Matthew Pilkington, â??The Progress of Musick in Ireland, to Miraâ?•

Description

MATTHEW PILKINGTON

â??The Progress of Musick in Ireland, to Miraâ?•

The poet in fact is taught by Love, even if he has no skill before.
Eurip[ides], Sthenoboea.

By thee enjoynâ??d thâ?? obsequious *Muse* obeys,
Yet, trembling, dreads the Danger she surveys,
But vain are Infant Fears, I plead in vain,
The Task too Noble, too Sublime the Strain,
The *Fancy*â??s wingâ??d, and springs to bolder Flights,
When *Beauty* bids, and *Harmony* invites;
For each, our Passions pleasingly controuls;
Loveâ??s but the purer Harmony of Souls:
Musick and Love the savage World refinâ??d,
Reformâ??d the Manners, while they raisâ??d the Mind,
Gave Man a Foretaste of the Joys above;
For what is Heavâ??n but *Harmony* and *Love*?

Hibernia long beheld, with Sorrow fillâ??d,
Her Poets and her Sons in Arts unskillâ??d:
Sons! dead to Fame, nor comely to the Sight,
Their Customs wild, their Manners unpolite;
Nor yet couâ??d *Musick* boast persuasive Charms,
To tempt one sprightly Genius to her Arms:
The *Muse*, in mournful Pomp, laments her Case,
Pale Grief and Anguish painted in her Face;
To lonely Woods retire the tuneful Throng,
Uncharmâ??d by Sound, and negligent of Song:
The silent *Lark* forgets to wake the Dawn
With early Song, suspended oâ??er the Lawn,
On Earth he Pines, and droops his useless Wings
With dumb Concern, and neither Soars nor Sings.

At length a *Swain*, long torturâ??d with Despair,
The Scorn of some inexorable Fair,
Haunted each Grove, each dark Retreat of Grief,
Bereft of Ease, and hopeless of Relief;
Nightly he heard sad *Philomel* complain,
And wishâ??d to copy so divine a Strain,
So clear, so soft the plaintive Warbler sung,

The Groves, and Hills with plaintive *Echoes* rung.
Her Notes so mournfully melodious flow,
They calm his Soul, and mitigate his Woe,
Distressful Passion both alike bewail,
He sighs his Grief, she chants her piteous Tale.

Fain would he Sing; his Voice was still supprest
By swelling Sighs, which struggled from his Breast.
Despair, whose Sting can haughtiest Minds controul,
Unstrings his Nerves, and quite unmans his Soul,
Breathes a wild Horror into evâ??ry Part,
Restrains his Tongue, and preys upon his Heart.

But near the Grove, where comfortless he lies,
The spiky Reeds in waving Clusters rise,
He models one, and his Invention tires,
Varying its Form as Art or Chance inspires:
Then gives it Breath to sing: With gentle Mirth
It strikes the Ear, as conscious of its Birth.
With sharpenâ??d Steel he lancâ??d its tender Skin,
In order rangâ??d the opâ??ning Wounds are seen,
Wounds! less than he receivâ??d, with piercing Smart,
In that soft Instrument of Love, the *Heart*:
To these his active Fingers he applies,
Which bid the changing *Musick* fall, and rise,
While in the Road of *Harmony* they guide
Each infant Sound, and oâ??er the Notes preside.

But oâ??er his Airs a gloomy Sorrow hung;
For still he lovâ??d, and Love distressâ??d he sung,
His Heart in evâ??ry Accent seemâ??d to bleed,
And Grief harmonious trembled from the Reed.

And still the Tenor of *Hibernian* Strains,
Those pleasing Labours of enamourâ??d Swains,
From his a melancholly Turn receive,
The Airs are moving, and the Numbers grieve.

Musick thus wakâ??d to Life, fair Child of Love!
Timeâ??s ripâ??ning Touch, and growing Arts improve,
While to the feeble Voice of slender Reeds,
The manlier Musick of the *Fife* succeeds.
Alike in Form, but of a larger Mold,
More durable its Frame, its Tone more bold;
Now lively Numbers, born on willing Gales,
Flow to the Hills, and echo in the Vales;
The rural Throng now chearful croud around,
And catch, enamourâ??d, the inspiring Sound,
They walk and move with correspondent Mien,

And Dance exulting on the level Green:
No Secret now the rapturâ??d Heart conceals,
The conscious Maid her hidden Flame reveals
In glowing Blushes on her Cheeks they rise,
Burst from her Tongue, and kindle in her Eyes.

But secret Pleasures once disclosâ??d to Sight,
Give Birth to fresh Successions of Delight.
On Objects new the restless Fancy strays,
And wantons in the search of nobler Lays.
Extended Strings at length Experience found,
Start at the Touch, and tremble into Sound;
Of which a Vocal Multitude conspire,
In shining Order placâ??d to form the *Lyre*:
And thus the Strings, as in a Choir combinâ??d,
Have each their parts of Harmony assignâ??d:
Some heavâ??nly Sounds transportingly create,
Like *Echo* some the heavâ??nly Sounds repeat,
Those placâ??d above, rejoyce in sprightly Tones,
Below the rough, hoarse *Base*, responsive, Groans.

If the judicious Artist bids them Play,
The dancing Cords in Silver Sounds obey,
But struck with Hands unskillâ??d, they spring to War,
Hiss out their Rage, and in harsh Discords jar.

Musick henceforward more Domestick grew,
Courts the throng Towns, and from the Plains withdrew:
The Vagrant *Bard* his circling Visits pays,
And charms the Villages with venal Lays.
The solemn *Harp*, beneath his Shoulder placâ??d,
With both his Arms is earnestly embracâ??d,
Sweetly irregular, now swift, now slow,
With soft Variety his Numbers flow,
The shrill, the deep, the gentle, and the strong,
With pleasing Dissonance adorn his Song;
While throâ?? the Cords his Hands unwearyâ??d range,
The Musick changing as his Fingers change.

The Croud transported in Attention hung,
Their Breath in Silence sleeps upon the Tongue,
The *Wheels* forget to turn, the Labours cease,
And evâ??ry Sound but *Musick* sinks to Peace.

So when the *Thracian* charmâ??d the Shades below,
And brought down Raptures to the Realms of Woe,
Despairing Ghosts from Labour stand releasâ??d,
Each Wheel, each Instrument of Torture ceasâ??d;
The *Furies* drop their Whips, afflictive *Pain*

Suspends, with ghastly Smiles, her Iron Reign,
All Groans were stillâ??d, all Sorrow lullâ??d to Rest,
And evâ??ry Care was hushâ??d in evâ??ry Breast.

Joy spreads her Wings oâ??er all the rapturâ??d *Isle*,
And bids each Face be brightâ??ned to a Smile.
Now Nature, pleasâ??d, her Gifts profusely Pours,
To Paint the chearful Earth with odâ??rous Flowâ??rs,
So changâ??d a Scene she wonders to survey,
And bids evâ??n Things inanimate look Gay.

The *Muses* now from *Albionâ??s Isle* retreat,
And here with kind Indulgence fix their Seat:
Then *Viner* rose, with all their warmth inspirâ??d,
A Bard caressâ??d by all, by all admirâ??d;
He Choral strings, in sleepy Silence bound,
Touchâ??d into Voice, and wakenâ??d into Sound;
Then taught those Sounds to flow with easy Art,
To wooe the Soul, and glide into the Heart,
In Notes, untryâ??d before, his Fancy dressâ??t,
And bid new transports rise in evâ??ry Breast.

While round in Crouds the fair Creation stand,
The polishâ??d *Viol* trembling in his Hand,
While swift as Thought, from note to note he springs,
Flies oâ??er thâ?? unerring Tones, and sweeps the sounding Strings,
The Old, the Young, the Serious, and the Gay,
With ravishâ??d Ears devour the â??witching Lay;
The *Loverâ??s* Eyes now languishingly Roll,
And speak the Dictates of the rapturâ??d Soul;
Foes, in whose Breasts the wildest Passion strove,
Forget their Rage, and soften into Love:
The prideful *Beauty*, feels with new Surprize
Her Bosom swell, and wonders why she Sighs,
Each Passion acts as he affects the Heart,
And Nature answers evâ??ry stroke of Art.

But now refinâ??d *Hiberniaâ??s* ravishâ??d Throng,
With wonder dwell on *Nicholini*â??s Song,
Whose warbling Voice and tuneful Tongue dispence,
The blended harmony of Sound and Sense:
With these he knew the listâ??ning Soul to charm,
And evâ??ry Torment of its Sting disarm,
Couâ??d calm the harsh disturber *Care*, to ease,
With Fear delight us, and with Sorrow please;
Couâ??d warm the kindling Soul with amâ??rous Fire,
And Raptures, which he never felt, inspire.

While *Musick* thus its native Beauty shows,
And, from its living Spring delightful flows,
How does it raise! how gladden evâ??ry Heart!
How far transcend the mimic Voice of *Art*!

So, when *Belinda*â??s heavâ??nly Beauties stand,
Wrought into Life, by *Kneller*â??s magic Hand,
Her Face, her Shape, have all that *Art* can give,
Start from the animated Paint, and Live;
But, when the real Nymph, divinâ??ly bright,
Arrayâ??d in native Lustre, strikes our Sight,
Some nameless transport in our Bosom plays,
That Shade and Colour want the Force to raise.

Dubourg next sways the Soul with nicest Art,
And binds in airy Chains the captive Heart,
While from the vocal Strings, and shifting *Bow*,
At his nice Touch thâ?? obsequious Numbers flow.
With easy toil he swells the Notes aloud,
Now on the Ear precipitant they croud,
Now, scarcely heard, they gradually decay,
And with melodious *Cadence* waste away,
While at his melting Falls, and dying Notes,
Around the Heart the liquid Rapture floats.

With martial Ardor if he boldly warms,
The animated *Hero* pants for Arms,
With guiltless Rage thâ?? impetuous Spirit glows,
And prostrates *Legions* of imaginâ??d Foes.

But, if to Mirth, a sprightly strain inclines,
With Humour fraught his quickâ??ning Genius shines,
Then, smiling Joys throâ?? evâ??ry Aspect fly,
Glow in the Lips, and wanton in the Eye.

Next *Bocchi* Reigns, whom Art and Nature grace
To smooth the roughness of the sullen *Base*,
Directs his Notes distinct to rise or fall,
Tries evâ??ry *Tone* to charm, and charms in all.

Thâ?? awakenâ??d *Muse* thus rises, thus refines,
Improves with *Time*, and in Perfection shines;
The first rude Lays are now but meanly prizâ??d,
As rude, neglected, as untunâ??d, despisâ??d:
Deadâ??(in Esteem too dead) the *Bards* that sung,
The *Fife* neglected, and the *Harp* unstrung.

So when the *Thrush* exalts his chearful Throat,
To glad the Fields with many an artless Note,

With rude Delight the Listâ??nerâ??s Breast he warms,
Wild thoâ?? he sings, his sylvan Wildness charms;
But if the warbling *Nightingale* prepares
Her softer Voice, that melts with thrilling Airs,
The Winds are hushâ??d, still Silence reigns around,
And listâ??ning *Echo* dwells upon the Sound;
Harsh seem the Strains which gave Delight before,
And far excellâ??d, those Strains delight no more.

The pausing *Muse* now shuts her ventâ??rous Wings,
And, anxious of Success, distrustful sings;
O! might her Lays to thy Esteem succeed,
For whom she tunâ??d her artless Voice and Reed,
Thy Smiles wouâ??d swell her Heart with honest Pride,
Approvâ??d by thee she scorns the World beside.

NOTES:

Title *Mira* Laetitia Van Lewen (1709-1750) married Pilkington in 1725, noted for her exceptional singing voice. Several other pieces in his *Poems on Several Occasions* are dedicated to her.

Epigraph From *Stheneboea*, a play fragment by Euripides (c. 480-c. 406 BC), given in ancient Greek. Translation from C. Collard, et al, eds., *Euripides: Selected Fragmentary Plays* (Liverpool UP, 2009), fragment 663, p. 88.

13 *Hibernia* Ireland (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*).

31 *Philomel* A nightingale (*OED*).

51 *its* Emended from â??itâ??s,â?• a printerâ??s error.

66 *Numbers* â??Versesâ?• (*OED*).

70 *Fife* â??A small shrill-toned instrument of the flute kindâ?• (*OED*).

77 *Mien* â??The look, bearing, manner, or conduct of a person, as showing character, moodâ?• (*OED*).

103 *Bard* Turlough Oâ??Carolan (1670-1738, also Terrence Oâ??Carolan), blind Irish composer and harpist; renowned for his improvisational verse (*Brittanica*).

117 *the Thracian charmâ??d the Shades below* A reference to Orpheus, mythological Greek poet and musician of Thracian origin. After the death of his wife, Eurydice, at the suggestion of the gods, Orpheus descended to the underworld and charmed Hades and Persephone with his song (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*).

121 *Furies* Also called Erinyes; Greek spirits of punishment, avenging wrongs done to kindred (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*).

131 *Albionâ??s Isle* Britain (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*).

133 *Viner* William Viner (1650-1716), English violinist, composer and Master of the State Music in Ireland from 1703 until his death (*Dictionary of Irish Biography*).

138 *wooe* Alternate form of â??woo;â?• to court a person, typically a woman (*OED*).

156 *Nicholini* Nicolo Grimaldi (1673-1732), Italian opera singer, alto castrato (*The Harvard Biographical Dictionary of Music*).

160 *its* Emended from â??itâ??s,â?• a printerâ??s error.

161 *Care* â??A burdened state of mind arising from fear, doubt or concern about anythingâ?• (*OED*).

169 *Belinda* The main character in Alexander Popeâ??s popular mock-heroic poem *The Rape of the Lock* (1714); based on Arabella Fermor (1696-1737), who was renowned at the time for her beauty.

170 *Kneller* Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723), English portrait painter. One of the three known portraits of Arabella Fermor is attributed to him.

177 *Dubourg* Matthew Dubourg (1703-1767), English violinist, preternaturally gifted and was appointed Master of the State Music in Ireland in 1728, a position he held until his death (*Dictionary of Irish Biography*).

195 *Bocchi* Lorenzo Bocchi (d. 1725), Italian cellist; he is believed to be responsible for introducing the cello to both Scotland and Ireland (R. Cowgill and P. Holman, eds., *Music in the British Provinces, 1690-1914*, p. 4).

SOURCE: *Poems on Several Occasions* (Dublin, 1730), pp. 3-25. [Google Books]

Edited by Jerry Andersen