

Music on the Stage



5. Not Always Serious

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A CLASS ENTIRELY DEVOTED TO OPERA, beginning with the high-minded *opera seria* that was in vogue in London in the early 1700s while Handel was producing his prodigious output. After looking at some of the reasons for his success, we turn to John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, a musical play featuring highwaymen and whores rather than kings and heroes, whose satirical songs used popular tunes, and which achieved a London run in 1728 unmatched by any opera.

Other ballad operas followed *The Beggar's* success, but none are now performed; its true legacy can be seen on Broadway. But the other challenge to *opera seria* was more insidious and far longer-lasting: comic *intermezzi* written to be performed between the acts of the more serious fare, which eventually took on a life of their own in the comedies of Mozart, Rossini, and others. We shall sample Pergolesi's *La serva padrona*, ancestor of the entire genre of *opera buffa*. *rb.*

A. Handel's "Rodelinda"

Rodelinda, Handel's London success of 1725, deserves all the criticisms that are usually leveled at *opera seria*: an almost incomprehensible story from obscure ancient history, an unbelievable series of plot-twists, totally manufactured situations, and an unbroken sequence of solo arias. But those arias! In number after number, Handel succeeds in bringing emotional depth to otherwise stock characters, especially at moments of pathos involving the *castrato* hero. Given an updated staging and performances like those we shall hear, it is impossible not to feel for these people, despite their pasteboard origins.

Handel: *Rodelinda*, "Ho perso il caro sposo" (Renée Fleming, Met 2011; d. Stephen Wadsworth; c. Harry Bickett)

Handel: *Rodelinda*, "Con rauco mormorio" (Bejun Mehta, Madrid 2017; d. Claus Guth; c. Ivor Bolton)

Monteverdi: *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, closing duet (Lea Desandre and Jakub Jozef Orliński, in concert)

Handel: *Rodelinda*, Act II duet (Mehta & Lucy Crowe, Madrid)

Handel: *Rodelinda*: "Vivi, tiranno" (Christophe Dumaux in concert)

Handel: *Rodelinda*: "Vivi, tiranno" (Bejun Mehta, Madrid)

B. Gay's "Beggar's Opera"

John Gay and Handel's own impresario John Rich took a gamble in applying *opera seria* mechanics to a plot set among the criminal underworld, with satirical texts sung to the popular songs of the day—the first "jukebox musical." It was a gamble that paid off handsomely, making (as wags said at the time) *Rich gay and Gay rich*. Their progeny is alive and well today in musical theater, but there are inevitable problems involved in recreating the original, though many have tried.

Gay: *The Beggar's Opera* (BBC, 1983) introduction and Act II catfight (Roger Daltrey, *Macheath*; Carol Hall, *Polly*; Rosemary Ashe, *Lucy*; d. Jonathan Miller; c. Sir John Eliot Gardiner)

Gay: *The Beggar's Opera* (Paris, 2018) Act I love scene and opening of Act II (Ben Purkiss, *Macheath*; Kate Batter, *Polly*; d. Robert Carsen; c. William Christie)

C. Pergolesi's "Maid as Mistress"

The tragically short-lived G-B Pergolesi wrote *La serva padrona* as light relief between the acts of his 1733 opera *Il prigioniero superbo*. But it soon took on a life of its own, especially after a 1752 revival in Paris ignited a two-year debate involving the King and Queen on opposite

sides, and many of the leading scholars of the day. But the ultimate outcome was to set Italian *opera buffa* on its own footing, as its own genre. We listen to two arias and a duet to determine the characteristics of the new style.

Pergolesi: *La serva padrona*, "Sempre in contrasti" (Furio Zanasi as Uberto; c. Diego Fasolis)

Pergolesi: *La serva padrona*, "Stizzoso, mio stizzoso" (as above, Sonya Yoncheva as Serpina)

Pergolesi: *La serva padrona*, "Lo conosco a quegli occhietti" (as above)

John **Gay** (1685–1732, *English poet and playwright*), George Frideric **Handel** (1685–1759, *German-born English composer*), Claudio **Monteverdi** (1567–1643, *Italian composer*), Giovanni Battista **Pergolesi** (1710–36, *Italian composer*)

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