

THE 13TH INTERNATIONAL MILTON SYMPOSIUM PRESENTS

Harmonious Milton: An Evening of Voice and Verse



Wednesday July 12, 7:30pm

Church of the Redeemer, 162 Bloor Street W

Land Acknowledgment

We wish to acknowledge that the land on which we perform is the traditional territory of many nations, including the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to gather on this land.

Harmonious Milton

Overture

ACT I: The Wedding of Voice and Verse

Samson

George Frederick Handel (1685-1759)

"Let their celestial concerts all unite"

"Your hopes of his delivery"

"Total Eclipse"

L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato

"Come and trip it"

"Come, but keep thy wonted state"

"And young and old come forth to play"

ACT II: Sweet Echoes

"When David Heard"

John Milton, Sr. (1562-1647)

"Fair Orian, in the Morn"

Comus (A Masque at Ludlow Castle)

Henry Lawes (1596-1662)

"Sweet Echo"

"Sabrina Fair"

ACT III: Renewed Song

"Thou, O Spirit" (From *Paradise Lost*, Book 1)

Robert Busiakiewicz (b.1990)

"And As I Wake" (*Il Penseroso*)

Stephanie Martin (b. 1962)

ACT IV: Saintly Shout

"Blest Pair of Sirens"

Hubert Parry (1848-1918)

Performers

Attendant Spirit: R.H. Thomson

Soprano: Alison Beckwith, Ellen McAteer

Alto: Veronika Anissimova, Lillian Brooks

Tenor: Larry Beckwith, Robert Busiakiewicz

Bass: Martin Gomes, Bryan Martin

Violin: Bijan Sepanji, Larry Beckwith

Viola: Matt Antal; Cello: Alice Kim

Organ: Robert Dixon

Harmonious Milton curated by Larry Beckwith & Confluence Concerts
Dramatic text & program notes by Seth Herbst, United States Military Academy

Program Notes

For a poet profoundly inspired by music, John Milton has had a rather quiet afterlife. Musical adaptations of Milton's poetry have been few and far between. Later generations of poets and artists could not escape Milton's outsize influence; what baffled musical response to Milton's art? Genre is partly to blame: the epic heft of *Paradise Lost*, Milton's grandest contribution to literature, is difficult to fit into any answerable musical form. Milton's "grand style," too, has challenged composers. In its Latinate syntactic involution and unprecedented enjambment, Milton's poetry very nearly refuses to be parsed in singable phrases. (It is uncommon to encounter music based on Milton in translation.) Even so, from the very beginning there has been a small but proud tradition of musical response to Milton. Tonight's program celebrates this inventive, sometimes quirky strand of music history.

ACT I: THE WEDDING OF VOICE AND VERSE

The most prominent composer to set Milton into music was **George Frederick Handel** (1685-1759). By the 1740's the leading composer in Britain, Handel wrote three works based in whole or in part on Milton: *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato* (1740), *Samson* (1743), and *A New Occasional Oratorio* (1746). The first two works have become an enduring part of the repertoire. Handel's famous capacity for text-painting—when the music illustrates the word being sung—everywhere illuminates the niceties of Milton's complex texts.

The oratorio ***Samson***, adapted from *Samson Agonistes* by the librettist Newburgh Hamilton, expands Milton's closet tragedy into a huge, 3.5-hour drama. Hamilton respects Milton's plot while taming his experimental late style into rhyming couplets for airs and regular pentameter for recitative. Samson's despairing air, "**Total eclipse**," adapts Milton's opening monologue into a strikingly minimalistic lament in which a spartan orchestral accompaniment tries to coax Samson from a darkly depressive E-minor into a softly lit G-major consolation. Samson's despair wins out and the air ends in bleak E-minor. Hamilton gave Handel a Chorus of Philistines to balance out the Hebrew Chorus. In Act II, as the added Hebrew character Micah—a solo version of Milton's Chorus—converses with Samson's father, Manoa, they are interrupted by the offstage noise of Samson's final act, which in Milton's drama is left to the imagination ("**Your hopes of his delivery**"). Handel leaves nothing to the imagination. We hear a "symphony of horror and confusion," soon joined by the Chorus of Philistines crying out in staggered choral lines to their silent god. The orchestra gradually swallows the singers, illustrating, in musical slow-motion, the temple collapsing upon them. For all its unflinching tragic violence, the oratorio ends not in Milton's "calm of mind, all passion spent" (l. 1758), but rather a jarringly triumphal showpiece for the Chorus of Hebrews. Nothing in *Samson Agonistes* would suit the purpose, so Hamilton

mined the early lyric "At a solemn music," for both an aria with chorus, "Let the bright seraphim," and a closing choral salvo, "**Let their celestial concerts all unite.**" Handel's great gift for rousing choruses issues in a blaze of grandeur that threatens to erase the tragic complexities of the preceding three hours. But the music is a brilliant enactment of Milton's early lyric.

Handel had a special feel for Milton's early lyrics. In *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*, the composer worked with two librettists, Charles Jennens and James Harris, to transform Milton's so-called companion poems, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, into one of the composer's most adventurous works. Harris' innovation was to put the two poems into direct dialogue, interleaving corresponding sections so that the speakers of each poem debate one another. We hear two contrasting "panels" of the oratorio, as *L'Allegro* pronounces the sprightly "**Come and trip it,**" originally written as a tenor air and chorus, and *Il Penseroso* responds with the melismatic "**Come, but keep thy wonted state,**" originally for soprano and chorus. The surprise is that *L'Allegro's* music is in a dignified minor mode, while *Il Penseroso* opens into the lyrical repose of the major mode as a bed for one of Handel's characteristically generous legato descending lines. *L'Allegro* is not all major-mode fun and games, nor *Il Penseroso* a *serioso* stick-in-the-mud. Jennens added a third figure as the final section of the three-part oratorio, a reconciliation of Milton's antitheses: *Il Moderato*, the temperate mean. Handel sets *Il Moderato* with gracious music. But it is not merely the Miltonist who will wish to remember this dazzling oratorio by its first two parts, the rapid-fire exchanges between *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. We take our leave of Handel with *L'Allegro's* "**And young and old come forth to play,**" the final number of the first part of the oratorio. Again Handel surprises us: the blithe merriment of the opening chorus subsides, as "to bed they creep, / By whis'pring winds soon lull'd asleep." The drowsy *L'Allegro* takes on a sublime gravity that seems, more than *Il Moderato*, to reconcile the lively and the thoughtful man.

ACT II: SWEET ECHOES

Before the 18th century, the most intriguing strands of the Milton-and-music story centre on the poet himself. Milton's father, **John Milton, Sr.** (1562-1647), officially a scrivener, was a talented amateur composer of choral music. "**When David heard**" is a haunting anthem based on 2 Samuel 18:33. David's poignant lament for Absalom is brought to life in sensitive text-setting that oscillates between major and minor and suggests the flow of tears. The secular madrigal "**Fair Orian, in the morn,**" composed for a multi-composer collection likely honoring Queen Elizabeth, engineers a bustling interplay of voices to bring a pastoral scene to witty musical life.

Milton's associate **Henry Lawes** (1596-1662), whom the poet praised for clear text-setting in one of his most charming sonnets, wrote deftly effective music for Milton's 1634 *Ludlow Masque (Comus)*. Of five surviving songs, we hear the most famous, the Lady's

“**Sweet Echo**,” which showcases Lawes’ gift for limpid, unassuming melody, and “**Sabrina Fair**,” with which the Attendant Spirit conjures up the “goddess of the silver lake” (l. 865). The conversational clarity of the text-setting amply justifies Milton’s warm praise.

ACT III: RENEWED SONG

Milonic music is alive and well in 21st-century Toronto. Two contemporary Torontonians composers, **Robert Busiakiewicz** (b.1990) and **Stephanie Martin** (b. 1962), have adapted Milton into distinctive choral settings. Busiakiewicz’s “**Thou, O Spirit**” takes on the final sentence of the opening proem of *Paradise Lost*. Marrying a bold, free atonal harmonic palette with deft, lustrous part-writing, Busiakiewicz realizes Milton’s grand statement of theodicy in a postmodernist a cappella anthem. Milton’s propulsive lines and expansive thought are compressed into an ecstatic, unsettling lyric utterance.

Martin’s “**And As I Wake**,” written to honor Canadian composer Ruth Watson Henderson in 2013, adapts the famous passage on music from the close of Milton’s *Il Penseroso*. Martin’s expert command of choral idiom, triadic harmony enlarged by gentle dissonances, and atmospheric use of organ accompaniment confer a special grace on every measure of this radiant, rhythmically nuanced setting. Listen for the mid-point climax, where Martin enacts the “pealing organ” of Milton’s verse by first removing the accompanying organ and then, at the climax of the a cappella passage, bringing the organ in on a blazing pedal point with triumphal manual embellishments. The setting “dissolves” into the same high ethereal circling figures in the organ with which it opens.

ACT IV: SAINTLY SHOUT

Now mostly remembered for the choral ode that closes tonight’s program, Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry, or **Hubert Parry** (1848-1918), was a grand exemplar of British Romanticism. An admirer of Brahms, Parry built the rich yet highly disciplined orchestral technique of the German master into a less restrained, unabashedly sentimental edifice of symphonic sound. “**Blest Pair of Sirens**” transforms Milton’s “At a solemn music”—the early lyric with which Handel anchored *Samson*—into a massive ode for chorus and orchestra. One will listen in vain for Milton’s disciplined lyricism and compact *canzone*-inspired form. Better to revel in the unabashed fervor of Parry’s soaring romanticism as orchestra and chorus spur one another into one of music’s largest climaxes. If Milton might well have turned a cold frown on its excesses, Parry’s ode can be forgiven for its large-hearted, multifariously tuneful embrace of Milton’s most lovely tribute to the transportive power of music.

SETH HERBST

Milton's Verse and its Libretto Transformations

ACT I: THE WEDDING OF VOICE AND VERSE

"Let their celestial concerts all unite"

From Milton, "At a Solemn Music"

O may we soon again renew that song,
And keep in tune with heaven, till God ere long
To his celestial consort us unite,
To live with him, and sing in endless morn of light.

From Handel, *Samson*, libretto by Newburgh Hamilton

Let their celestial concerts all unite,
Ever to sound his praise in endless blaze of light.

"Your hopes of his delivery"

From Milton, *Samson Agonistes*

CHORUS

Thy hopes are not ill founded nor seem vain
Of his delivery, and thy joy thereon
Conceived, agreeable to a father's love,
In both which we, as next, participate.

MANOA

I know your friendly minds and—O what noise?
Mercy of heaven what hideous noise was that?
Horribly loud unlike the former shout.

CHORUS

Noise call it you or universal groan
As if the whole inhabitation perished,
Blood, death, and deathful deeds are in that noise,
Ruin, destruction at the utmost point.

From Handel, *Samson*

MICAH

Your hopes of his deliv'ry seem not vain,
In which all Israel's friends participate.

MANOA

I know your friendly minds, and . . .

[*Sinfonia* of offstage noise]

Heav'n! What noise!

Horribly loud, unlike the former shout.

CHORUS OF PHILISTINES

Hear us, our God! Oh hear our cry!
Death! Ruin! Fall'n! No help is nigh,
Oh, mercy, Heav'n we sink, we die!

"Total Eclipse"

From Milton, *Samson Agonistes*

SAMSON

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!
O first-created beam, and thou great word,
Let there be light, and light was over all;
Why am I thus bereaved thy prime decree?
The sun to me is dark
And silent as the moon,
When she deserts the night
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.

From Handel, *Samson*

SAMSON

Total eclipse! No sun, no moon,
All dark amidst the blaze of noon!
Oh glorious light! No cheering ray,
To glad my eyes with welcome day!
Why thus depriv'd Thy prime decree?
Sun, moon, and stars are dark to me!

“Come and trip it”

From Milton, *L'Allegro*

Come, and trip it as ye go
On the light fantastic toe.

From Handel, *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*, libretto by J. Harris & C. Jennens

CHORUS

Come and trip it as you go,
On the light fantastick toe.

“Come, but keep thy wonted state”

From Milton, *Il Penseroso*

Come, but keep thy wonted state,
With even step, and musing gait,
And looks commencing with the skies,
Thy rapt soul sitting in thine eyes:
There held in holy passion still,
Forget thyself to marble, till
With a sad leaden downward cast,
Thou fix them on the earth as fast.
And join with thee calm Peace, and Quiet,
Spare Fast, that oft with gods doth diet.

From Handel, *Samson*

IL PENSEROSO

Come, but keep thy wonted state
With even step, and musing gait,
And looks commencing with the skies,
Thy wrapt soul sitting in thine eyes.
Join with thee calm peace and quiet,
Spare fast, that oft with gods doth diet.

“And young and old come forth to play”

From Milton, *L'Allegro*

And young and old come forth to play
On a sunshine holiday,
Till the livelong daylight fail,
Then to the spicy nut-brown ale,
With stories told of many a feat,
How fairy Mab the junkets ate;
She was pinched, and pulled she said. . . .
Thus done the tales, to bed they creep,
By whispering winds soon lulled asleep.

From Handel, *Samson*

L'ALLEGRO

And young and old come forth to play,
On a sunshine holiday,
'Till the live-long day-light fail.
Thus passed the day, to bed they creep,
By whispering winds soon lull'd asleep.

ACT II: SWEET ECHOES

“When David Heard”

Music composed by John Milton, Sr., librettist unknown

When David heard that Absalom was slain
He went up into his chamber over the gate and wept,
And thus he said: my son, my son, O Absalom my son,
would God I had died for thee!

“Fair Oriana, in the Morn”

Music composed by Milton, Sr., lyricist unknown

Fair Oriana, in the morn,
Before the day was born,
With velvet steps on ground,
Which made nor print nor sound,
Would see her nymphs abed;
What lives those ladies led.
The roses blushing said:
O stay, thou shepherd's maid.
And on a sudden all,
They rose and heard her call.
Then sang those shepherds and nymphs of Diana:
Long live fair Oriana.

“Sabrina Fair”

Song lyrics from Milton, *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* [Comus]

ATTENDANT SPIRIT

Sabrina fair

Listen where thou art sitting
Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave,
In twisted braids of lilies knitting
The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair,
Listen for dear honour's sake,
Goddess of the silver lake,
Listen and save.

“Sweet Echo”

Song lyrics from Milton, *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* [Comus]

LADY

Sweet Echo, sweetest nymph that liv'st unseen
Within thy airy shell
By slow Meander's margent green,
And in the violet-embroidered vale
Where the love-lorn nightingale
Nightly to thee her sad song mourneth well.
Canst thou not tell me of a gentle pair
That likest thy Narcissus are?
O if thou have
Hid them in some flowery cave,
Tell me but where
Sweet queen of parley, daughter of the sphere.
So mayst thou be translated to the skies,
And give resounding grace to all heaven's harmonies.

ACT III: RENEWED SONG

“Thou, O Spirit”

Milton, from *Paradise Lost*, Book 1

And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples the upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou knowst; [thou from the first
Was present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dovelike satst brooding on the vast abyss
And mad'st it pregnant:] what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

“And As I Wake”

Milton, from *Il Penseroso*

And as I wake, sweet music breathe
Above, about, or underneath,
Sent by some spirit to mortals good,
Or the unseen genius of the wood.
But let my due feet never fail,
To walk the studious cloister's pale,
And love the high embowed roof,
With antique pillars' massy proof,
And storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religious light.
There let the pealing organ blow,
To the full-voiced choir below,
In service high, and anthems clear,
As may with sweetness, through mine ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all heaven before mine eyes.

ACT IV: SAINTLY SHOUT

“Blest Pair of Sirens”

Milton, “At a Solemn Music”

Blest pair of sirens, pledges of heaven’s joy,
Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice, and Verse,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power employ
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,
And to our high-raised phantasy present,
That undisturbed song of pure concert,
Ay sung before the saphire-coloured throne
To him that sits thereon
With saintly shout, and solemn jubilee,
Where the bright seraphim in burning row
Their loud uplifted angel trumpets blow,
And the cherubic host in thousand choirs
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
With those just spirits that wear victorious palms,
Hymns devout and holy psalms
Singing everlastingly;
That we on Earth with undiscording voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise;
As once we did, till disproportioned sin
Jarred against nature’s chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
In perfect diapason, whilst they stood
In first obedience, and their state of good.
O may we soon again renew that song,
And keep in tune with heaven, till God ere long
To his celestial consort us unite,
To live with him, and sing in endless morn of light.

WITH THANKS

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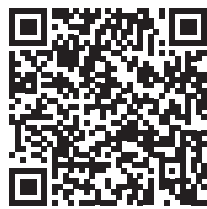
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Cover image from William Strang (1859 - 1921), "Milton Accompanying His Daughters," title page of *Paradise Lost* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1895). Strang may have had in mind this passage from Thomas Newton's *Life of Milton* (1749): "After his severer studies, and after dinner... he used to divert and unbend his mind with playing upon the organ or bass-viol, which was a great relief to him after he had lost his sight; for he was a master of music as was his father."