

# BRITTEN'S "BEGGAR'S OPERA"

WHEN the BBC first broadcast Benjamin Britten's new musical version of "The Beggar's Opera" so much importance was attached to it that the programme was repeated three more times in the same programme-week. Present in the studio theatre for the first broadcast was "The Listener's" London correspondent, who here describes the event from the inside.

IF I had known that in attending the first broadcast performance of Benjamin Britten's new version of *The Beggar's Opera* I might be asked to take part, I suppose I would not have gone. Nevertheless, like about 150 other people, I did ask for a ticket from the BBC, and we all went along to the old Camden Hippodrome, one of the BBC's overflow production centres. This is a dowdy little theatre with a lot of florid ornamentation outside and which stands just opposite the huge Carreras factory, whose modernistic jazzings also have a very faded look these days. Inside, we collected our tickets—we being the ones who "know someone in the BBC," the ones who ask, and take a turn in the queue, the ones with special reasons for being present, and also a number of 'blind' people, who have places kept for them—in this case for a performance they could have followed better at home.

When the word was given we all went in and filled the dress circle, some of us removing big white "Reserved" cards and placing them on the red plush balustrade where the plaster angels might read them from above. Below, the floor and the stage of the old Hippodrome were laid out for doings they never expected to see—wires and cables everywhere, microphones slung from the roof or on stands, a podium and some chairs where the front stalls had been; on the stage, a small table with a microphone, a jug, and glasses, and behind it some chairs and a big grey thing like a refrigerator on rubber wheels (which turned out to be the "door"); behind the chairs a half-circle of acoustic screens (and beyond them the whitewashed brick walls with the notices about Fire). To one side of the stage was an alcove walled off by screens, with a table and another microphone so that someone could talk into it without being a part of the goings-on on the stage.

In the buzz of people moving about some faces could be picked out. A slender boyish figure, with curly hair, in slacks and a navy pullover—Mr. Britten. A tall and very dashing handsome fellow in a huge white sweater—Tyron Guthrie, producer of the stage version and adapter of this radio version; a very neat man in grey double-breasted suit with shiny black hair, who went about rubbing his hands and satisfying himself that all was in order—Stanford Robinson, who takes charge of BBC opera broadcasts.

The clock was not yet near the starting time, but shortly there was a hush and Mr. Robinson addressed us.

WE were about to see a radio performance of *The Beggar's Opera* by a company (the English Opera Group) that had done it many times on the stage on the Continent, and lately in England, too, and therefore although they were not in costume, and there would be very few properties, there would be Action, he said. They would

carry scripts about with them, only because many cuts had been made; but we would see a good deal more fun than there is in most BBC productions, which are usually got up specially for studio conditions. Over in that alcove the Beggar (who would be Norman Lumsden) would describe his production to his radio audience—we might miss most of that. At this microphone at the centre table some of the characters would whisper some of their lines, but we ought to be able to gather what they were saying. And would we please forget the usual rules, and this time behave as an audience at *The Beggar's Opera* ought to—laugh as loud as we could at some of the very bawdy jokes, and finally, when one of the cast would step forward and ask us to determine how the opera should end (whether Macheath should be reprieved or hanged) would we give the right answer, as loud as possible?

This was the full extent of the audience participation that was required, but it proved to be more than enough, for the fact is that a 20th Century audience, and a largely Third Programme audience at that (since most of us only knew it was on if we read our Third in the *Radio Times*) does not laugh loud at John Gay's jokes—which is not the same as saying it doesn't find them funny. Furthermore, we tended to be, as our white cards on the balustrade described us to those above, "Reserved." So in the end we did little more than snigger, half a beat behind the robust guffaws of the cast, though by the third act we had just about enough courage to cry "Reprieve!" in our mainly West End and North-west London voices.

THE singers took their places in chairs on the stage. Denis Dowling, the New Zealand tenor, was among them. None looked like beggars—the men in tidy lounge suits, and the women in black dresses with sequins or tweed skirts and pastel jumpers with pearls; Dolly Trull, Betty Doxy, Molly Brazen, and the rest. Clearly, this performance was going to provide its own special brand of fun.

A girl in a satin blouse and cardigan took her place in the alcove with some heavy chains and a dog-eared copy of the full script. She might have been anybody's stenographer, but she proved to be one of the most important people there; she had to prod the Beggar from time to time, or give signals to Mr. Britten, which became his upbeats to bring the music in, or she would rattle paper by the microphone, clank Macheath's chains on the floor while Lockit



BBC Photograph

BENJAMIN BRITTEN  
"The score works magic"

extracted a bribe for the lighter ones, open and shut the refrigerator, and so on. Peter Pears and Nancy Evans were now on the stage also.

The orchestra had gathered itself together and tuned up. It is what one might call a one-of-each orchestra; that is, a string quartet, with double bass and harp (these six on the conductor's left) and one woodwind all round, flute, clarinet, oboe (doubling cor anglais), bassoon, French horn, and percussion. No trumpets, no trombones.

Mr. Guthrie set the mood of the evening with an introductory flourish written in a happily effective parody of John Gay's kind of English, and the Beggar took up his story. We could not hear him, but only knew he was growling into his microphone in the alcove.

THIS new production of *The Beggar's Opera* starts from an entirely fresh conception, unrelated to the Nigel Playfair-Frederic Austin-Lovat Fraser version which was a classic success at Hammersmith after World War I. That one ran for three years, and undoubtedly deserved its success, by all accounts; but, by all accounts, it was a charming period piece, whereas the original was intended as a bitter satire, a "Newgate pastoral," as Dean Swift said, which displayed "the similitude of manners in high and low life." The Playfair-Austin version is what most people think of when they think of *The Beggar's Opera*, whether they saw it or not. In the last 25 years or so, that version was *The Beggar's Opera*. But it completely altered the nature of the original. The *Daily Herald* critic, Martin Cooper, an avowed fan of that version, now says after seeing a stage production of Britten's version that neither is this the real thing but (in

effect) nothing ever will be anyway, and this one is unquestionably nearer the 1728 original in atmosphere. Yet some people take it as a kind of affront, so loyal are they to the Playfair version. Some, scoffing at the very idea of making Macheath a tenor, have had to be told that he was one in 1728, and not a baritone.

Britten, who is responsible for the fresh approach to the piece, has gone to Hogarth for its mood, and naturally the designer of the settings (Tanya Moiseiwitch, who did the Covent Garden sets for *Peter Grimes*) has done so too. Therefore it is not graceful or elegant, as the Playfair version was, neither to the eye nor the ear. The squalor and the bitterness, far from being toned down, are very much present. The sets revive a tradition that the beggars' room at St. Giles' (where the beggar presented his opera) was a wash-house by day, and so in the stage version the company are stumbling over baskets of dirty linen as they move about.

Consequently, to listen to Britten's "realisation" of the music, it is necessary to start afresh, with no preconceptions at all, unless it is an advantage—probably it is—to be one of those people who like Britten's music in general, and in particular the idiom of *Peter Grimes*. The tunes, which dear old Dr. Burney called (in 1789) "wild, rude, and often vulgar melodies," are there, no mistaking them, but they seem to have come out all in colours—their own colours. Nothing should be dainty about the musical settings, and in Britten's version nothing is. Much is beautiful, but that is another matter.

Charles Stuart, the *Observer's* critic, has had more opportunity of studying the music than I have, and with better equipment, too, and some of the things he has said about it seem to put the matter as well as might be:

We pass from Mozartian limpidities to severe and antique strains which conjure up Henry Purcell's beneficent shade. Between these extremes occur patches of bitonality which—so persuasive is Britten's technique—sound quite at home in Hogarth's Newgate and its purlieus. A case in point is the setting of "Let us take the road," the highwaymen's chorus at the beginning of the second act, to a tune from Handel's *Rinaldo*. The music has in it the sound of hooves, the jingle of coach harness. Beneath the vocal line the kettle-drums maintain a gallop in B flat. Above it the woodwind gallops in the same key. All this is in four-four time. But the French horn repeatedly enters with a fanfare in a different metre (six-four) and a different key (D flat). Thus the highwaymen exist in one tonal dimension; the approaching stage coach (which the horn obviously symbolises) exists in another. The effect is almost unbearably exciting. At three hearings in the theatre it has made my blood run cold.

Yes, indeed, there are moments like that, which compare with the moment in *Peter Grimes* where Grimes hears the villagers coming for him from the distance, led by the carter's drum, and tells his apprentice to hurry down the cliff to the boat. And these moments can make their full effect even on one who like myself has not so far been able to see the stage performance.

For such as I, the BBC provides more than well enough. The first broadcast performance (at which I was present) was followed by three more broadcasts, all in the one week. Three times in the Third, and once in the

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