

## JOHN DRYDEN

### “A SONG FOR ST. CECILIA’S DAY”

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website [www.tarvinlit.com](http://www.tarvinlit.com). Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

**An answer key is provided at the end of this handout (p. 4).**

#### I. BACKGROUND

1. This poem was written in praise of St. Cecilia, a third-century Christian martyr who became the patroness of music and reportedly invented the organ.
2. It commemorates her feast day, November 22.

#### II. THEME

1. The major theme of the poem is **Order**.
2. Two ways that Dryden typically explores the theme of order are (1) he imposes order upon disorder and (2) he shows that order in man and in society is at one with an all-encompassing universal order.
3. Just as the king orders society in Dryden’s Absalom and Achitophel and the satirist imposes order upon false literary standards in his “Mac Flecknoe,” so in “A Song for St. Cecilia’s Day,” \_\_\_\_\_ is said to bring order to the universe.
4. “Song” itself follows a specific time order moving from the Day of Creation to the Day of Judgment.
5. It begins with the creation of the universe in stanza 1: “From harmony, from \_\_\_\_\_ harmony / This universal frame [the cosmos] \_\_\_\_\_” (1-2).
6. The poem ends with the Day of Judgment or the end of time: “So, when the \_\_\_\_\_ and dreadful \_\_\_\_\_ / This crumbling \_\_\_\_\_ shall devour/ . . . And \_\_\_\_\_ shall \_\_\_\_\_ the sky” (59-63).

**III. STRUCTURE:** The poem has seven stanzas and a concluding “Grand Chorus.”

**A. STANZA 1**

1. As noted earlier, this stanza deals with the creation of the universe by God.

2. His “\_\_\_\_\_ voice” (6) put “in \_\_\_\_\_” (9) the “heap / Of jarring \_\_\_\_\_” (4) of disordered “Nature” (3).

3. The Great Chain of Being—seen here as the “\_\_\_\_\_” (15) or the entire range of a musical instrument, from the highest note to the lowest—culminates in “\_\_\_\_\_” (15), created last and therefore completing the Chain.

**B. STANZA 2**

1. The opening line of this stanza (repeated in its closing line) states the thesis of the poem: “What \_\_\_\_\_ cannot \_\_\_\_\_ raise and quell!” (16, 24).

2. Stanzas 3-6 will develop this thesis by listing types of musical instruments, each of which arouses a different passion.

3. This stanza celebrates \_\_\_\_\_—our word jubilant comes from his name—who, Genesis 4.21 states, discovered the first musical instrument, a shell.

**C. STANZAS 3-6**

1. Stanza 3 deals with two musical instruments, the \_\_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_\_, both of which arouse the passion of warlike courage.

2. Stanza 4 mentions that the \_\_\_\_\_ and the Lute are the instruments of lovers, since they capture the sorrow of unrequited love.

3. Stanza 5 deals with the \_\_\_\_\_, an instrument which captures the passionate “pangs” and “fury” of jealousy (38-39).

4. Stanza 6 celebrates the Organ which inspires “\_\_\_\_\_ love” (45), the impulse to worship God.

**D. STANZA 7**

1. In stanza 7, Dryden compares the musical power of St. Cecilia to that of the mythological figure \_\_\_\_\_.

2. St. Cecilia is shown to be the superior of the two. With the power of his lyre, “\_\_\_\_\_ could \_\_\_\_\_ the savage race” (48), but upon hearing the organ of St. Cecilia, “An \_\_\_\_\_ . . . [mistook] earth for \_\_\_\_\_” (53-54). Thus as a musician, Orpheus, a pagan terrestrial symbol, is no match for St. \_\_\_\_\_, the Christian celestial symbol in this poem.

### E. LAST STANZA: “GRAND STANZA”

1. As mentioned earlier, this last stanza deals with the Day of the Last \_\_\_\_\_ and thus contrasts with Stanza 1, which celebrates the Day of Creation.

2. This stanza uses the musical instrument of Stanza 3, the \_\_\_\_\_, since 1 Cor. 15:52 mentions the “last trump,” which will announce the Resurrection and the Last Judgment.

3. Explain the **paradox** of the last line of the poem, “And Music shall untune the sky” (63).

A paradox is a seemingly contradictory statement, such as “Music shall untune.” Music, which began creation, will end (“untune”) the existence of that creation by transcending the creating world, since all human beings will be sent to Heaven or Hell.

**Answer Key**

- II. 3. music.  
5. heavenly; began.  
6. last; hour; pageant; Music; untune.
- III. A. 2. tuneful; order; atoms.  
3. diapason; Man.
- B. 1. passion; Music.  
3. Jubal.
- C. 1. Trumpet; Drum.  
2. Flute.  
3. Violin.  
4. holy.
- D. 1. Orpheus.  
2. Orpheus; lead angel; heaven ; Cecilia.
- E. 1. Judgment.  
2. Trumpet.