

FIELD-DAY FOR THE MORALISTS

"The Beggar's Opera" Caused A Stir

"IF there be any one thing more disgraceful to the English stage than another, it is this opera. The subject, the ideas, the language, are equally all horribly disgusting: the author has raked together the very offal of society."

This was written about "The Beggar's Opera" one hundred years after it was first produced in 1728, but the people who saw the revivals produced in the late 19th and early 20th century took it all quite calmly—and enjoyed the music. Now the NBS is to present the full opera from 2YA in the "Music from the Theatre" series, on Sunday evening, March 9, with the cinema and stage star Michael Redgrave in the leading part—that of the swashbuckling Captain Macheath.

It is not the first time that an opera or play has survived to live down the horrid things said about it at the outset, but probably more nasty things were said about the "Beggar's Opera," one way and another, than about any other production of the days before the movies arrived. These old criticisms remind one of what was often written in the not-so-far-distant past about the blood'n'-thunder Westerns, and the sex-and-iniquity society films. The 18th century critics even got in first with the theory that the Westerns turned schoolboys into desperadoes, for a news paragraph about "The Beggar's Opera" in 1794 records:

"A boy of 17, some years since tried at the Old Bailey for what there was every reason to think his first offence, acknowledged himself so delighted with the spirited and heroic character of Macheath that on quitting the theatre he laid out his last guinea

in the purchase of a pair of pistols, and stopped a gentleman on the highway" (the italics, as they say, are not ours).

Even before that, in 1776, Sir John Hawkins, a lawyer by profession, who had been knighted for his services as a magistrate, wrote: "Rapine and violence have been gradually increasing

double crossing, which alas, seems inconspicuous amid the welter of "low" characters.

An Age of Corruption

The full plot is summarised in the note on Page 18 of this issue. Newgate was the chief prison for London and most of the scenes are played therein. The age was one of callous indifference to poverty and suffering, when men, women and children were transported or hanged for very trifling thefts. In the pages of this opera, and the pictures of the contemporary artist, Hogarth, one has a vivid representation of the reckless, dissolute, and predatory spirit of a large section of the city population of England before the work of the Wesleys, Whitefield Howards and other religious and social reformers.

Influence on Music and Politics

As a matter of fact, however, the chief interest in "The Beggar's Opera" today lies, not so much in its characters and setting as in its value to the music lover and student of opera because of the important part it played in English musical history.

Two hundred years ago, with the death of Purcell, English music had declined. It is true that Handel, a naturalised Englishman, was producing Italian operas, but the production in 1728 of "The Beggar's Opera," a deliberate caricature of the Italian operas of Handel and his friends, set a new fashion in England and resulted in the composition of a number of native imitations which dealt a serious blow to the imported Italianate type.

"The Beggar's Opera" is not merely a parody of Italian opera, however, but also a political satire, hitting at the

No More, Please!

Station 2YD has once again had to close down its Saturday Listeners' Request session. Already the station has received enough requests to provide items for all Saturday evenings for the next three months, and has no alternative but to ask listeners to refrain from sending in further requests. When the files are clear again an announcement will be made over the air, as has been done when blockages of this nature have occurred previously, but meantime —no more, please.

ever since its first presentation" — a magisterial pronouncement which smacks very much of statements once frequently heard about the bad effect of movies on the young. Certainly, John Gay, the author of the opera, could perhaps have given points to the Hollywood sensationalists in the days before the Hays office took control of the moral standards of the movies. His hero, Captain Macheath, made no bones about loving as many women as were present at the time, and the bland statement of his father-in-law that he was merely putting his daughter "in the comfortable state of widowhood" covers a dirty piece of



MICHAEL REDGRAVE is here seen as Kipps in the forthcoming 20th century Fox film of H. G. Wells's story "Kipps." But in the recorded version of "The Beggar's Opera," to be heard from 2YA on March 9, he has the vastly different role of the swashbuckling Captain Macheath

Prime Minister of the day, Sir Robert Walpole, and his satellites. A picture of the political corruption of the period is presented in the guise of a picture of the life of highwaymen, pickpockets, harlots, and criminal servants of the law. The government of the day was so upset that the public performance of a sequel, or second part of the opera, called "Polly," was forbidden by the Lord Chamberlain, and this did not reach the stage till nearly half a century later.

Tunes of the Day

The songs of "The Beggar's Opera" were set to the popular tunes of the day, English and Scottish folk song and folk dance tunes, London street tunes, a few French airs, and a touch of Purcell and Handel. The author of the dialogue and song-lyrics was the poet Gay, hence the old gag that the "Beggar's Opera" made Gay rich and the rich gay. The selector and arranger of the music was Dr. Pepusch, a learned theorist and teacher of composition, a Doctor of Music at Oxford, and altogether a very respectable gentleman.

All the music is charming, and its subject matter, piquant at the date it was written, has become still more so after the life it represents has passed away. It is like the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan in retaining an interest for the public after the full significance of its topical allusions has been lost. Sir Nigel Playfair presented many revivals in London, and the opera has even been produced in New Zealand by a travelling professional company about 15 years ago.

When first produced the opera broke all records by running for 63 nights; when it was revived it ran for two and a-half years.

The arrangement to be presented by the NBS is that of the Glyndebourne company, of which Val Gielgud is producer. A point of special interest is that the leading role of Captain Macheath is taken by Michael Redgrave. As the star of several popular films, notably "The Lady Vanishes," he is well known to us here, but few will have suspected until now that he is also an operatic star.

CHRISTCHURCH LIBRARIAN IS RADIO PIONEER

ERNEST J. BELL, whose book-talks have been given from 3YA at regular periods throughout the past few years, is one of the pioneers in radio work in the Dominion.

Long before 3YA came into existence Mr. Bell delivered book-talks and occasionally conducted a story hour for the children, this work being carried out at station 3AC, situated in St. Asaph Street, Christchurch. He also broadcast occasionally from station 3AQ, owned and operated by J. I. Smail, which was at the premises of Robert Francis Ltd., High Street, Christchurch.

In September, 1926, 3YA began operations in the building opposite the police station in Hereford Street, and Mr. Bell became a radio uncle (Uncle Jack) and was assisted by Aunt Edna (Miss E. Pearce). Children's sessions were broadcast twice weekly, and Uncle Jack's songs, music and stories became very popular and thousands of appreciative letters were received from all parts of the Dominion. Aunt Edna, too, received much praise for her songs and stories.

These two radio personalities continued to carry out the children's ses-



ERNEST J. BELL

sions when the new 3YA was established in Gloucester Street in 1927. It was here that Mr. Bell organised the programmes provided entirely by talented girls and

boys, many of whom are to-day famous in the musical world. For two years Mr. Bell continued to broadcast to the children and then found it necessary to resign. During the whole of this period he received more than 8,000 letters of appreciation from listeners. Many of the radio friendships made in those very early days have continued unbroken to the present day.

Since 1929 Mr. Bell has broadcast various talks from station 3YA and has regularly provided the book-talks, except for brief intervals.

Mr. Bell has occupied the position of Chief Librarian at the Canterbury Public Library, Christchurch, since 1913, having received his library training in public libraries in the London area. In 1933 he was awarded a Carnegie Corporation travelling grant for the purpose of visiting the United States and Canada. In 1937 he was elected President of the New Zealand Library Association, having held the office of Hon. Secretary and also served as a councillor to the association for several years.