

*The Beggar's Opera & Polly*  
(Gay-Austin)



with Members of the Original Cast

## THE BEGGAR'S OPERA

"It would either take greatly, or be damned confoundedly" so said the dramatist William Congreve on being shown a draft of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*. Both Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, who had encouraged Gay to attempt the work, were doubtful that it would succeed, but its success was to prove Congreve's first prediction. It did indeed 'take greatly'.

Contrary to some statements it was not the first ballad opera, but it was certainly the most successful. The story of rogues, thieves, whores, and corrupt officials, with a strong dash of political satire thrown in, opened at John Rich's Theatre Royal, Lincoln's Inn Fields, on 29 January 1728. As Eric Walter White pointed out in his *History of English Opera* (1983) it differed from most operas in that it expected all the principals to sing. Next, it differed from conventional Italian opera (then dominating the London stage) as there was no recitative and, lastly, although it had a specially composed overture, fifty-one of its sixty-nine airs were from popular and old tunes. These came from English, Irish, Scottish and French sources. The remaining airs were adapted from established composers, both English and European, including Handel and Purcell.

Gay's first presentation of the text contained no music, but it was quickly seen that the insertion of music was essential, and although the author is known to have selected much of the music, it was the German-born Dr. John Christopher Pepusch, then domiciled in London, who provided both the overture and the arrangements of the airs to suit the plot and abilities of the cast.

The Lord Chamberlain, then the sole arbiter of what could legally be performed on the stage, seems to have been unaware of the political consequences of the opera. Sir Robert Walpole was a controversial and argumentative Whig politician, often described as the first Prime Minister. He had been accused of corruption during his tenure of office as Secretary for War in the years 1708 to 1710. When he returned to office as First Minister in 1714 he attacked his accusers, and charged them with treason. He continued to attract violent criticism from his Tory opponents, almost to the end of his career. Walpole's administration is lampooned in the scenes with Peachum, and the scenes with Lockit the gaoler are references to Walpole's relationship with his brother-in-law, Charles Viscount Townshend, with whom he shared dominance in the government. The notorious rivalry between the two prima donnas of the day, Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, eventually led to physical blows on the Drury Lane stage, and the scenes between Polly Peachum and Lucy Lockit would have delighted the contemporary audiences who were well aware of the real targets of Gay's work.

Today though, we look at *The Beggar's Opera* not so much as a satire, but rather as a work full of vitality to be enjoyed for its own sake. The first run in 1728 went on for an unprecedented 62 nights, and in the following season a further 28 performances. There was even a special children's version in which the cast was known as The Lilliputians.

After the great success of his first effort, Gay speedily wrote a sequel, *Polly*. But this time the government was ready and banned the staging of the new work. Curiously, Gay was not now attacking the government, but was satirising the harsh treatment of native Indians by colonizing Europeans. Gay was able to publish the libretto as a book, though *Polly* was not performed on the stage until 1777, long after his death. There were

many revivals in the 18th century and a lesser number in the 19th. However, the latter productions often suffered from bowdlerization as the plot was held to be 'indelicate' or 'immoral'.

The productions which concern us here are those produced by Nigel Playfair in the 1920s. The last staging of both works had been in the previous century, and Playfair, who had taken a lease on the unfashionable Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, was keen to do a revival of *The Beggar's Opera*. It is unlikely that either he or his collaborators expected such a remarkable success, but the world and his wife seemed to make the journey out to Hammersmith, and filled the 800 seat theatre from June 1920 to December 1923, a run of 1,469 performances.

Some leading members of the cast had been members of the Beecham Opera Company whilst others were comparatively unknown, but had excellent singing voices. Frederic Austin, not only sang the role of Peachum, but had re-arranged all the music, mainly for 18th century instruments, and was conducting the work whilst not on stage. His associate conductor was Herbert Withers. Of course, there were a number of textual omissions - the original version had been a long evening in the theatre, more than most modern theatre-goers would tolerate, and some songs were left out of the Lyric production. However, to take account of many cast changes during the run and to stimulate interest, a new production was staged from the 19th January 1922, some numbers were dropped, and new ones from the original score reinstated. These too were recorded, and appear on this Compact Disc.

## POLLY

The production of *Polly*, which Playfair was preparing while its predecessor was still running at Hammersmith, followed a different pattern. It was always somewhat weaker than the boisterous *The Beggar's Opera*, so Playfair commissioned the poet and essayist Clifford Bax to rewrite the work, most of the music being newly composed by Frederic Austin, with occasional use of the original airs. The designs and costumes for *The Beggar's Opera* had been by the fashionable C. Lovat Fraser, but for the new work Playfair turned to the equally talented William Nicholson, though a few costume designs by Fraser were retained. Playfair was confident enough to take the central London Kingsway Theatre, where the opera opened on 30 December 1922. The Kingsway had a capacity of only 650, and, after three months, business was good enough to transfer to the Savoy Theatre, which had a very large stage and an audience capacity of 1,300. There it ran until 6 October 1923, a respectable combined run of 324 performances. Although Austin conducts on the recorded selections given here, the first performances were conducted by Eugene Goossens, with all later performances under the baton of Ernest Irving. It is perhaps intriguing to note that the stage manager for the production was James Whale, later to find fame as the director of *Journey's End*, and in Hollywood as the director of *Frankenstein* and the film version of *Showboat*. As with the earlier work, *Polly* had several cast changes during its shorter run. Unlike *The Beggar's Opera*, which had a number of revivals and other versions than Austin's, *Polly* was not revived, and the HMV recordings are our only memento of the Austin-Playfair production. Lilian Davies had a delightful voice and stage presence and the opera benefitted greatly from her performance as the heroine. Unfortunately she died in tragic circumstances only a few years later. All the principal numbers were recorded, although some are necessarily brief. The orchestra was that of the Kingsway Theatre.

Strangely enough there was a rival production with music arranged and composed by Hubert Bath, which appeared for a single performance at the Chelsea Palace, a “very free adaptation from Mr. Gay’s opera”, on 31 March 1923, the day of Playfair’s move to the Savoy. Lyrics were by Norman Slee, adaptation by W.E.B. Henderson & R.B. Salisbury.

## THE RECORDINGS

*THE BEGGAR'S OPERA* Members of the original 1920 company went to the HMV studios at Hayes on the 10 December. The company included several of the musicians from the Lyric, Hammersmith. The six sides recorded then were issued in May 1921. Frederick Ranalow, who played Macheath, Frederic Austin, as Peachum, and Sylvia Nelis, as Polly, had all sung with the Beecham Opera Company. Sylvia Nelis had a light high soprano voice, and had sung Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* during the English Opera seasons at Drury Lane. Despite the success of *The Beggar's Opera* she had left the production by March 1921, and these excerpts from the opera are the only records of her voice. Her place was taken by Katherine Arkandy, a Hungarian-born, London-based soprano who first appeared at Covent Garden in 1919 and who succeeded Maria Ivogün at Munich in 1923. The only member of the original cast not to appear on the records was Elsie French, singing the role of Mrs. Peachum. Perhaps her voice did not record well. Her place was taken by Nellie Walker, a stalwart of the house singers employed at Hayes for a variety of recordings; she also made a number of records for Columbia, often in distinguished vocal company.

For the revised production of January 1922 there were further changes to the cast, and four sides were recorded at Hayes on 14 February 1922. Polly was now sung by Kathlyn Hilliard, Lucy, as before, by Violet Marquesita, but on one disc the roles are sung by Dorothy Smithard and Phyllis Blackburne. Frederick Ranalow had resumed his role of Macheath, which had been taken temporarily by Pitt Chatham. As with other studio recordings in the acoustic period (Vaughan Williams' *Hugh the Drover* springs to mind) there was a good deal of role-switching when making records. It must be said that technically the 1922 records are an improvement on those of 1920. It seems that HMV, despite its long experience of recording, was a little nervous of recording 18th century instruments in 1920, and placed some of the singers well back from the recording horn. Alfred Heather and the male chorus in 'Let us take the Road' are recorded in fine vigour though, and this number was always encored during the stage performances.

*POLLY* was recorded at Hayes, the sessions being held on the 21 and 26 February 1923. Lilian Davies always recorded well and the role of Macheath was now taken by Pitt Chatham, though Ranalow, of course, was still playing the part at the Lyric, Hammersmith. Other roles were taken by Adrienne Brune, Winifred Hare, Percy Parsons and Stanley Vilven, and Frederic Austin conducted

The records from the second opera were all deleted by December 1926, but the 1920 records from earlier work remained in the catalogue, astonishingly, until 1942. The four sides from the 1922 revised production were deleted in 1934.

Ronald Taylor

A long and expensive legal case arose when Austin heard that Albert Ketelbey had prepared an arrangement for Columbia and that a record was about to be issued.

Austin v. Columbia Graphophone Co. (1923) is one of the cases sometimes cited as helping to establish the principle that a person who makes an arrangement of an old tune by the exercise of a substantial amount of his own skill, useful labour or judgement acquires copyright in that arrangement.

Ketelbey denied plagiarism. As musical director of the defendant company he had to prepare such music for records as he was told to prepare. He had seen the production but did not remember the music. He went to the British Museum.

Mr. Austin did not approve; he had an agreement with His Master's Voice Gramophone Company not to allow any other company to publish records before theirs.

In a letter Sir Frederick Bridge wrote that if the plaintiff succeeded then it would be dangerous for a composer to arrange an old air which had previously been arranged by another composer, suicidal if he had before heard the earlier arrangement.

It was claimed that there was no competition as Mr. Ketelbey's work was not intended for theatre or piano score; "the charge was really that Mr. Ketelbey had played on the 'cello a tune which Mr. Austin had played on the piano."

Astbury J: "Although no copyright exists in ideas, there can be copyright in a combination of ideas, methods and devices, used and expressed in and going to form part of a new and original work based though it may be on old matter.

Facts: Plaintiff had copyright in his modern arrangement and harmonisation of certain old tunes. Although the harmonisation devices taken separately were known, the overall effect was original.

In order to meet the demand for gramophone records of this music, the defendants procured an experienced composer to take the old tunes and treat them in the same general way, but not to imitate the actual notes.

Was there infringement?

Held: Yes.

Astbury J. "Copyright is now no longer restricted to particular forms of expression."

"As part of the cross-examination in this case, a distinguished expert witness was handed two well-known pieces of music, then two further sheets in which not one single note of the original pair was present. "He had no difficulty in seeing, admitting and stating that the second document in each case was a deliberate copy of the first.

Thus, in the case of a musical work consisting of an original arrangement of musical ideas, there will be infringement if a substantial part thereof be taken, even if the actual notes employed be different.

[On July 10th *The Times* commented that, "During the afternoon his Lordship, owing to the heat, removed his wig and gave leave to counsel to do the same. They availed themselves of the permission."]

Recording details:

The BEGGAR'S OPERA D 524-526 & 615-616  
Ho 4656, 4657, 4658-II, 4659-II, 4660-III, 4661af 10 XII 20  
Cc 1006-I, 1007-I, 1008-II, 1009-I 14 II 22

POLLY D 685-688  
Cc 2611-II, 2612-II, 2613-I, 2614-II 21 II 23  
Cc 2630-II, 2631-III, 2632-I, 2633-II 26 II 23

(There was also a double-sided orchestral pot-pourri from each work.)

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## "THE BEGGAR'S OPERA"

## ACT I

1	7	6	Virgins are like the fair flower	Polly
2	9	8	Can love be controlled by advice?	Polly
3	10	9	O Polly, you might have toy'd and kiss'd	Mrs. Peachum & Polly
4	12	11	A fox may steal your hens,	Peachum
5	13	12	O ponder well	Polly
6	14	13	The turtle thus with plaintive crying	Polly
7	16	15	My heart was so free	Macheath
8	17	16	Were I laid on Greenland's coast	Polly & Macheath
9	18	17	Oh! What pain it is to part	Polly & Macheath

## ACT II

10	20	19	Fill every glass	Filch & Chorus
11	21	20	Let us take the road	Filch & Chorus
12	22	21	If the heart of a man	Macheath
13	23		Music to a Dialogue	
14	25	38	Why, how now Madame Flirt?	Molly Brazen & Mrs. Vixen
15	26	23	Before the barn door crowing	Jenny Diver & Ladies Chorus
16	30	26	Man may escape from rope and gun	Macheath
17	31	27	Thus when a good housewife sees a rat	Lucy
18	App.2	29	The first time at the looking glass	Macheath
19	32	43	Thus gamesters united in friendship are found	Peachum & Lockit
20	34	34	Thus when the swallow	Polly
21	35	35	How happy I could be with either	Macheath
22	36	36	I'm bubbled, I'm troubled	Polly & Lucy
23	37	37	Cease your funning	Polly

## ACT III

24	40	62	Here in a humour I was of late	Tenor Solo, Chorus & Dance
25	41	44	The modes of the Court so common are grown	Macheath, Filch, Chorus
26	43	46	In the days of my youth	Diana Trapes, Peachum & Lockit
27	44		Interlude	
28	46	47	I'm like a skiff on the ocean tost	Lucy
29	52	58	O cruel, cruel case	Macheath
30	53	68	Would I might be hanged	Polly, Lucy & Macheath

Accompanied by the Kingsway Theatre Orchestra cond. by FREDERIC AUSTIN

1 with harpsichord, Viola d'Amore and Viola da Gamba

2 Additional Air may be sung after No.31

The numbers refer respectively to:

Track Number Austin's 20th century Scores (Boosey) Gay's 18th century Scores

## "POLLY"

### ACT I

31	7	6	She who hath felt a real pain	Polly
32	9	13	The Crow or Daw	Polly
33	10	9	I will have my humours	Mr. Ducat and Polly
34	13	11	When a woman jealous grows	Mr. and Mrs. Ducat
35	14		Utterly alone and forsaken	Polly
36	15		Unless you take her	Mrs. Ducat and Mrs. Trapes
37	17		A woman when battle presses	Mr. Ducat and Women of the Town

### ACT II

38	18		A Pirate must either sink	Tenor Solo and Chorus
39	19		How greatly is a rascal	Morano
40	20		Though woman be a pretty craft	Vanderbluff
41	21	25	By women won	Morano
42	22	31	How many men have found	Jenny
43	23	30	Shall I not be bold	Jenny and Morano
44	25	34	The world is always jarring	Polly with Jenny and Morano
45	26	52	By bolder steps	Morano and Pirates
46	30	17	Brave Boys, prepare!	The Pirates
47	34	47	Virtue's treasure	Polly
48	36		Laugh, boys, laugh	Morano and Pirates

### ACT III

49	38	23	Sleep, O sleep	Polly
50	40		Wait until you spy the charmer	Mrs. Trapes and Morano
51	41	33	Tho' different passions	Morano
52	45	57	As sits the sad turtle	Polly
53	46	51	When horns with cheerful	Ducat and the two Footmen
54	51		Love that hath sorrowed	Polly, Morano and Chorus

Accompanied by the Kingsway Theatre Orchestra cond. by FREDERIC AUSTIN