

A SONG FOR ST. CECILIA'S DAY - JOHN DRYDEN

Life:

- ❖ **John Dryden** was born in **Aldwincle, Northamptonshire, England** on **9 August, 1631**.
- ❖ He was born to **Erasmus Driden**, a justice of the peace and country gentleman, and his wife **Mary Pickering**, from a Puritan family.
- ❖ He was born during the reign of **Charles I** in the **Stuart era**.
- ❖ He attended **Westminster School** under **Richard Busby** (1644–50) and later studied at **Trinity College, Cambridge**, earning a **BA** in **1654** and an **MA** in **1657**.
- ❖ He married **Elizabeth Howard**, daughter of a nobleman, in **1663**, and they had three sons: **Charles, John, and Erasmus-Henry**.
- ❖ He belonged to the **English gentry** and was initially a **Puritan**, later converting to **Catholicism** in **1685** under **James II**.
- ❖ He worked as a **playwright, poet, critic, and translator**; he served as **Poet Laureate** (1668–88) and **Historiographer Royal** (1670–88) under **Charles II** and **James II**.
- ❖ He was stripped of his laureateship after the **Glorious Revolution** of **1688** due to his Catholicism.
- ❖ He suffered financial struggles after his fall from favor, relying on translations and patronage.
- ❖ He died in **London** on **1 May, 1700** (buried 5 May), at age **68**, due to **gout** and **syphilis**.
- ❖ He was buried in **Westminster Abbey's Poets' Corner**, near **Chaucer**, with a monument funded by subscription.

Career:

- ❖ Dryden was a poet, playwright, critic, and translator, the dominant literary figure of the **Restoration era**.
- ❖ He is celebrated as the '**Father of English Criticism**' and a master of **Restoration drama** and **heroic couplets**.
- ❖ He is described as a '**versatile satirist**' and **literary innovator**.
- ❖ He was associated with the **Restoration court** and figures like **John Milton, Samuel Pepys, and Aphra Behn**.
- ❖ His works are known for their **heroic couplets, satirical wit, and exploration of politics, religion, and human nature**.
- ❖ He influenced writers like **Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Johnson**.
- ❖ His first major poem, **Heroique Stanzas**, was published in **1659**.

- ❖ His works, such as **Absalom and Achitophel** and **An Essay of Dramatick Poesie**, are studied in **English literature curricula**.
- ❖ He pioneered the refined **heroic couplet** in English poetry, building on **Chaucer** and influencing **Pope**.

Works:

Poetry:

- ❖ **Heroique Stanzas (1659):**
 - A **eulogy** for **Oliver Cromwell**, written in **quatrains**, reflecting Puritan influences.
- ❖ **Astraea Redux (1660):**
 - A **panegyric** celebrating the **Restoration of Charles II**, marking his shift to royalist themes.
- ❖ **Annus Mirabilis (1667):**
 - A **historical poem** on the **Great Fire of London** and **Anglo-Dutch War**, in **heroic couplets**.
- ❖ **Absalom and Achitophel (1681):**
 - A **political satire** allegorizing the **Exclusion Crisis**, with **Charles II** as David; co-authored with **Nahum Tate**.
- ❖ **The Medall (1682):**
 - A satire attacking **Shaftesbury** and Whig politics.
- ❖ **Mac Flecknoe (1682):**
 - A **mock-heroic satire** ridiculing poet **Thomas Shadwell** as heir to bad writing.
- ❖ **The Hind and the Panther (1687):**
 - A **religious allegory** defending **Catholicism** after his conversion, in **heroic couplets**.
- ❖ **Alexander's Feast (1697):**
 - An **ode** celebrating music, set to **Handel** in 1736.

Plays:

- ❖ **The Indian Emperour (1665):** A **heroic drama** sequel to **The Indian Queen**, in rhyming couplets.
- ❖ **Tyrannick Love (1669):** A **tragedy** about **Saint Catherine**, with a controversial ending.
- ❖ **The Conquest of Granada (1670–71):** A two-part **heroic drama** on Moorish Spain.
- ❖ **Aureng-Zebe (1675):** His last rhymed heroic play, set in Mughal India.

- ❖ **All for Love (1677):** A blank verse tragedy retelling Antony and Cleopatra, rivaling Shakespeare.
- ❖ **Troilus and Cressida (1679):** An adaptation of Shakespeare, with added scenes.
- ❖ **Amphitryon (1690):** A burlesque of Plautus, satirizing mythology and marriage.
- ❖ **Don Sebastian (1690):** A tragedy on Portuguese history.

Criticism:

- ❖ **An Essay of Dramatick Poesy (1668):** A dialogue defending English drama against French neoclassicism.
- ❖ **Of Heroic Plays (1672):** Prefaces defending the heroic drama genre.
- ❖ **Preface to Fables Ancient and Modern (1700):** Praises Chaucer and defends translation.

Translations:

- ❖ **Ovid's Epistles (1680):** Of Heroides.
- ❖ **Virgil's Works (1697):** Including the Aeneid, in blank verse.

Awards:

- ❖ **Poet Laureate (1668–88):** Appointed by Charles II.
- ❖ **Historiographer Royal (1670–88):** Official historian.

Quotes:

- ❖ **Samuel Johnson:** "Dryden's verse is the glory of English poetry."
- ❖ **Alexander Pope:** "Dryden taught us to write with strength and grace."
- ❖ **T. S. Eliot:** "His heroic couplets are the backbone of Restoration poetry."
- ❖ **William Congreve:** "Dryden's wit and wisdom shaped our stage."
- ❖ **Dryden:** "The fame of Virgil and of Homer may / Outlast the world, yet poetry will stay."

A SONG FOR ST. CECILIA'S DAY

Stanza 1

From harmony, from Heav'nly harmony
 This universal frame began.
When Nature underneath a heap
 Of jarring atoms lay,
And could not heave her head,
The tuneful voice was heard from high,
 Arise ye more than dead.
Then cold, and hot, and moist, and dry,
In order to their stations leap,
 And music's pow'r obey.
From harmony, from Heav'nly harmony
 This universal frame began:
 From harmony to harmony
Through all the compass of the notes it ran,
The diapason closing full in man.

Stanza 2

What passion cannot music raise and quell!
 When Jubal struck the corded shell,
His list'ning brethren stood around
And wond'ring, on their faces fell
To worship that celestial sound:
Less than a god they thought there could not dwell
 Within the hollow of that shell
 That spoke so sweetly and so well.
What passion cannot music raise and quell!

Stanza 3

The trumpet's loud clangor
 Excites us to arms
With shrill notes of anger
 And mortal alarms.
The double double double beat

Of the thund'ring drum
Cries, hark the foes come;
Charge, charge, 'tis too late to retreat.

Stanza 4

The soft complaining flute
In dying notes discovers
The woes of hopeless lovers,
Whose dirge is whisper'd by the warbling lute.

Stanza 5

Sharp violins proclaim
Their jealous pangs, and desperation,
Fury, frantic indignation,
Depth of pains and height of passion,
For the fair, disdainful dame.

Stanza 6

But oh! what art can teach
What human voice can reach
The sacred organ's praise?
Notes inspiring holy love,
Notes that wing their Heav'nly ways
To mend the choirs above.

Stanza 7

Orpheus could lead the savage race;
And trees unrooted left their place;
 Sequacious of the lyre:
But bright Cecilia rais'd the wonder high'r;
When to her organ, vocal breath was giv'n,
An angel heard, and straight appear'd
 Mistaking earth for Heav'n.

GRAND CHORUS

As from the pow'r of sacred lays

The spheres began to move,
And sung the great Creator's praise
To all the bless'd above;
So when the last and dreadful hour
This crumbling pageant shall devour,
The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And music shall untune the sky.

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KEY FACTS

- ❖ **Poet:** John Dryden
- ❖ **Written:** 1687
- ❖ **First Published:** 1687
- ❖ **Occasion:** St. Cecilia's Day celebration (November 22)
- ❖ **Commissioned By:** The Musical Society of London
- ❖ **Genre:** Ode
- ❖ **Form:** Irregular ode with multiple stanza lengths
- ❖ **Total Stanzas:** 7 stanzas + final chorus
- ❖ **Theme Focus:** Power of music, instruments, divine harmony, praise of St. Cecilia
- ❖ **Later Included In:** Dryden's collected poems; often paired with *Alexander's Feast*

SUMMARY

Stanza 1

- ❖ The poem begins by saying that the **universe was created from heavenly harmony**.
- ❖ Before creation, **Nature** was in a state of **chaos**, where **atoms clashed** and nothing was ordered.
- ❖ Then, a **divine musical voice** commanded order by saying, "**Arise, ye more than dead.**"
- ❖ The four natural elements – **cold, hot, moist, and dry** – moved to their **proper positions** and followed the **power of music**.
- ❖ The **whole world (universal frame)** was formed **through harmony**.

- ❖ From the lowest to the highest notes, **the scale of creation** reached its **fullest expression in man**, the **perfect instrument of God's music**.

Stanza 2

- ❖ The poet asks, "**What passion cannot music raise and quell?**" – meaning music can **arouse and calm every emotion**.
- ❖ He gives the example of **Jubal**, the **biblical inventor of music**, who first played the **harp (corded shell)**.
- ❖ When Jubal played, his **listeners were amazed** and **fell in worship**, thinking that a **divine being** was present inside the instrument.
- ❖ They believed that such **sweet and powerful music** could only come from **God himself**.
- ❖ The stanza repeats the question: **music has the power to move all human emotions**.

Stanza 3

- ❖ The **trumpet** creates **loud, commanding sounds** that **stir men to battle**.
- ❖ Its **shrill notes** express **anger** and **call to arms**.
- ❖ The **drum** beats with a **thundering sound**, signaling that **the enemies are approaching**.
- ❖ The urgent cry – "**Charge, charge, 'tis too late to retreat**" – shows how **music can inspire courage and action in war**.

Stanza 4

- ❖ In contrast, the **flute** produces **soft, sorrowful notes**.
- ❖ Its **dying tones** express the **sadness of hopeless lovers**.
- ❖ The **lute** joins the flute, whispering a **dirge (mournful song)** that reflects **tender grief and lost love**.
- ❖ This stanza shows that **music can express deep sorrow and emotion** as well as excitement.

Stanza 5

- ❖ The **sharp sound of violins** represents **jealousy and emotional suffering**.
- ❖ The notes reveal **fury, frustration, and desperate love**.
- ❖ They show the **pain and passion** caused by a **proud or scornful woman**.
- ❖ Here, Dryden shows that **music can portray strong and conflicting emotions** such as **love, anger, and despair**.

Stanza 6

- ❖ The poet then wonders what **human art or voice** can ever **equal the sound of the organ**.
- ❖ The **organ** produces **sacred, divine notes** that **inspire holy love**.
- ❖ Its tones seem to **rise toward Heaven**, joining the **angelic choirs**.
- ❖ The **organ's music** connects **earthly devotion** with **divine worship**, lifting the human spirit upward.

Stanza 7

- ❖ The poet recalls **Orpheus**, the **legendary musician** whose **lyre** could **charm wild beasts and move trees and rocks**.
- ❖ But **St. Cecilia**, the **patron saint of music**, achieved **even greater wonders**.
- ❖ When she played the **organ**, her music was so **pure and heavenly** that an **angel mistook earth for Heaven** and came down to listen.
- ❖ Thus, Dryden praises **Cecilia's divine power** and her ability to **connect music with the divine realm**.

Grand Chorus

- ❖ The **chorus** concludes the poem with a **cosmic vision**.
- ❖ Just as **music's sacred power** once **set the spheres of the universe in motion** and **praised the Creator**,
so, at the **end of the world**, when everything will be **destroyed**,
the **trumpet of judgment** will sound again.
- ❖ The **dead will rise**, the **living will die**, and the **music of the universe will end** –
the **sky itself will be untuned**.
- ❖ Thus, Dryden shows that **music is both the beginning and the end of creation**.