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Opera in the Eighteenth Century

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NOVEMBER 7, 1922.

ARTHUR T. FROGGATT, Esq., Mus.D.

IN THE CHAIR.

OPERA IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

BY CAROLINE A. LEJEUNE.

PERHAPS the story had better begin with a letter which Swift received one morning at his Deanery in Dublin, in the spring of the year 1729. It was from his old friend Dr. Arbuthnot, formerly physician to Queen Anne. He writes that he has just been attending poor John Gay, and has pulled him through a very severe attack of fever, from which "a physician who had not been passionately his friend could not have saved him. I had beside my personal concern for him" the doctor goes on, "other motives of my care. He is now become a public person, a little Sacheverell; . . . one of the obstructions to the peace of Europe, the terror of ministers. He has got several turned out of their places, the greatest ornament of the court banished from it for his sake, another great lady in danger of being *chassée* likewise, about seven or eight duchesses pushing forward who shall suffer martyrdom upon his account first. He is the darling of the city. If he should travel about the country he would have hecatombs of roasted oxen sacrificed to him. . . and I can assure you this is the very identical John Gay—the inoffensive John Gay—whom you formerly knew and lodged with in Whitehall two years ago."

The cause of all the trouble was, of course, "Polly," the sequel to "The Beggar's Opera." The history of these two little plays, with the meteoric rise of the first and the banning of the second, forms one of the most amazing adventures in that age of adventure. When Gay produced "The Beggar's Opera" at the Theatre Royal in Lincoln's Inn Fields he unwittingly set light to a social and dramatic bonfire, which has been smouldering for nearly 200 years. *He* struck the light. But other hands collected the wood, and the spirit of the century dried it to a nicety, ready for the burning. We must look to the conditions of life in England—in London—under Anne and the First Georges to explain just what it was that Gay did, and how he came to do it.

If you talk to people about the eighteenth century—to well-read people, not the kind which collects its history from romantic costume plays, like "David Garrick" and "Monsieur Beaucaire," or from the novels of Agnes and Egerton Castle—you generally find out, sooner or later, that they think it a very tedious period indeed. And from an æsthetic point of view they are quite right. There was no poetry in any of its arts. Everything was clipped and correct and "elegant," to use the pet adjective of the age, and although the would-be artists of the pen and brush talked a great deal about "going back to nature," they never went any nearer to it than Pope's villa at Twickenham or Horace Walpole's weird treasure-house at Strawberry Hill. There was a great affectation of pleasure in landscapes and "rustic life," and a great writing of pastorals, but none of them ring true. The country was all very well in theory, but you *lived* in London or Bath or Dublin, or else you might just as well not live at all. All the art of the period is the art of city streets; pedestrian art, rather slow, rather laboured, rather visionless. At its best it leapt to portraiture, and made study after study of London types and manners—that is Hogarth's greatness, and Addison's (though he preferred to think himself a fine critic) and that is why, too, the letter-writers of that period are so much better worth reading than of any other. Pope's "Rape of the Lock" is typical of the age at its best; so is Gay's fascinating "Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London," in which he gives practical advice about what sort of shoes and cloak to wear, which side of the road to choose, how to prophesy bad weather by the creaking of the sign-boards, where to do your shopping, and all kinds of intimate details about everyday life in the city. No one need ever try to re-create eighteenth century London, for Gay has etched it all in pen and ink already. But these are the Augustans at their best. At their worst? Well, it is almost impossible to describe them at their worst. You can get a very good idea of them, though, by reading Addison's opera of "Rosamond," which ran for exactly three nights in 1710 with Clayton's music, and even when Arne reset it 20 years later met with much the same success. Mr. Hogarth rather naively points out that this looks as though there might be some fault in the drama itself. He does not seem to have read it. I do not blame him. When you find Queen Elinor visiting the King's mistress with a dagger in one hand and a poisoned bowl in the other, and greeting her coldly with the remark "Prepare to welter in a flood of streaming gore," and when Rosamond, waiting in Woodstock Park for her royal lover, suddenly "registers animation" as they say in the cinema world, and announces in all seriousness "A sudden motion shakes the

grove, I hear the steps of him I love"—it is impossible to take the thing in any other way than as a joke. But Addison's contemporaries took it all very solemnly, and several newspaper criticisms praise it as "a beautiful piece of poetry, both in fable and language." What they mean is that they are thoroughly familiar, from personal experience, with all its qualities of dullness, hyperbole, and false classicism, and that it never rises to heights of genius which their heavy pedantry cannot follow.

For genius and imagination are comparative strangers to the early eighteenth century in England. Swift knew them—but then Swift stands apart from and above his age. Art in general was struggling in a swamp, following a pseudo-classical Will-o'-the-wisp. The painting of Sir Godfrey Kneller, the music of Clayton, the verse of Ambrose Philips are all typical of an age which adds a capital letter to an abstract quality and hails it as a divinity. They worshipped "the ancients" (or rather, in most cases, French and late Latin versions of "the ancients") but made not the least attempt to understand them. As for a sense of humour—a thing quite distant from satire, or burlesque, or farce—it was conspicuous by its absence among the men who practised the polite arts. But Gay had it in abundance, and just because of that, because he could never take himself or his work seriously, "Trivia" and "The Beggar's Opera," and his few short poems, are alive and flourishing to-day. Ordinary people have always loved Gay. For he was himself ordinary.

One is rather in danger, because of the fame of Addison, Swift and Pope, Horace Walpole, Defoe and all the scholars of the age, of forgetting the quite ordinary man. But numerically, if in no other way, he matters the most of all. Social and dramatic history follows him, and it is here we must look for the causes which brought "The Beggar's Opera" into being. The ordinary Londoner saw nothing in the classical mania. He was bored with Pastorals *à la Virgil*, and drama about goddesses and demi-gods, and Virtue with a capital V. I don't think, to tell the truth, that he was very much interested in Mr. Pope's rhymed couplets, but he read them, chiefly to see whom Mr. Pope was going to attack next, and to watch his opponents go down like ninepins. It was an age which gloried in a good fight. If you had an enemy, you rushed all his vices into print, pulled his character to pieces, wrote the first and last letters of his name with a dash in the middle, and got off scot-free. Lampooning was a popular pastime. It was fashionable too. All the people in good society indulged in it occasionally, and those who had not the talent to be satirical were blatant, and the rest were merely rude. Never was a time

more personal and provocative, more daringly abusive. Pope was a notorious quarrel-picker. Swift was cruel in his conversation and letters. Addison was serenely callous of everybody and everything but himself and his own reputation. However, if you want a perfect example of the eighteenth century fighting instinct, you have only to glance for a minute at the history of the Italian opera in the Haymarket, and earlier at Drury Lane.

The troubles began when Clayton engaged two rival *prime donne* for his first opera in 1705—one was an Englishwoman, Mrs. Tofts and the other an Italian, Margarita Delepine. They were old enemies, and only the spring before Mrs. Tofts had found it advisable to publish in the *Daily Courant* an open letter, which gives a very good idea of the play-going manners of the time. "Sir," she writes, "I was very much surprised when I was informed that Ann Barwick, who was lately my servant, had committed a rudeness at the playhouse, by throwing of oranges, and hissing, when Mrs. L'Epine, the Italian gentlewoman, sang. I hope no one will think it was in the least with my privity, as I assure you it was not. I abhor such practices, and I hope you will cause her to be prosecuted that she may be punished as she deserves. I am, Sir, yr. humble servant, Katherine Tofts." Although Mrs. Tofts abhorred such practices she does not seem able to have prevented them in her admirers. Civil war followed. But this was only the first of many. There was the affair of Clayton's dismissal in 1711, when Handel came and took over the reins of the Haymarket opera, and composers of the old hybrid works, the Clayton's and Hayms and Dieuparts, found themselves out of a job. So Mr. Clayton collected a small orchestra at his house in York Buildings, and sent out invitations to various "persons of sense and quality," with a prospectus of what they had to offer in the way of musical fare. "We aim at establishing some settled notion of what is music, at making all foreigners who pretend to succeed in England to learn the language of it as we ourselves have done, and not to be insolent as to expect a whole nation, *a refined and learned nation*, should submit to learn theirs." Then, apparently, someone hinted that Clayton was doing his best to injure Handel's opera at the Haymarket, and was trying to draw patronage away from it. So Clayton wrote to *The Spectator*, as you or I to-day might write to *The Times*. He wrote several letters. He took a line of wounded integrity. He and his friends, he said, did not think it proper to trouble *The Spectator* with particulars of the just complaints they all of them had to make, but "without regard to our obliging pains, we are all equally set aside in the present opera." "It is industrially insinuated,"

he goes on, "that our intention is to destroy operas in general, but we beg of you to insert this plain explanation of ourselves in your paper, and as we were the persons who introduced operas, we think it a groundless imputation that we should set up against the opera itself. Our purpose is only to improve our circumstances, by improving the art which we profess. *We see it utterly destroyed at present,*" he winds up, with a side glance at Handel, who remains completely and irritatingly unmoved—that is, if he is conscious of the attack at all.

But the fractious complaints of Clayton, and the old rivalry between Mrs. Tofts and Signora Delepine, were mere storms in a teacup as compared with the feuds of the Royal Academy period, from 1720 to 1728. I am not going to describe these in detail. You know already how the town fought over the respective merits of Handel and Buononcini, and how, when all possible insults and epigrams on the subject were exhausted, and the topic losing its freshness they found a new bone of contention in the singing of the two leading ladies, Faustina and Cuzzoni. It is almost incredible to-day that such a silly quarrel should have been carried to such lengths. Lord Lyttleton, in his mock-serious "Persian Letters," describes a visit to the opera, where one of the singers "wore a suit of armour and called himself Julius Cæsar. I asked who Julius Cæsar was, and whether he had been famous for singing. . . . I heard two ladies who sat near me, cry out, as it were in an ecstasy 'O that dear creature! I am dying for love of him!' At the same time I heard a gentleman say aloud, that both the music and singers were detestable. 'You must not mind him,' said my friend, 'He is of the other party and comes here only as a spy.' 'How,' said I, 'have you parties in musick?' 'Yes,' replied he, 'it is a rule with us, to judge of nothing by our senses and understanding, but to hear, and see, and think, only as we chance to be differently engaged.'"

I have not found any indication that the admirers of Handel and Buononcini ever came to physical blows, but the admirers of Faustina and Cuzzoni certainly did. At first they were content to write lampoons and doggerel verses, to send anonymous letters round the town, and to print paragraphs in the newspapers giving the most intimate and scandalous details about these ladies' private lives. Then they tried hissing and cat-calling. And finally the feud became a riot, with both factions attending the opera in force, and expressing their feelings practically and with no uncertain aim.

Now all this happened in the spring of 1727, just about the time that Dean Swift came over from Ireland on a visit to Pope at Twickenham—a visit that lasted for most of the summer, and during which Gay, using Pope's villa as a kind

of hotel in his usual manner, drew up the final schemes for "The Beggar's Opera." Gay was travelling by coach back and forward from Whitehall, and would bring his friends all the latest town gossip. Swift was constantly in town, too, on political business. And Pope would be in touch with all the literary and journalistic world through his publishers. So Twickenham had its finger as it were, on the pulse of public opinion, and knew exactly what was likely to take and what would be damned.

I should trust Gay's opinion first of the three, so far as gauging the taste of the ordinary man is concerned. Pope and Swift were what to-day would be called "highbrows": Gay was not, and could not have been had he tried. He was a happy, inconsequent little man who never thought very long or very deeply on anything. He went everywhere, and made friends easily, and kept them without any difficulty at all. Nobody wanted to quarrel with Gay, or to argue with him, or to be careful what was said in his company. People confided in him, and poured out their woes, not in the least that he could help them, for he was himself the most helpless little figure of the age, but because he could be so charmingly sympathetic. He scattered money wherever he went—when he had none of his own he scattered his friends', and yet they were as fond of him as ever. Somebody or other was always providing for him, giving him room and board, and trying to teach him the rudiments of practical economy—Pope usually, or Swift, or Arbuthnot, or his patroness the Duchess of Queensberry, who adopted him into her family altogether during the last years of his life. "I suppose Mr. Gay will return from the Bath," Swift remarks in a letter to Pope, "with 20 pounds more flesh and 200 less in money. Providence never designed him to be above two and twenty by his thoughtlessness and gullibility. He has as little foresight of age, sickness, poverty or loss of admirers, as a girl of fifteen." And the Dean writes just as frankly to Gay himself:—"I find by the whole cast of your letter that you are as giddy as ever, just the reverse of Mr. Pope, who has always loved a domestic life from his youth. I was going to wish that you had some little place that you could call your own....but you are yet too volatile, and any lady with a coach and six horses would carry you to Japan. You pretend to preach up riding and walking to the Duchess, yet, from my knowledge of you after 20 years, you always joined a violent desire of perpetually shifting places and company, with a rooted laziness, and an utter impatience of fatigue....You mortally hate writing, only because it is the thing you chiefly ought to do; as well as to keep up the vogue you have in the world as to make you

easy in your fortune: you are merciful to everything but money, your best friend, whom you treat with inhumanity." And then he goes on in lighter vein to twit Gay about his life in the country, on the Queensberrys' estate—"Tell me, have you cured your absence of mind? Can you write domestic libels, to divert the family and neighbouring squires for five miles round? or venture so far on horseback without apprehending a stumble at every step? can you set the footmen a-laughing as they wait at dinner? and do the duchess's women admire your wit? In what esteem are you with the vicar of the parish? Have the farmers found out that you cannot distinguish rye from barley, or an oak from a crab-tree?"

All the letters to Gay, and about him, are written in this half-bantering, half-protecting tone. He brought out the best and gentlest sides of anyone with whom he came in contact, not because of any peculiar qualities of virtue in himself, but because of his childish incompetence, his sentiment, and enormous powers of hero-worship, and because he knew how to tackle the exact spot of the emotions which makes people laugh or cry. He must have been the best company in the world.

There is something rather ironical in the fact that this should be the man to produce the greatest dramatic sensation of his century, to set politicians and divines by the ears, to be banished from court as a political firebrand, and to introduce the London public to an entertainment so novel, so satisfying, that its attraction was to empty the Haymarket for many years to come. I am quite certain that Gay had never considered the possibility of his own opera making history. He was not a fighter. He was not really a reformer. He was just a perfect mirror to the people round about him, reflecting their ideas and their biases, backed by a certain keen instinct of his own for right and wrong. Injustice and hypocrisy troubled him, certainly, but never set him storming, as they would set Swift, and excessive folly—the sort of thing that made Addison blush for the whole English race—merely amused him. Of course to say, as his opponents did, that "The Beggar's Opera" sets out to glorify roguery and depreciate goodness, is quite absurd, but on the other hand, I find it very difficult to believe that Gay, under the cover of romantic drama, is really trying to sweep clean the morals of his country. Of course, he said he was—afterwards. He told Swift that "for writing in the cause of virtue and against the fashionable vices he is looked upon as the most obnoxious person, almost, in England." But I feel sure that, when he planned and in his "The Beggar's Opera," ethics played a very small part

in his programme. He was ready enough to have a cut at the corruption in the Ministry, and another at the back-stairs work among prison officials, and still another at the ridiculous flair for highwaymen and rogues which the famous Jack Sheppard had brought into being. But these shafts are only incidental, like the topical satire in a modern revue.

No, "The Beggar's Opera" is not propaganda. It was begot by a chronic shortage of money on an innate sense of the ridiculous. Swift had suggested long ago to John Gay that he should write a Newgate pastoral, and now it suddenly occurred to him that a very saleable thing might be made out of it, if only he could slip it through under the fashionable name of opera. Many years earlier a little burlesque of his, "The What D'ye Call It," sub-titled a Tragic-Comi-Pastoral Farce, had made a great hit at Drury Lane. This had ridiculed contemporary melodrama—and why should not the Newgate pastoral, thought he, do the same by Italian opera? It was quite as laughable, and had this additional advantage, that it was patronised by all classes of society, from the royal family down—or up—to the trunk-maker in the gallery. But Gay was now 13 years older than when he had written "The What D'ye Call It." He wanted to create as well as to destroy. So besides the burlesque, or rather burlesquable, elements from Italian music drama, he gathered certain purely native elements of realism and crude comedy, welded them together, and produced from their fusion the first ballad opera. Apart from the title, a certain formal arrangement of material, leading through three acts of catastrophe to an extravagantly happy conclusion and a borrowed air from Handel, the Haymarket contribution is purely a negative one. That is to say, Gay learnt from popular criticisms of Italian opera the qualities he must avoid in English. He studied the bias of the age, found out what the ordinary man wanted to see and hear, and what, above all the ordinary man had seen and heard too much already. Then he begins work.

The plot, which by all operatic tradition should have been a legendary one (time and place unknown), is of here and to-day, and of such a kind as to appeal intimately to every contemporary Londoner. The blue-blooded hero and mythical heroine of Handel's librettists fade into thin air, and Gay creates a hero out of a highway robber and a heroine out of a thief-taker's daughter. Finally—and this is the real innovation—he exchanges recitative dialogue for broad, colloquial English prose, and discards the florid Italian aria for folk-songs which everybody can hum.

Perhaps I should not say that the contribution of the Haymarket was purely negative. Perhaps it is truer to say that

Gay adopted all the characteristic elements of Italian opera and reduced them to their lowest possible terms. He is one of those men who only write well when their material is simple and a little crude. In "The Beggar's Opera," he writes amazingly well. It just suits his pen. Goldsmith once said of him that he possessed a happy knack of ballad *thinking*, and certainly his lyrics, whether sad or merry, flow out with extraordinary facility. As an amateur too, he played the flute and seems to have been familiar with countless English and Scotch folk-tunes, besides the ballads he picked up from his friends the beggars at St. Giles. He knew his London from east to west, indoors and out, and everywhere he was hail-fellow-well-met. Surely, of all the dramatists and poets of the age, no one could be better qualified than he to gauge the sentiments and to satisfy the tastes of the average, quite ordinary man.

"The Beggar's Opera" is touched with political satire, beyond a doubt, but plot interest is always allowed to predominate. Technically, Gay has not worked it out very well. The interest is hunched together here and there, jerky, unsustained, and a good many strands of episode hang loose. But that is a fault of craftsmanship, not of thought. The central core of plot has been one of the great motives of drama from the days of the Greek theatre to Ibsen and after. Macheath and his two women—the theme could be played tragically, comically, psychologically, as broad farce or as melodrama of the real Lyceum school. Gay chose to play it comically. This is an important point, closely allied to the question of the opera's morals, or lack of them, which distressed so many worthies at the time of its first production. The situation can only become comic in the complete absence of any recognised moral standard. That is to say, the opera must be regarded not as immoral, but as non-moral, and to appreciate it one must lay aside all ethical bias and judge entirely by the criteria of dramatic art. Every comic hero must be a defaulter against the conventions of that particular community to which he happens to belong—otherwise he is not comic. The hero of legitimate comedy is an unsociable man, or a man with awkward whims and habits—the sort of man you would not have in a club if you could help it. Now Macheath, when he is "fond" enough, as he himself would say, to marry Polly in good earnest, offends against the unwritten laws of his own little community. The circle of assorted rascals in which he moves—highwaymen, pickpockets, thief-takers, women of the town—have not a shred of virtue among them, but there is a sort of code which holds them together—a bond of hard commonsense, general distrust

and suspicion, and a coarse sympathy born of the knowledge of common vice. There is no room for the weakling in this code. And Macheath, by proving himself a weakling, becomes the true hero of comedy.

All this may seem obvious enough to us, but we must remember that the acceptance of non-morality in art is a thing infinitely old or quite new. In the middle periods of history it is a very rare phenomenon, and in the eighteenth century, of all centuries, practically unknown. In this way "*The Beggar's Opera*" is born out of its time, and many people fought shy of it, quite naturally. "Thieves are set out in so amiable a light," says Defoe, "that it has taught them to value themselves on their profession, rather than to be ashamed of it." But then Defoe was never the man to understand the substitution of artistic for ethical standards. Colley Cibber, the actor-dramatist and poet laureate, whom Pope took such delight in baiting, is the most amusing of all on the subject. He is quite frankly puzzled. *Why* should Gay's opera have proved such a success, and his own "*Love in a Riddle*," which he wrote in direct imitation of it (as he thought) prove so ghastly a failure? He argues round and round the subject in his pompous "*Apology*," blustering, excusing himself, quite unable to understand it at all. "After the vast success of that new species of dramatick poetry, '*The Beggar's Opera*,'" says he, "I was so stupid as to attempt something of the same kind, upon a quite different foundation, that of recommending virtue and innocence, which I ignorantly thought might not have a less pretence to favour, than setting greatness and authority in a contemptible, and the most vulgar vice and wickedness in an amiable, light." . . . Yet on the other side honesty compels him to add "must we not allow that to have taken a whole nation, high and low, into a general applause, has shown a power in poetry which, though often attempted in the same kind, none but this one author could ever yet arrive at?" Then, with a shrug, he gives up the attempt to be critical, and summarises, "If their merit were to be measur'd by the full houses they may have brought, if the judgement of the crowd were infallible, I am afraid we shall be reduc'd to allow that '*The Beggar's Opera*,' was the best written play that ever our English theatre had to boast of."

About its popularity there can be no doubt at all. The general public was sick and tired of legendary opera sung in a language which they could not understand. The novelty of the thing had worn off, and even the joy of partisanship was beginning at last to pall, after eight years of constant friction. They were tired of stilted melodrama too, and very, very tired

of hearing about "the ancients." They did not want to be educated—they wanted to be amused, and, except for the popular plays written for Bartholomew Fair and the ballet-pantomimes which Rich and Thurmond, the dancing master, had lately brought into favour, there was no light entertainment to be seen anywhere in London. Nobody had thought of catering, as we do to-day, for the tired business man who wants to let his brain lie fallow. And now came John Gay, whom all of them knew by sight and reputation, and many of them knew personally, and brought with him a swinging story of rogue life, told in easy prose and still easier lyric, rich in comedy, and full of the good old tunes that had been familiar from their schooldays. Of course "The Beggar's Opera" was a success. It was just exactly what play-going London had been waiting for, and when it came people lost their heads completely. Gay found himself in the extraordinary position of a national hero, without having done anything, to his knowledge, to deserve it.

I am not going into the history of the opera—for you probably know as much about it as I do. It is one of the foundations on which mid-eighteenth century society rests, and in an age when theatrical triumphs were few and far between, and a run of fifteen nights created something of a record, Gay's opera went clean through the country, and could be relied upon to pack a theatre at every revival, whatever the house and whoever the singers might be. Throughout the eighteenth century and well on into the nineteenth—we ought indeed to say, the twentieth—its powers of attraction have never failed. Swift writes to Gay describing its reception in Dublin (Swift had not been present at that famous first night with his friends. He was in Ireland at the time) and says that it has been played twenty times already, "We are as full of it . . . as London can be: continually acting, and houses crammed, and the Lord Lieutenant several times there laughing his heart out." An English friend of Swift's, Mrs. Delany, has much to say about the opera in letters to her sister, and discusses various amateur performances, which seem to have been common. "I desire you will introduce it at Gloucester," she writes, "for you must sing it everywhere but at church, if you have a mind to be like the polite world. . . But you must defer it till I come to you, for I put in for the part of Mrs. Slamikin."

And so the story goes on. It went through many vicissitudes with the years; the old complaint of immorality, in particular, was never allowed to die, and as late as 1773 the Bow Street Magistrates tried to suppress performances on the grounds of increased vice due to its "pernicious influence." When this attempt failed, a certain Captain Thompson whitewashed the

opera to make it fit for production. He sent Macheath to the galleys very properly for his sins, but allowed him ultimately to repent and go back with Polly to a blameless life. For some strange reason theatrical managers would not accept this version of the opera ! Captain Thompson never understood why. The original "*Beggar's Opera*," as Gay made it, stands firm against all attack, and forms an unchanging background to the English drama of the century. So that by 1770 "this most masterly and great composition" (according to a theatrical paper of the day) "has been acted frequently not only in London, Dublin and Edinburgh, but in every capital town and village in the three kingdoms."

It really sounds like a fairy story. So does the account of its effect on popular drama, and the mushroom crop of ballad operas that sprang up in a night. But really it was inevitable. Gay had struck a new dramatic mould, containing possibilities of appeal quite unsuspected until then. The ballad opera offers a chance for a realistic story, dealing with everyday people and everyday problems. It could hold sentimental humour for the boxes, and crude comedy for the gallery. As for satire (a very important consideration in those days and one which must have figured largely in Gay's mind when he wrote) the advantages are remarkable, for point is given to every line of verse by the familiarity of its musical setting. Words are never obscured by tune, but the associations of tune, carefully treated, can be made to emphasise and underline a stroke of satire, to brand it on the memory. And the music makes no serious demands on orchestra or singers : dramatic sense is far more important than regular operatic technique. As Handel once said to the young Gluck, "You have taken far too much trouble over your opera. Here in England that is mere waste of time. What the English like is something that they can beat time to, something that hits them straight on the drum of the ear." For this national taste the ballad opera caters perfectly. A simple, dramatic story of real life, with the dialogue of comedy : distinct drawing of character : songs raised to their highest power by the help of fine melody : this is the full potentiality of the ballad opera form. Its drawbacks—but I must speak of its drawbacks later. Nobody thought of them then.

Nobody thought much at all in the first blaze of ballad opera enthusiasm. Authors big and small, with talent and without—mostly without—seized their pens and began to write in imitation of Gay. It did not take long to turn out a ballad opera, a few weeks at the most, and several had appeared before "*The Beggar's Opera*" had ended its first run at Lincoln's Inn Fields. Between that time and the middle of

the century, nearly a hundred were produced, of which not more than half a dozen were works of art in any sense of the word, many others a blot on dramatic literature, and the vast majority commonplace. Then, about the middle of the century, the whole crop vanished just as suddenly as it had come. After 1758 a real ballad opera is the rarest thing in the world—in fact, I only know of four amongst all the comic opera of the age of Bickerstaffe and Dibdin and Arne. And those four are atrocious. But even after a formal imitation of "*The Beggar's Opera*" has died away, the influence of its text remains. Drama of the century is tinged everywhere with it. At first the debt to Gay is handsomely acknowledged, but after a while phrases and motifs and whole arguments are "lifted" as the Scotch say, without any comment. Dr. Arne is perhaps the most unscrupulous borrower. Of course, he needed some writer of talent to help him with his own vapid libretti, but though reminiscent phrases like "Pretty encouragement for young beginners" and "Dear Guardy, don't let your choler boil over your judgment—let us weigh the matter and throw passion out of the scale"—though these relics of Gay may be forgiven him, he really carries the thing too far when he offers as original work a song of this kind :

Though oft the cock in farmer's yard
To every she will rove,
It only heightens his regard
For th'object of his love.
With joy he pecks the yellow grain
To give his fav'rite hen,
And quits the others with disdain
To cherish her again."

But amongst the early ballad operas there are several which owe far more than a quotation, a dramatic motif, or even a parodied song to Gay. There is "*The Beggar's Wedding*," which hovers uncertainly between Gay and Brome's old comedy of "*The Joviall Crew*," borrowing a little from each here and there, until the whole is a fine medley of nonsense. And there is "*The Quaker's Opera*," which Thomas Walker wrote—Tom Walker who played the original Macheath. In scheme and formal arrangement this is pure Gay. The scene is laid in Newgate and the taverns round about ; (Walker knew *them* as well as any man living) ; Shepard is cousin german to Macheath, and his women must all have been on Diana Trape's register, while there is nothing to choose in easy virtue between the Peachum establishment and that of Mr. and Mrs. Coaxthief. Even the dialogue has caught the stamp of Gay and much of his wit. "When you see Shepard"

(Jonathan Wild is sending a message to Newgate) "remember me to him. . . I can't stay with you now, I must go and drink with the fellows I condemn'd last sessions; they dye to-morrow, and old friends should part like friends." If that isn't sheer Peachum, what is?

Now Gay was an artist: he had shaped his material into the one form which could most perfectly express it, and had filled every corner of the mould. Satire, romance and comedy, all are unified. But his followers, with just a few exceptions, are quite incapable of appreciating this. Instead of using to the full the potential qualities of the ballad opera form, each writer seizes upon some characteristic which corresponds with the trend of his own thought, and develops that one characteristic at the expense of all the rest. Somebody realised, for instance, what a chance there was here for satire. So he wrote, in ballad opera form, a criticism of contemporary affairs, without any qualities of drama or song. Dozens of others follow suit. Sometimes the satire is directed against the amusements of fashionable society. Sometimes it is political and sometimes legal. But the one unfailing target for ballad opera satire is Sir Robert Walpole, against whom author after author tilts with weapons of abuse, invective, and slander, Fielding among the rest. On this subject no restraint can hold them back, and all considerations of art are buried under pages of libel and filth. The year of Walpole's Excise Bill alone produced ten, possibly more, ballad operas on the matter, but with great caution the majority of the authors remain anonymous. Not Fielding, of course. When he flings dirt, he flings it openly.

Beside this group of satirical ballad opera is another group happily small, which has seized on the non-moral comedy of Gay, and converted it into immorality, under cover of exposing vice and espousing virtue. These operas are in all cases the work of inferior dramatists whose only good quality is their brevity. Delight in coarseness for its own sake is not balanced by any beauty of form or character, and the one useful purpose they serve is to show up the blackness of the pit into which Gay has *not* fallen. Then there is a third group of ballad opera, rather more difficult to define. Its debt to "The Beggar's Opera" is one of social status only. The action moves among what their own age would call "persons of low life"—not necessarily Cockneys, but maid-servants, footmen, villagers—the sort of men and women whom classical drama (classical in Pope's sense), like to pass over altogether. The scene, as a rule, is shifted to a country inn or garden. The Holborn rabble becomes a crowd of farmers and labourers, and the beggar is closer akin to the tramping vagabond of the Eliza-

bethans than to the fraternity at St. Giles's. So far, so good. The eighteenth century is greatly in need of a real comedy of the countryside—but the question is this—are the men who fling their thoughts into ballad opera form as the easiest way of dramatising them—are these the right people to produce such a comedy? Experiment showed that they were not. Without realism, ballad opera becomes nerveless. And realism is out of the question for the born and bred Londoner who tries to describe, let us say, the home life of a Devonshire milk maid or to reproduce the dialogue of two old farmers over their tankards in a north country inn. With the best intentions in the world, he can't catch the real tang. Ballad opera is safer in Newgate.

Happily there are a few, just a few, ballad operas which realise the potential qualities of their art form, more or less completely. Out of the whole mass I should pick five, and call them good, and out of the five I should pick one, and call it great—and then I should have to own that that one is not, properly speaking, a ballad opera at all. I mean Allan Ramsey's "Gentle Shepherd." He never intended it for dramatisation, and the version that did finally appear on the stage under the title "A Scots Pastoral Comedy," is not in the least the poem that Ramsey had meant to write. He was a poet, not a dramatist, and his stage technique is decidedly shaky. But his lyrics are the loveliest things ever shaped in that conventional age—the only real lyrics, except "Phyllida Flouts Me," and a few of Gay's own. Ballad opera will be far richer if it can claim "The Gentle Shepherd" amongst its numbers. But somehow it does not look at home there.

"The open field—a cottage in a glen,
An auld wife spinning at the sunny end."

and again,

"A trotting burnie wimpling throw the ground"—.

That's Allan Ramsey. If it is ballad opera too, so much the better. But I doubt it.

About the other four operas there is luckily no question. Fielding wrote two of them, "Don Quixote in England" and "The Intriguing Chambermaid." Another is called "The Village Opera," and gives Bickerstaffe the hint for his much more famous "Love in a Village," during the second half of the century, and the fourth is a highly successful adaptation of Brome's old comedy "The Joviall Crew." "Don Quixote in England" shows Fielding in real "Tom Jones" humour, drinking ale in a wayside inn, championing ladies in distress. This is the birthplace of "The Roast Beef of Old England,"

and "The Dusky Night rides down the Sky," and many others. A great zest of comedy, a dash of sentiment, reverence for Cervantes, and that passionate feeling for English scenery and English customs of the road which is typical of Fielding at his best, guard the opera against burlesque and keep the flavour sweet. In "The Intriguing Chambermaid," Fielding is back again among his London types, but without satire and for once without coarseness. The chief merit of the opera lies in its dialogue, which is so brilliantly natural that you scarcely notice its brilliance, so studied that it sounds spontaneous. "The Joviall Crewe" is a story of spring in English lanes, of vagabondage and of gipsies, "In the charming month of May," begins the beggar-maid. . . and so on. Not great poetry, but the play is a good play, and crystallises just those qualities of realistic comedy, blended with character interest and simple lyric utterance, for which the ballad opera form is an ideal medium. "The Joviall Crewe" was a tremendous success, and deserved to be.

Such then, is the ballad opera which formed the staple dramatic fare, during the thirties and forties, of London and provincial theatres. At times, a single opera was played, merely as an afterpiece to the regular drama; at other times, three or four were given together, to make up a full evening's performance. They used to run them in triple bills. They were madly popular, cheap and easy to tour. Perhaps they had been too popular—perhaps they outstayed their welcome. At any rate, towards the middle of the century the fashion began suddenly to wane, and in spite of valiant attempts to revive it with old favourites, the whole genus, like Lewis Carroll's Snark, softly and silently faded away—and another adventure was over. It was bound to happen, of course. The ballad opera form has certain flaws which an author of genius can overcome, or hide, but which in the hands of a mediocre writer become distressingly obvious. Its very simplicity, the prose dialogue of everyday and the elementary metre of the lyrics, afford an excuse for scribbling to every literary hack with an easy pen and an empty head. Omitting the roundness of comedy, the dialogue becomes meaningless—omitting the inspiration, the songs become vapid. And satire, which the authors of the best ballad operas use only sparingly or not at all, may easily degenerate into mere scandalous abuse—a marked tendency in the later works. But chiefly, the very use of traditional melody, which is the greatest beauty of the earlier operas and the kernel of every one, leads inevitably to their downfall. The range of melodies from which the authors of ballad opera drew their material is small; Gay practically exhausted it with his 69 airs in

"The Beggars' Opera," and later writers merely reborrow the same airs from their predecessors. But when a melody has carried the burden of ten or a dozen different poems, its attraction becomes blunted. You listen to one set of words, and hear quite another. Memory is playing the devil with your ear. In short, the illusion of drama is broken completely by that very choice of music which should be able to raise it to its highest power. The traditional air is the crux of ballad opera. It is also its worst enemy. On this the whole fabric strikes, and crumbles away.

But though ballad opera is dead, it has left behind a handful of works touched with real genius, and certain qualities of comedy and realism, simplicity and ease, which are quite new to English music-drama. Before Gay they did not exist. Now, by mid-century, they are full-grown and lusty, and within a year or two are to play an important part in the shaping of yet another fashionable madness, under Dibdin, Bickerstaffe and Arne. For on these traits of ballad opera are to be grafted the avowed comic purpose, the new range of dramatic motif and the musical technique of opera buffa, then but lately arrived from Italy; the action is to be gathered together and sharpened by the use of a dramatic finale, and the resulting production will be the true comedy opera of the second half of the century.

DISCUSSION.

THE CHAIRMAN: We are much indebted to the Lecturer for having brought forward this most interesting subject, and, I think I might say without offence, one about which the majority of us know very little. At any rate I speak for myself. The subject, which has been treated in a most interesting and exhaustive manner, is now open for discussion by those present who know, or who do not know, anything about Ballad Opera. One thing I understood was that there were less than 50 ballad operas in existence; but I now have learnt that the number is something like 100—which shows how little I have known on the subject. If anything further occurs to me to say I will say it at the end of the discussion. I am sure that Mr. Webb will be able to tell us something interesting.

MR. GILBERT WEBB: I agree with our Chairman that we have had a most interesting Paper. But there is little use in discussing the past unless we can get something for the present out of it. It would appear that history has been repeating itself quite recently, for the desire is now very prevalent to understand what one hears and sees. People

have got tired of artificial stories and of dialogues in a language they do not understand. Ballad opera is really the foundation of musical comedy, a combination of story and episode linked together with some jolly good tunes and good singing. It is a class of entertainment which has always existed in some form and is necessary. The more preposterous the story and absurd the situations the greater probability of success.

It is worthy of consideration that the most successful really British operas, those by Balfe and Wallace, are based upon alternations of dialogue and song as in the "*Beggar's Opera*." The combinations may be considered primitive and inartistic but it is the distinguishing mark of the French *Opéra Comique* of which Bizet's "*Carmen*" is such a brilliant example and it may prove to be the true foundation of future British opera.

MR. J. PERCY BAKER: Perhaps I may be allowed to say a few words, lest we degenerate into a Quaker's Meeting! It seems to me that one great point in Miss Lejeune's Paper is this: it gives the correct angle from which to regard ballad opera. And there is a great deal in that. You know the enormous success that "*The Beggar's Opera*" has attained in its present revival. Only a day or two ago it passed its thousandth performance—a very extraordinary circumstance indeed, which is largely due to the fact, as Miss Lejeune has said, that ballad opera is a peculiarly English sort of entertainment. That is illustrated by the circumstance that when "*The Beggar's Opera*" was taken over to the United States the people there failed to appreciate it, because they did not look at it from the same point of view that we English people do. They rather compared it with grand opera, such as, "*Madame Butterfly*" and works of that sort; they could not understand the *raison d'être* of it. Therefore the thing was a frpst. On the other hand, in a letter I received a few days ago from Canada where "*The Beggar's Opera*" was also performed, I was told that it was the most delightful thing that could possibly be. The probable explanation is that the Canadians are naturally more English in thought and feeling than are our friends of the United States. That is an illustration of the importance of the angle from which to study Ballad Opera. Now, it is useful for us to remember this, because even now some people fail to understand what "*The Beggar's Opera*" means and how we should look at it. I have known people after they have been to a performance express themselves as quite disgusted; they regard it as shocking, but as Miss Lejeune says, we are not to look upon it as immoral, but as non-moral; that is to say, it does not come into the category of morals at all; it stands absolutely outside it. When we

remember that ballad opera arose as a re-action against the impossibilities of the Italian opera of the 18th century, then we understand better this particular "Beggar's Opera": and we must take it on that ground, or not at all. If we look upon it, as our friends of the United States did, as opera pure and simple, then we could have nothing but condemnation for it. We must regard it as a satire and protest against the exaggerated impossibilities of the gods and goddesses with incredible virtues, that strutted their brief day on the stage and spoke almost as many languages as were heard in the Tower of Babel! The success of ballad opera in this country is largely due to the fact, as Mr. Webb has said, that it has been produced in a language understood of the people and that it has included rhythmical melodies. If opera is to succeed in this country it must be, I think, on these lines: it must be in the tongue of the country where it is performed, and it must have not only intelligible action but also intelligible music. I have never subscribed to the opinion that the English are not an opera loving people, because they are. But it is necessary to fulfil certain conditions, and not to set up impossible and artificial ones. But given a good story, good music, good singing, and good acting, I do not think there is any doubt at all but that we can develop opera on our own lines, and not as imitators of foreign models. The British people love opera if it is presented to them in the proper way. It is a most extraordinary fact if you go to see "The Beggar's Opera" down at Hammersmith there is no change of scene from beginning to end. Out of doors, indoors, prison, dwelling-house, ale house, everything has the same setting; the lighting is altered, and that is all. But one never thinks of it. You can kill drama, and you can kill opera, by too much elaboration.

THE CHAIRMAN: As no one else is moved to say anything I should like to add one or two remarks. In regard to the production of opera, Mr. Baker has well stated the requisite conditions of success in this country. Moreover, all, or nearly all, English operas have been distinguished by one special feature, and that is the large amount of spoken dialogue. This is the peculiar feature of English opera, and not only of ballad opera. I suppose I am right in saying—I know so little on the subject that I should be glad to gain further information—but I should imagine I am right in saying that in ballad opera, whether the number is fifty or a hundred, the music is not original; the airs were at the time well-known melodies. Ballad opera I believe ceased in England about 1758 having flourished about 30 years. If I am wrong in that perhaps the Lecturer will put me right. But the great majority of English operas from that period to the present day have all had something of

the characteristic of ballad opera—that is to say there is a large amount of spoken dialogue. Take those that have been most successful in recent years—they have that characteristic more or less in common. But whether that characteristic is absolutely essential to the success of opera in England I do not know ; but I hope not. I do not see why the original Italian conception of opera should fail to be a lasting success in this country, that is to say something in which music is heard from start to finish—I do not see why that ideal should be impossible of attainment in this country. I do not know what there is in the English character to differentiate us from all other music loving nations ; although it is a fact that up to the present one must regard opera in that form as more or less exotic. However, I should like to know whether or not I am quite right in the one or two details I have mentioned.

A vote of thanks to Miss Lejeune was then passed.