

John Milton (1608–1674)

*Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue
freely according to conscience, above all liberties.*

from *Areopagitica* (1644)

Milton's life was so extraordinary that we will imagine there were actually *two* persons of that name, John Milton, the poet, and John Milton, the political activist.



John Milton
the young poet

John Milton the poet spent his youth learning modern and ancient languages and reading classical literature. He began writing poetry in both Latin and English while at Cambridge. After Cambridge, he spent several years at his father's home in private study. His first great poem was the pastoral elegy *Lycidas*, written to mourn the death in a shipwreck of his Cambridge friend Edward King. He then went on a “grand tour” of France, Switzerland, and Italy. In 1646, a volume of his collected poems was published. By this time, Milton's eyesight was failing and, at the age of 43, he became totally blind. Then his wife died after giving birth to their third daughter and his only son died soon after. The sonnet *On His Blindness* composed soon after these tragic events is considered one of the most moving poems ever written. Two settings of

this sonnet (by Gerald Finzi and David Colwell) are in the program for this concert.

In the 1650s, Milton began the epic poem he had been planning for years: *Paradise Lost*. It took him 10 years to compose the over ten thousand lines of blank verse, all of which was dictated to scribes. It was published in 1667 and immediately acclaimed as the greatest long poem in the English language. Before he died in 1674, he had produced two other epic poems, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, a revised and extended version of *Paradise Lost*, and various other works: books on logic and grammar, and a *History of Britain*.

The political activist John Milton was born into a middle-class household which was prosperous despite the fact that his father had been disinherited for anti-monarchist views. He grew up at a time when it seemed King Charles I and William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, were pushing England back to Catholicism. Travelling in Italy as a young man, he was profoundly shaken by a meeting with the aged Galileo Galilei, the noted astronomer and physicist, who was under permanent house arrest and had been spared torture and execution by the Inquisition only by pretending to recant his “heretical” view that the planets revolved around the sun.

On returning to England, he found a country on the brink of civil war. He began to

write anti-monarchist and anti-clerical pamphlets. In 1642, Milton married a 17-year old girl from a royalist family; a few weeks later she went back to her family for a visit and did not return. It is thought her family thought it unsafe for her to be associated with an active anti-monarchist. Milton began writing tracts in support of divorce on the grounds of incompatibility. He was attacked as a libertine and the government attempted to suppress his writings. This led to the most famous of Milton's prose works, *Areopagitica*, a 1644 tract that argued against censorship and for freedom of expression. As the anti-monarchist side became more popular, his wife's family relented and Mrs. Milton returned to him and bore him several children.

In 1649, Charles I was captured, convicted of treason and executed. Milton was not directly involved but published a tract titled *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* that argued against absolute power of monarchs and supported the new regime. As a result, he was appointed Secretary of Foreign Tongues; his job was to translate documents and defend the new regime against Royalist attacks. Even as the new regime became increasingly unstable, undemocratic and unpopular, Milton continued publishing anti-monarchist and libertarian tracts.

The monarchy was restored in May of 1660 and, fearing for his life, Milton went into hiding. After a general pardon was issued in August for all except those involved in the trial or execution of Charles I, he emerged from hiding; nonetheless, perhaps because of his notoriety, he was arrested and imprisoned. He might have suffered the torture and execution that was the fate of some of his former associates but influential friends managed to save him, and he lived quietly for another ten years, surviving both the Plague and the Great Fire of London.

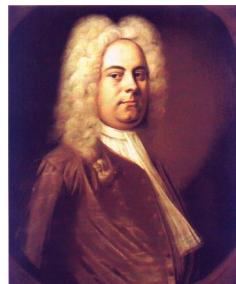
It is indeed amazing that the two Miltons were in fact one person. No politician today would risk admitting to reading, much less writing, poetry, and when important literary figures venture political opinions, they are ridiculed. Milton may well have thought his political activities had been in vain; but the British monarchy has become part of a democratic system of government, and Britain was spared the Inquisition and the bloody aftermath of the French Revolution. Milton's political writings, especially *Aeropagitica*, have been influential throughout the Western world. Thomas Jefferson cited Milton's writings when he wrote the *Statute for Religious Freedom in Virginia*, which was one of only three achievements (with the *Declaration of Independence* and the founding of the University of Virginia) to be commemorated in his epitaph. Alas, Milton's articulate and passionate polemics in support of free speech, liberty and religious freedom are still highly relevant today.



John Milton
the civil servant

Three Choruses from *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* (HWV 55), by G. F. Handel (1685–1759)

By 1740, Italian opera, Handel's speciality, was no longer popular in London and he was writing music for texts in English. Charles Jennens, a wealthy literary scholar who would in 1741 give Handel the libretto for *Messiah*, re-organized material from two allegorical poems written by Milton while he was a student at Cambridge as a "pastoral ode." *L'Allegro* (1631) describes the exuberant and outgoing personality; *il Penseroso* (1633) portrays thoughtfulness and introspection. Both are in English. According to Jennens, Handel had requested that he compose a third poem, *il Moderato*, to allow for a "balanced" resolution of the contrasting affects. Handel composed the music in just seventeen days. Despite exceptionally cold weather, the first performance on February 27th was a great success, and five more performances were put on that season, with several revivals in subsequent years. The poem by Jennens is considered quite inferior to those by Milton; Jennens admitted in a letter that he had overheard a patron in the theatre describing it as "*moderato* indeed."



G. F. Handel

Mirjams Siegesgesang (D 942), by F. Schubert (1797–1828)



F. Schubert

Schubert was particularly interested in Handel's music. He had received the scores of the Handel oratorios as a gift and would play the music at the piano, amazed at the daring of the modulations. In 1828, he set to music a text by Franz Grillparzer, a Viennese poet, based on the following verses from *Exodus* about the Israelites' celebration after the destruction of the Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea:

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a hand-drum in her hand; and all the women went out after her with hand-drums and dancing.

And Miriam sang to them 'Sing onto the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously, horse and rider He has thrown into the sea.'

The resulting cantata clearly shows the influence of Handel's music. The work was apparently intended for the Frölich sisters, whose musical evenings in Vienna often featured music by Schubert, but it was first performed in public at a memorial concert organized by Anna Frölich after Schubert's death later that year at the age of 31.

***Blest Pair of Sirens*, by Sir Charles Hubert Parry (1848–1918)**

Parry is best known for his setting of William Blake’s short poem *And did those feet in ancient time*, better known as *Jerusalem*. He was simultaneously Director of the Royal College of Music and Professor of Music at Oxford University, and composed numerous choral works, five symphonies, a piano concerto, and an opera. *Blest Pair of Sirens* is a setting of John Milton’s ode *At a Solemn Musick*, which describes the experience of listening to sacred music.



C. H. Parry

***Evening*, by Charles Ives (1874–1954)**



Charles Ives

Charles Ives was a director of a successful insurance agency who, as a hobby, composed eccentric music that was far ahead of his time. His father, a band leader and teacher in the small town of Danbury, Connecticut, encouraged Charles in his compositional experiments, which included incorporating popular music of the day — ragtime, marching songs, fiddle tunes, gospel hymns, Stephen Foster — into classical genres, combining melodies in different keys or different metres, instructing a piano player to use a 14¾ in. board to play a tone cluster, and concluding works on highly dissonant 11-note chords. Ives encouraged listeners to “Use your ears like men!”

Evening is a setting of lines from Book 4 of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

***Two Sonnets by John Milton (Opus 12)*, by Gerald Finzi (1901–1956)**

Although roughly contemporaneous with Ives, Finzi was a composer in the 19th century English tradition of Elgar, Parry, and Stanford. His most famous instrumental compositions are a clarinet concerto and a cello concerto. He produced nine song cycles, choral music, and works for voice and orchestra. He was regarded as old-fashioned in his lifetime, but his reputation has improved as “modernism” has become less dominant. The two sonnets by Milton set to music by Finzi are ruminations on the brevity of life, a recurrent theme of Finzi’s work. Ironically, Finzi died of Hodgkin’s disease, then incurable, at a relatively young age.



Gerald Finzi