizing' of the music." Gratefully, he did not resist! The music has the same quality of organic inventiveness we find in Britten's folk song settings, and the chamber orchestration – the same as *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring* – is brilliant and compelling, often asserting itself with raw dramatic intent. Notable examples include Polly's Act I melodrama 'Now I'm a wretch indeed' and Macheath's encounter with the women of the tavern, each characterized by a different solo instrument.

Donald Mitchell concludes:

The *Beggar's Opera* is not a 'sport' among Britten's operas but an integral part of the totality of theatrical works, from *Paul Bunyan* to *Death in Venice*, that was his prodigiously rich legacy. As for the plot, are we surprised that Britten's imagination was excited by it? After all Macheath is another of Britten's doomed heroes, tormented by love, the victim of treachery, and only saved in the nick of time by the conventions of 'opera' coming to his rescue. It was a release Britten permitted none other of his tragic heroes to enjoy.

By Ryan Turner