

## Music for *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay

*The Beggar's Opera* was the first and remains the best known example of a so-called ballad opera: a stage work with musical interludes in which new words are attached to popular songs. It was first performed on Jan. 29, 1728, at the London theater known as Lincoln's Inn Fields and has remained popular ever since. Originally conceived as a satire on both the popular Italian opera of the time and the British government of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, it can be interpreted more generally as an attack on privilege and injustice, as in the updated version in Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* (1928).

The songs in *The Beggar's Opera* were derived from contemporary English, Scottish, and Irish ballads as well as "art" music of the time, including operas by Handel and Bononcini and songs by Purcell (all of which were familiar to London theater-goers). Originally published in 1728 with only the melodies of the songs, the text of the play was re-issued that same year with an overture and in 1729 with bass lines added to the songs, the overture and basses being attributed to the German-born Johann Christoph Pepusch (1667–1752). Pepusch, who knew Handel (then living in London), incorporated one of the songs into his overture, which otherwise is similar in style to the overtures of Handel's Italian operas. Most of the songs, however, are distinct in character, and the bass lines could be criticized for being simplistic and in some cases for misinterpreting the modal character of the melodies derived from folksong. On the other hand, the original bass lines probably reflect the improvisatory harmonizations that the songs are likely to have received in the play's original performances.

Later musical arrangements, beginning with those attributed to the English composer Thomas Arne (1759), have tended to update the style of the music to suit changing musical fashions. An attempt to restore the original character of the music, as well as a reconstruction of its original performing practice, can be seen in the edition by Jeremy Barlow (Oxford, 1990), whose complete recording from 1991 is currently available on [YouTube](#). More information about the music, including sources for the original tunes, can be found in Barlow's edition. The present scores include the original song titles as given in the 1729 edition ([available online](#)).

My arrangements of the songs were created for performances at Harvard University in 1976 and 1979. They reflected my study of historical performance practice but were not intended as reconstructions of the music of any eighteenth-century production. Although scored for the same forces as Pepusch's overture—the standard opera orchestra of the time, consisting of two oboes, strings, and basso continuo (harpsichord)—they elaborate the bass lines, harmony, and instrumentation in ways that cannot correspond to what was originally heard. In addition, because modern audiences are unfamiliar with most of the original music, they include references to what are now better-known eighteenth-century compositions, some of which are unlikely to have been familiar to the play's original audiences. (Among these are Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto and the "Hallelujah" chorus from Handel's *Messiah*.)

My arrangements include brief introductions for all the songs, in some cases also interludes and postludes (codas). Many of the songs as originally printed, and as arranged by me, include repeats that could be omitted in the interest of moving the drama forward more quickly. I have also included some original music that was requested by Richard Engelhart and by Steven Drury,

directors of the 1976 and 1979 performances, respectively: the introductions to acts 2 and 3 and three dances in the same acts. Of these, only the prisoners' dance in act 3 is called for by the play text; what music was originally used for this is unknown, although two of the songs—the cotillion in act 2 (no. 22) and the finale—are also specified as serving for dances.

Those wishing to use these arrangements in performance are reminded that they are under copyright and can be used only with permission. Parts can be obtained by writing to me (dschulen@wagner.edu).

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