John Milton (1608–1674), one of England’s most preeminent poets, polemicists, and man of letters, was born the 9th of December on Bread Street near St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. His early education included the study of English, French, Italian, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, mathematics, and theology. Regular attendance at All Hallows near the Tower encouraged Calvinist and anti-Catholic views and galvanized a Puritan outlook. In 1625 he entered Christ’s College, Oxford to complete a Master of Arts degree, then returned home to contemplate a career in writing. In May 1638 he embarked on a tour of Europe to advance his literary standing and cultural grounding.

Crossing at Calais and on to Paris on horseback, he took along letters of introduction from English diplomats. After viewing familiar landmarks such as the Louvre and Notre Dame, he quickly left France, as he did not approve of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu who were anti-Huguenot.

En route to Nice, Genoa, and Livorno, he stopped briefly in Pisa, then by July he had reached Florence, immediately feeling at home in its intellectual and social atmosphere of elegant language and wit. Italy’s renowned academies attracted him, in particular La Crusca which gained him standing as a writer and created useful connections in accessing Rome’s intellectual circles. Before his departure it is thought that he visited the blind and aged Galileo Galilei.

Upon entering Rome in September 1638 the austere Puritan was struck by a 28-century-old city whose ancient ruins of Etruscan and Roman history he could only read about as a student. Here also was the bustle of priests, cardinals, clerics, Jesuits, Oratorians, monks, and zealous congregants. There were Protestants of every sect, pilgrims, students, and foreigners, not to mention monuments, palaces, villas, exquisite fountains, magnificent churches, chapels, oratories, Jesuit colleges, ultra-dramatic sculptures, paintings, gargoyles and ornaments, reliquaries, extravagance, sensuality, theatricality, sublimity. This is what we now call “the Baroque,” and it had its dawn in the Eternal City.

At the pinnacle of this gargantuan heap of riches was the Vatican, the papal empire of the Barberini family who aimed to display the triumphs of the Catholic Church and the banner of the Counter-Reformation: “Delectare et docere” – “To Delight and to Instruct.” To this end vast sums were spent on architecture, sculpture, painting, poetry, music, and theatre. Maffeo Barberini (Pope Urban VIII) was a pious Catholic and an intellectual whose published Latin and Italian poetry was celebrated all over Europe. He appointed two of his erudite nephews, Francesco and Antonio Barberini, as his top cardinals; they became major patrons of the arts, forming their own musical establishments and commissioning countless numbers of vocal chamber works as well as operas and oratorios.
Deluged by delight and opulence, Milton found sanctuary in Rome’s literary academies. His Latin poetry impressed prominent literary figures and patrons. At the Accademia degli’Umoristi (Humorists) he may have seen or even heard the soprano Leonora Baroni (1611–1670), known not only for the beauty, artistry and style of her singing but also for her refined manners, her ability to speak several languages and to write verse and compose music. An impressive poetry collection in her honor entitled Applausi poetici per Leonora Baroni (published in 1639) included contributions from academy members.

Little did Milton suspect that in the following winter he would attend a more intimate academy or “salon” at the villa of Leonora’s father. Meanwhile he was hearing reports of such concerts which also included her mother and sister. The three ladies would have sung repertoire such as Luigi Rossi’s trio Piango, prego e sospir. Rossi was leader of the bel canto school whose hallmarks were luscious harmonies, slow, painful dissonances, suave and beguiling melodies, entwining melodic strands and exquisite textures that could illustrate the whole of earthly and heavenly love. The three singing ladies accompanied themselves on an array of musical instruments: Leonora on the chitarrone and viola da gamba, her sister Caterina on the triple harp, and her mother Adriana on the lirone (large lyre). With as many as 14 strings, this remarkable bowed instrument produced an otherworldly sustained sonority particularly suitable for lamentation. This is the “lyre” of Leonora’s mother whose “golden strings moved in harmony,” as mentioned by Milton in one of his Latin epigrams.

Cardinal Francesco presided over musical performances, discussions, and theoretical experiments in his academies at the Barberini Palace. Polymaths, music theorists, and musicians discussed the superiority of ancient Greek music and its tuning systems, as well as “metabolic harmony,” a term specifically associated with the music of Domenico Mazzocchi. His Musiche sacre e morali (1640) is an important collection suitable for “private religion” in the intimate surroundings of a palace chamber, a small chapel or an oratory.

The music of Misura altri amplifies the sonnet’s metaphor on how clocks measure human life: the mechanical clock crushes human pride; the hourglass reveals that all life turns to dust; the sundial points out that human desire is but a shadow. But the water clock explicitly reminds us that all mortal life is grief, which can only be measured in tears.

Folle cor delightfully encourages us to “flee life’s false delights” with glittering and beguiling musical imagery set to the poetry of Ottavio Tonsarelli (a member of L’Umoristi). Mazzocchi’s luxuriant close harmonies reveal his own brand of bel canto style.

The extraordinary spiritual cantata Piangete occhi, piangete entreats listeners to contemplate the crucifixion, to practice penance and to express grief by shedding
endless tears in love and devotion to Christ. At the climax of the cantata, Mazzocchi startles us with a monumental harmonic shift that gradually winds down to the peaceful home key, gently making one last plea for tears. This recalls the spiritual teaching of Ignacio de Loyola (1491–1556) who advocated the daily shedding of tears. This excessive weeping nearly blinded him.

Despite being repulsed by the Jesuits, Milton attended a dinner given at their English College where he met visiting Catholic theologians and literary men. He then left for Naples in November 1638, no doubt reflecting upon the extravagant life that he enjoyed in Rome. He came to appreciate the idea that admitting opposite viewpoints was a means of strengthening one’s own Protestant convictions.

In 1639 as carnival season got underway, Milton returned to the Eternal City having decided not to venture to Sicily or Greece as planned. He arrived in time to attend a papal opera at the Barberini Theater, but first he took in an oratorio at the Chiesa Nuova of the Congregation of the Oratory. Early on, their spiritual exercises were expressed through laude (hymns of praise), but as Rome became more of an opera-going capital, a new genre called the oratorio took hold, which became a great attraction for nearly all members of society.

Luigi Rossi and Marco Marazzoli collaborated on a number of oratorios, one being the anonymous Santa Caterina. Here the recitative and aria writing suggests Marazzoli’s unmistakable, rather quirky style. The libretto, set in Alexandria, tells of a beautiful, virtuous and devoted young Christian queen who rejects the advances of Maximinus, the visiting Roman emperor. In Part I she is chained, imprisoned and left to starve for scorning his pagan ways. Between the two parts of the oratorio a rhetorical sermon on a related topic would be delivered. In Part II the miracle of faith that sustained Caterina in prison provokes the emperor to submit her to the torture wheel, which is miraculously shattered in her hands. In a rage he then orders his soldiers to slay her by sword. She dies serenely imploring the forgiveness of her Lord and Savior. One sympathetic soldier converted by her remarkable faith and courage cautions the crowd to abandon their earthly desires and to treasure heaven above all else. The final choir sublimely amplifies that message.

Near the end of his second visit to Rome, Milton was finally rewarded with an invitation to attend a private concert at Leonora’s family villa. There he might have heard Marazzoli’s Lament of Artemisia, the Greek queen of Caria (300 B.C.) left grief-stricken by the death of her husband, Mausolo. Over a prolonged period she and her family built a huge monument at Halicarnassus to honor his memory. It was not only designated one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but it became famous enough that today we still retain “mausoleum” as a term for stately tombs.
Artemisia’s grief drove her to such restless impatience that she resolved to bury him in her body by drinking his ashes with her wine. After twisted and depraved soul-searching, she sobbed so uncontrollably that the tears flooded her goblet, spilling the ashes into oblivion: a caution to all of us against excessive grief, and especially to any Christian who would be damned for such a mortal sin.

Rossi’s *Planto della Maddalena* is a lengthy spiritual lament set almost entirely in ultra-expressive recitative, with only one very brief concluding aria. One might almost see this as a Jesuit “Imagination Prayer” in which the opening narrator offers a visceral image of the Magdalene with Christ bleeding on the cross, followed by her long bouts of spiritual and moral questioning, onto the final aria of resignation and despair in which the whole universe mourns.

Overcome by a plethora of extravagant religious indulgences, Milton must have found great relief in the secular and quite simple *Occhi belli*. The duet describes the agonizing but exquisite pain caused by a lover’s beautiful eyes (Leonora was well-known for hers), and we can only imagine how this would have been received by the nobility, the cardinals – and indeed by Mr. Milton.

At the villa he met André Maugars, the famous French viola da gamba virtuoso who often visited Rome to play and to share thoughts with Leonora about their beloved instrument. His long and detailed letter to an unnamed Parisian declared her to be “the marvel of the world, whose exquisite song held gods and men entranced.”

Apropos one evening, he declared:

> “This concert transported me into such ravishment that I forgot my mortal condition and believed myself to be among the angels.”

The trio *Disperate speranze* ends the evening with the sighing and weeping of another sentimental lover, perhaps Milton?

*What can I expect from my idol?*  
*Alas, false hopes, fly away!*

Indeed Milton would fly away soon – back to his beloved England briefly stopping again in Florence. There he may have recalled his earlier visit with Galileo who risked his eyes for scientific research, or the story that Loyola’s near blindness was sacrificed to religious zeal. Both presaged Milton’s own loss of sight later in life to the greater good of poetry.

A final stop in Geneva would return Milton to his Protestant senses. And as he looked back, perhaps Leonora and Rome had been an illusion, which he could only express through his poetic voice. In one of his three Latin elegies under the title *Ad Leonoram Romæ canentem* (To Leonora singing in Rome) he extols her soul-moving song:

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Each man, so the nations believe, is given a guardian angel with protective wings. Why marvel then, Leonora, if you have even a greater privilege? After all, the sound of your voice declares the presence of God…

God, having left Heaven, hides in your throat and slowly accustoms people to immortal sounds. If God is in all things and is everywhere, he still speaks only through you, while he remains silent in everyone else.

—Program notes by Erin Headley