

Berwick Educational Association

**'The Beggar's Opera and 18th
Century Street Life'**

A lecture by Dr Richard Moore

**Friday 1st June 2018 10am -1.00pm
Berwick Voluntary Centre,
Tweed St, Berwick**



Watching *The Beggar's Opera* is like opening a window on theatrical history generally. It is at once a riotous celebration of traditional folk-art and a seminal work which had its influence on later 18th century music, on the ballad opera mode of the early 19th century, on Gilbert and Sullivan, and even on Benjamin Britten.

So what *is The Beggar's Opera*? Essentially it is a ballad opera in three acts written in 1728 by John Gay with music arranged by Johann Christoph Pepusch. It is one of the watershed plays in 18th century theatre and is the only example of provocative ballad opera still to remain popular. Ballad operas were satirical musical plays that used some of the conventions of opera, but without recitative. The lyrics of the airs in the piece are set to popular broadsheet ballads, opera arias, church hymns and folk tunes of the time.

The Beggar's Opera premiered at the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre on 29th January 1728 and ran for a record 62 consecutive performances. The work became Gay's greatest success and has been played ever since. In 1920, *The Beggar's Opera* began an astonishing revival run of 1,463 performances at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, another record-breaking run proving its enduring appeal.

Like later Victorian works such as *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Beggar's Opera* had one particular musical target: it satirised Italian Opera which had become feverishly popular in London. Gay indeed wrote the work more as an anti-opera than an opera, one of its attractions being its lampooning of the Italian opera style. Instead of the grand music and themes of opera, the work uses familiar tunes and characters who were ordinary people. Some of the songs were by opera composers such as Handel, but only the most popular of their airs were used. The audience could hum along with the music and sometimes identify with the characters.

Although classed as folk-art, the piece also had some illustrious literary links. The original idea came from Jonathan Swift, who wrote to Alexander Pope on 30th August 1716 asking "...what think you of a Newgate pastoral among the thieves and whores there?" Their friend, Gay, took the hint but decided that it would be a satire rather than a pastoral opera. For his original production he intended all the songs to be sung without any accompaniment, adding to the shocking and gritty atmosphere. However, a week or so before the opening night, John Rich, the theatre director, insisted on having a formal French overture (based on two of the songs in the opera, and including a fugue) and the provision of musical accompaniment for 69 songs. Although there is no external evidence, inspection of the original 1729 score demonstrates that the arranger was Pepusch.

Like the later W.S. Gilbert, Gay also took satirical aim at a number of real politicians. For instance, he set out to lampoon the notable Whig statesman Robert Walpole, amusingly also including reference to notorious criminals such as Jonathan Wild, the thief-taker, as if to suggest a link between the two. Claude Duval, the highwayman, and Jack Sheppard, the prison-breaker, are also referenced. The piece also deals with social inequity on a broad scale, primarily through the comparison of low-class thieves and whores with their aristocratic and bourgeois "betters."

A full synopsis of the opera will be given on the Study Morning and we shall see substantial excerpts from a modern production. We shall also examine how the piece broke new ground, in the form of a commercial spin-off, its success being accompanied by a public desire for keepsakes and mementos. These ranged from images of Polly Peachum on fans and clothing, playing cards and fire-screens to broadsides (sheet ballads) featuring all the characters.

All in all, *The Beggar's Opera* has something for everyone. Sometimes it is seen as a call for libertarian values in response to the growing power of the reactionary Whigs. Sometimes it is seen as tilting at the growing fashion for ornate speech and oratory and the already developing cult of sensibility. Whatever your musical and literary interests, you should find something to enjoy. Come and learn a little more about 18th century theatre, its eccentric supporters, its writers, and the opera which is *not* an opera but which is more important than many pieces that officially are.

The cost of the study morning is £9 including refreshments. All are welcome, and no previous knowledge is assumed.

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(Beggar's Opera)