

Gay=s use of music  
for satire in the  
beggar=s oper



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John Gay= s *The Beggar= s Opera* is a rather complex work, despite its apparent simplicity. Critics have interpreted it variously as political satire, moral satire, even (at a stretch) Christian satire. Common to many interpretations is the assertion that the Opera is a satire directed at both the politics and the art of its day. A fairly conventional interpretation of the play and its composition shows that it is, and was intended by its author to be, specifically a satire of Italian opera and of the aristocrats that patronized that form. While that interpretation is not in doubt, because critics almost universally agree about it in the literature, most interpretations overlook a certain aspect of the satire and comedy. Specifically, the nature of the music and the manner in which Gay uses that music in the play produces a certain brusque effect, one which can serve to heighten the comedy and deepen the satire of Opera. This caustic use of music extends to the content of the songs themselves, the technical features of the music, and the manner of their insertion into the play itself. Several examples of the songs, as well as the text surrounding them, evidence this acerbic use of the music within the play to satirize opera.

That Gay means to satirize opera categorically is fairly obvious within the text, even without outside knowledge of the operas of the day. Gay first indicates his satiric intent in the *Beggar= s* opening speech when the Beggar says:

I hope I may be forgiven, that I have not made my opera throughout unnatural, like those in vogue. (Nettleton 530)

Further, the Beggar represents opera composers to some extent, which is an unflattering representation in itself. That the Beggar speaks like a literary hack furthers the insult delivered to those composers through this character:

I have introduced the similes that are in all your celebrated operas: the swallow, the moth, the bee, the ship, the flower &c.

At the end of the play, the Beggar and Player return to further insult opera. The Player says AAn opera must end emailprotected The idea is that this piece is ostensibly an opera, and yet it is obviously not. It is the author= s characterization, his caricature of opera. By giving this piece simple, even trite, music and scurrilous content, Gay makes light of the entire form. By using so very much music and creating a play so prone to choppiness, he exposes the awkwardness of the operatic form. By maintaining the right distance from the precise form of an opera, Gay= s piece satirizes the Italian form quite effectively. The Opera was effective in that it inspired a new genre, the ballad opera, thus created a niche for native English music. It thus challenged and struck deeply at opera (Schultz 145-153). Because the Opera was so popular and was performed so often for the rest of the century and beyond, it established a permanent stage presence for native English music, and allowed that music to rival the Italian form. A production of the Opera should certainly address this satirical aim, perhaps by emphasizing the unnatural uses of song, or coaching the actors to draw attention to the satirical elements with their timing. In any case, Gay accomplished his motive of striking a blow for English music. Besides the parody of opera which is so critical to the play, there are of course barbs directed against the Prime Minister and against all opera fans. It also satirizes both criminals and

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the system that pays criminals to inform on each other. Thus, the play serves as political and social criticism. Thence, the Opera achieves an immense degree of complexity and artistry, which helps to explain why the play was so popular for so long. The Opera is entertaining for the masses, complex enough to engage the critic, and it was (in its own way) peculiarly patriotic during an age of immense English pride for native culture.

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