

Matthew Pilkington, "The Progress of Musick in Ireland, to Mira"

Description

MATTHEW PILKINGTON

"The Progress of Musick in Ireland, to Mira"

The poet in fact is taught by Love, even if he has no skill before.
Euripides, *Sthenoboea*.

By thee enjoynd th' 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*'s wing'd, and springs to bolder Flights, 5
When *Beauty* bids, and *Harmony* invites;
For each, our Passions pleasingly controuls;
Love's but the purer Harmony of Souls:
Musick and Love the savage World refin'd,
Reform'd the Manners, while they rais'd the Mind, 10
Gave Man a Foretaste of the Joys above;
For what is Heaven but *Harmony* and *Love*?

Hibernia long beheld, with Sorrow fill'd,
Her Poets and her Sons in Arts unskill'd:
Sons! dead to Fame, nor comely to the Sight, 15
Their Customs wild, their Manners unpolite;
Nor yet cou'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; 20
To lonely Woods retire the tuneful Throng,
Uncharm'd by Sound, and negligent of Song:
The silent *Lark* forgets to wake the Dawn
With early Song, suspended o'er the Lawn,
On Earth he Pines, and droops his useless Wings 25
With dumb Concern, and neither Soars nor Sings.

At length a *Swain*, long tortur'd with Despair,
The Scorn of some inexorable Fair,
Haunted each Grove, each dark Retreat of Grief,
Bereft of Ease, and hopeless of Relief; 30
Nightly he heard sad *Philomel* complain,
And wish'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, 35
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 suppress
By swelling Sighs, which struggled from his Breast. 40
Despair, whose Sting can haughtiest Minds controul,
Unstrings his Nerves, and quite unmans his Soul,
Breathes a wild Horror into ev'ry Part,
Restrains his Tongue, and preys upon his Heart.

But near the Grove, where comfortless he lies, 45
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. 50
With sharpen'd Steel he lanc'd its tender Skin,
In order rang'd the opening Wounds are seen,
Wounds! less than he receiv'd, with piercing Smart,
In that soft Instrument of Love, the *Heart*:
To these his active Fingers he applies, 55
Which bid the changing *Musick* fall, and rise,
While in the Road of *Harmony* they guide
Each infant Sound, and o'er the Notes preside.

But o'er his Airs a gloomy Sorrow hung;
For still he lov'd, and Love distress'd he sung, 60
His Heart in ev'ry Accent seem'd to bleed,
And Grief harmonious trembled from the Reed.

And still the Tenor of *Hibernian* Strains,
Those pleasing Labours of enamour'd Swains,
From his a melancholly Turn receive, 65
The Airs are moving, and the Numbers grieve.

Musick thus wak'd to Life, fair Child of Love!
Time's rip'ning Touch, and growing Arts improve,
While to the feeble Voice of slender Reeds,
The manlier *Musick* of the *Fife* succeeds. 70
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, 75
And catch, enamour'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 80
 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, 85
 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*: 90
 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, 95
 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. 100

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, 105
 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; 110
 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, 115
 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; 120
 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*, 125
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. 130

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, 135
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. 140

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, 145
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: 150
The prideful *Beauty*, feels with new Surprise
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, 155
With wonder dwell on *Nicholiniâ??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, 160
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, 165
And, from its living Spring delightful flows,
How does it raise! how gladden ev'ry Heart!
How far transcend the mimic Voice of *Art*!

So, when *Belinda*'s heav'nly Beauties stand, 170
Wrought into Life, by *Kneller*'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, divin'ly bright,
Array'd in native Lustre, strikes our Sight,
Some nameless transport in our Bosom plays, 175
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 th' obsequious Numbers flow. 180
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, 185
Around the Heart the liquid Rapture floats.

With martial Ardor if he boldly warms,
The animated *Hero* pants for Arms,
With guiltless Rage th' impetuous Spirit glows,
And prostrates *Legions* of imagin'd Foes. 190

But, if to Mirth, a sprightly strain inclines,
With Humour fraught his quick'ning Genius shines,
Then, smiling Joys thro' ev'ry Aspect fly,
Glow in the Lips, and wanton in the Eye.

Next *Bocchi* Reigns, whom Art and Nature grace 195
To smooth the roughness of the sullen *Base*,
Directs his Notes distinct to rise or fall,
Tries ev'ry *Tone* to charm, and charms in all.

Th' awaken'd *Muse* thus rises, thus refines, 200
Improves with *Time*, and in Perfection shines;
The first rude Lays are now but meanly priz'd,
As rude, neglected, as untun'd, despis'd:
Dead (in Esteem too dead) the *Bards* that sung,
The *Fife* neglected, and the *Harp* unstrung.

So when the *Thrush* exalts his chearful Throat, 205
To glad the Fields with many an artless Note,

With rude Delight the List'ner's Breast he warms,
 Wild tho' he sings, his sylvan Wildness charms;
 But if the warbling *Nightingale* prepares
 Her softer Voice, that melts with thrilling Airs, 210
 The Winds are hush'd, still Silence reigns around,
 And list'ning *Echo* dwells upon the Sound;
 Harsh seem the Strains which gave Delight before,
 And far excell'd, those Strains delight no more.

The pausing *Muse* now shuts her vent'rous Wings, 215
 And, anxious of Success, distrustful sings;
 O! might her Lays to thy Esteem succeed,
 For whom she tun'd her artless Voice and Reed,
 Thy Smiles wou'd swell her Heart with honest Pride,
 Approv'd by thee she scorns the World beside. 220

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 'it's', a printer's error.

66 *Numbers* 'Verses' (*OED*).

70 *Fife* 'A small shrill-toned instrument of the flute kind' (*OED*).

77 *Mien* 'The look, bearing, manner, or conduct of a person, as showing character, mood' (*OED*).

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

117 *the Thracian charm'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 *Albion'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 *woo*; 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 *it's*, a printer's error.

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

169 Belinda The main character in Alexander Pope'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