
Beggars' banquet

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[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

Beggar's Opera Bridewell

Orfeo English National Opera, Coliseum

The Carmelites Welsh National Opera, Cardiff

The Lodger Matrix Ensemble, QEH

For a work that so blithely twirls the forces of virtue and vice into a single bright new shape like a twist of barley sugar, the venue could not have been better. Bridewell theatre, squeezed into a narrow lane behind Fleet Street, has a spicy past. Once the site of a royal palace, it became a debtors' prison and eventually, in 1898, a public bath house, pumping up putrid Thames water for inky printers in need of a scrub. In 1995, after years of dereliction, it became a theatre. During the next two weeks it hosts an exuberant new production of John Gay's *Beggar's Opera* by Cardboard Citizens, a professional theatre group of homeless people, and ENO's *The Knack*, run by the Baylis Programme for young singers who have missed out on a professional training.

This 1728 ballad opera, which cocks a snook at every target of decency in range and revels in lawlessness, achieved astounding success when it was written, supposedly making Gay rich and Rich (the producer) gay, as the adage had it. No one is likely to grow fat out of this shoestring collaboration between homeless actors and an impecunious opera company working in a tiny theatre. Yet judging from the communal zest with which everyone tackled the piece, the rewards in terms of esteem and morale, or even morality, should prove incalculable. The performers were not the only ones affected. When one of Mr Peachum's petty criminals asked, 'Why are the laws levelled at us? Are we more dishonest than the rest of mankind?', you could feel the audience flinch. Gay's sting has lost no venom.

In keeping with the spirit of the piece, the bawdy songs and ballads of the original have been interspersed with iconic songs from our own time (such as 'House of the Rising Sun'), accompanied by a versatile five-piece band directed and arranged by Greg Palmer. These songs, as Gay intended, are for actors who can sing rather than highly trained voices; the excesses of fashionable Italian opera were also the object of his satire. The company ensembles sounded lithe and lusty, the solos characterful and louche. Mary King, a doyenne of musical theatre, was artistic associate and voice coach. Her Mrs Peachum, bewigged and trenchant, stole the show. Yet when she strode on stage with Sylvia Larry, a 59-year-old Cardboard Citizen playing a scheming, streetwise madame, they held the stage as equals.

The in-the-round production by Adrian Jackson, Cardboard Citizens' artistic director, made extensive use of the galleries and several large trap doors. Their mysterious abundance was explained by Bridewell's past: the underground tiled Victorian pool (now empty) still stands intact beneath the removable oak floor on which the performance took place, returned as a covering each winter. The ironies inhabited this intense atmosphere like midges at a picnic.

One of the most influential modern productions of *Beggar's Opera*, a work more often seen now as Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera*, was David Freeman's for Opera Factory in 1982. The previous year his staging of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* was first seen at English National Opera. Nearly two decades later and still fresh, its fourth revival draws to a close this week. This captivating show has become as much part of the Coliseum landscape as Jonathan Miller's invincible mafia version of *Rigoletto*. With an outstanding new cast, it is conducted by Anthony Rolfe Johnson who, fittingly, sang the title role in that first performance. John Mark Ainsley's magisterial *Orfeo* tears at the heartstrings. He mourns his lost Euridice with dignity, ardour and incomparable vocal prowess. Mark Padmore

makes an imposing Apollo. The ENO ensemble and orchestra are at their best. There's still time. Go.

A more conventional collaboration for ENO is the co-production with WNO of Poulenc's otherworldly *The Carmelites*. The shift of Phyllida Lloyd's clean, clear staging to Cardiff has transformed it. Not that impact was lacking at the Coliseum. But in the immediacy of the smaller theatre, words audible, orchestral playing (conductor Gareth Jones) newly transparent and sensuous, a startling new concentration burnt through. The end, in which the martyred nuns considerably meet their death offstage, didn't please all tastes when first seen, yet seemed to me a brilliant solution, replacing mere gruesomeness with terror. Eliza beth Vaughan as the prioress repeated her harrowing death scene. As the neurotic and nervous Blanche (as a programme essay pointed out, she'd never have got past Carmel's psychotherapist) Catrin Wyn-Davies excelled, with Natalie Christie a sunny, credulous young Constance and Sally Burgess fervent and crystal clear as Sister Marie. As Poulenc's centenary year draws to a close (no tears in these quarters), this production of a strangely queasy masterpiece stands as one of the highlights. WNO tour starts in Southampton on 28 October.

Film music could be thought a no-go area for critics just as it seems to be for any but card-carrying specialist 'film-composers'. Another barrier is down, however, thanks to an initiative by the BFI to persuade composers to write for live performances of silent films with a video release in prospect. The trend is confirmed by a new CD of Philip Glass's music for *Dracula*, which is performed live at the South Bank later this month. The Hitchcock season at the South Bank ended with the premiere of a new score by Joby Talbot (of *Divine Comedy*) for the silent thriller *The Lodger* (1926), a haunting film whose star is itself a composer, Ivor Novello. The wryly atmospheric music blazed in the hands of the Matrix Ensemble conducted by Robert Ziegler. Hitchcock, a connoisseur of sound, would have relished it.