

***“When David Heard”*: Three Settings** **by John Hamilton, August 2005**

Throughout the history of composition, man has turned to the Bible for inspirational text to set to music. In the past few centuries, one of the more selected texts has been taken from II Samuel 18:33 and reads as follows, “Then the King was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept. And as he went he said thus: ‘O my son, Absalom—my son, my son Absalom—if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!’.” This text has been set to music by such significant composers as the Flemish Josquin des Prez, and Slovenian Jacob Handl in the sixteenth century; English composers Michael East, Thomas Weelkes, Richard Dering, Robert Ramsey; German Heinrich Schutz in the seventeenth century; and contemporary American composers Joshua Shank and Norman Dinerstein. The three settings of this text selected for analysis are from three different time periods, composed by Thomas Tomkins, William Billings, and Eric Whitacre. This study will highlight the compositional techniques and devices of each setting used to portray the grief of David through music.

Thomas Tomkins, a student of William Byrd, was the last of the “Tudor” school of English composers. Born in 1572, he composed some of the greatest masterpieces of English polyphonic church music and also many fine examples of the verse anthem. His great stature as a composer is revealed in the collection *Musica deo sacra*, published by his son in 1668. “When David Heard” is one of the finest pieces from his published collection of 1622, *Songs of 3. 4. 5. & 6. Parts*, in which both sacred and secular pieces are included (Rutter 7). “It is believed by some that ‘When David Heard’ was composed for Tomkins’ degree from Magdalen College, but there is no hard evidence to support that claim” (Stevens 32). Tomkins outlived all of the other prominent English madrigalian-style composers—Weelkes, Wilbye, and Gibbons—and died in 1656.

William Billings was born in Boston, Massachusetts on October 7th, 1746. Self-taught in composition, Billings drew on British models to develop a stark, primitive style of vocal composition appropriate to the stern New England church (Lienhard, paragraph 1). Benny Green in *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Music* states: “He is considered by many to be the foremost representative of early American Music and his compositions were a direct outgrowth of the tradition of psalm singing. They might have been a point of departure for an early indigenous American style, but in fact, they led to no further development and have been rediscovered only recently” (434). Billings was the first American composer to publish a book of entirely original works, *The New England Psalm Singer*, in Boston, 1770. “David’s Lamentation” appeared first in Billings’ *Singing Master’s Assistant* in 1778. The inclusion of “David’s Lamentation” in *The Sacred Harp* collection assured his prominence in America. Teachout states that it is a “Fuging tune, (an American hymn tune that involves textual overlap) a genre that was the rage in Britain and the United States in the eighteenth century” (16). Billings died in 1800.

Born in 1970, Eric Whitacre studied at both the University of Las Vegas and the Juilliard School (with John Corigliano). He lists an eclectic group, including Monteverdi, Debussy, Prokofiev, Bernstein, and Pärt; as his main musical influences. Poetry is the essential source for Whitacre’s musical ideas. In the liner notes for the compact disc *Eric Whitacre: The Complete A Cappella Works 1991-2001*, Dr. Bruce Mayhall, Whitacre’s former choir director, writes that Whitacre’s music and compositional style are “evolving” and “personal” using many “symbolic icons” such as specific chords, melodic cells, and gestures that refer to “God, life, the senses, soul, dreams, love.” Mayhall also points out that the textures and complexities of the chords that he uses create “the broadest possible palette for musical expression” (4). “When David Heard” was composed in 2000 for the Brigham Young University Singers who received a grant from the Barlow commission. It is the only Biblical text Whitacre has chosen to set. Eric

Whitacre resides in Los Angeles, California, and continues to compose music for both choral and instrumental ensembles.

Tomkins

The Tomkins setting is scored for five parts a cappella and is set in the key of C minor. Many of the typical madrigalian effects are present including: text painting, contrasting homophonic and polyphonic sections, duets between parts, imitative counterpoint, and through-composed writing with multiple statements of the text. Although in C minor, there is a strong hinting at the parallel major throughout. This use of these mixed modes creates a mood of the unrest and torment that may well be felt by a grieving father such as David.

He begins with homophonic writing in the upper four voices stating “When David heard that Absalom was slain.” This occurs over a period of eighth measures. By m. 2, Tomkins is already painting the text with the color changes of grief and sadness by inserting half-step motions that create the feeling of weeping. Tomkins continues to assert his expertise of text-painting in the next three sections of text by first having the upper three voices ascend in pitch at m. 8 on “he went up to his chamber,” echoed in a similar fashion by the two lower female voices and the bass, which enters for the first time in the piece. Then, Tomkins continues to word-paint at m. 11 by having the entire ensemble go “over the gate,” by either a melodic leap down or a melodic step up/leap down combination. Every part except for the bass, who sings longer note values to solidify tonality by singing the roots of chords, continues the weeping half steps on the text “and wept” from mm. 13 to 16. This section is polyphonic and paints the picture of multiple tears running down David’s face. Tomkins closes the first section of the work—“And thus he said”—with imitative counterpoint. The text is repeated up to five times within the ensemble and pivots between the chords C minor and G major. The note values grow longer as the section progresses, setting the listener up for the development section that follows.

In the second section, starting on m. 23 of the piece, the choir’s cries grow to wails on the text “O my son, my son.” Tomkins expands his imitative counterpoint by allowing the vocal parts to rise and fall within the given text phrase and by separating the entrances of each part by at least two beats, thus creating waves of sadness that overlap for nine bars. The initial “O” and the last word “son” of each part are longer note values which bookend the continued weeping steps on quarter notes. This phrase and section is completed and the arrangement peaks at m. 43 on the text “Absalom, my son.” At the beginning of the section, Tomkins uses shorter values and dotted rhythms to add a more frantic and emphatic feeling to the grief of David. When the choir repeats the text for the sixth time, the peak is reached and he closes by allowing the choir to linger on the last syllable of “Absalom” and the word “son” as if to imply that David is finally dealing with his grief rationally. This is the section of text that Tomkins chooses to emphasize and linger the most on, lasting sixteen bars. The bass voice even echoes the phrase in half notes well after the rest of the choir has sung the next section of text, “Would God I had died for thee, for thee.”

The last section of the work, beginning on m. 48, is similar to the “O my son, my son” section in that it is imitative and the phrasing is long and delayed between parts. The work closes at m. 57 with a restatement of the text “Absalom, my son, o my son” which is repeated four times over a period of thirteen measures. The bass sings long sustained phrases on whole, half, and dotted half-note rhythms as the rest of the choir recaps rhythmic and harmonic ideas that have been heard throughout the piece. Tomkins chooses to accentuate his contrast of dark and bright tonality by switching between major and minor on the first seven measures, moving into major for the next three, followed by two measures of A minor and eventually ending the piece on a C major chord.

The golden mean Fibonacci point is reached at the cusp of the development section on m. 43 over the text “Absalom, my son.” For most of the vocal parts, it is the sixth time they have sung this text, and the first soprano is completing an ascension to the highest notes of her phrase. The text will be repeated only one more time in each part except for the bass whose last statement of the phrase bleeds far into the next section of text “Would God I had died for thee.” Other points of Fibonacci occur at m. 23, the beginning of the development section, on the onset of the text “O my son,” and on m. 14 as the choir cries on “and wept.” The Fibonacci moments seem to happen when new segments of text are introduced and then repeated.

Billings

William Billings scores his arrangement for four-part SATB with an occasional baritone part doubling the bass at the octave. This setting is a product of the time it was composed (early American 1781) and is set homophonically with one bass solo line from mm. 9–13 and a four-bar duet from mm. 19–22 for contrast. He chooses the key of A minor but, like Tomkins, mixes dark and bright tonality throughout by going from major to minor chords. The “O my son!” repetitions from mm. 14–18 are a prime example of this technique. Billings also uses open fifths consisting of the tones A and E at all cadential points to create a feeling of ongoing longing in the listener, as if to say the grief of Saul will never end. A key point in the harmony happens at m. 7 where Billings uses a C-augmented 6 chord which eventually resolves to an A minor chord by way of an E major chord. This is an intense resolution that occurs as the choir sings “his chamber and wept,” for the first time. The only accidental that Billings uses in the piece is a G sharp, which makes those particular points major; then, he contrasts by following right away with the open fifth of A and E. It is used in three specific spots, m. 7 in the tenor part to help create the intense resolution that was spoken of earlier, in m. 17 in the soprano, and the last measure in the tenor, both times resolving an E major chord to the open fifth.

The introductory text, “David, the king was grieved and moved he went to his chamber, his chamber, and wept,” is the only part of the lyric which is not repeated. It is sung on eighth-note rhythms and set homophonically with two points where moving notes are used for text painting. First the soprano sings an ascending dotted eighth to sixteenth notes on the word “king” to symbolize the king, and second the tenor eighth-note run on “moved” to create a feeling of movement. In mm. 9–13, the basses act as the voice of David as they sing the text “And as he went he wept, and said.” Because the basses sing this as a solo line, the listener gets a sense of David being alone in the chamber and weeping.

Billings contrasts the opening statement with longer note values in the full choir on the repeated text “O my son! O my son!” As stated above, the first statement is in C major and the second is in A minor. There is a full measure of rest between the two, which makes the shift more effective, and adds to the drama of David realizing his son is dead. The soprano descending half-step motion from mm. 17–18 also creates the motive of weeping as David realizes his son is gone. The first part of the final phrase “Would to God I had died for thee” is repeated, for theatric effect, three times with varying choral textures; bass and tenor duet in the first statement, bass and soprano repeat the statement, and a full choir declares the last statement. The piece is concluded with “O Absalom, my son, my son!,” which is reminiscent of the beginning eighth-note lines contrasting with longer note values on the ending “my son, my son!” for emphasis. Billings chooses to repeat the song from m. 9 to the end, leaving the impression that David’s grief will linger on forever.

It is of interest that the Fibonacci points occur at major places in the text: the “Would to God I had died for thee” section the first time it is sung; the four-part “O My son!” in major; and

the first “and as he wept” solo line. The golden mean occurs at the bass solo on the repeat “and as he went, he wept, and said.”

Whitacre

Eric Whitacre scores his arrangement of “When David Heard” for SSAATTBB chorus a cappella. The piece fluctuates between A minor and D minor throughout, with other chords appearing to accentuate the color changes of the grief of David. In the first statement of text alone, “When David heard that Absalom was slain he went up into his chamber over the gate and wept, and thus he said” Whitacre uses both an A and E minor chord, as well as a C and F major chord, and a B diminished chord in his progression. The text-painting Whitacre applies in this first statement is also related to the changing color of the chords. The choir sings the word “slain” on a major-seventh chord texture, rises from an E minor chord to an F major chord on “he went up to his chamber over the gate,” and cries on the only B diminished chord in the progression on the word “wept.” David’s initial shock is then skillfully shaped by Whitacre as he combines a building of dynamic and choral texture, with a dramatic cluster chord, that culminates with a simple D minor chord followed by an F major-7+9 chord and an B-flat major 7+9 chord on the text “My son Absalom.”

The next thirteen pages of music display the many faces of David’s anguish, as the choir repeats the text “O my son, Absalom my son,” with several different musical motif ideas. Throughout this development section, Whitacre’s use of full measures of rest after every musical phrase is intended to increase the dramatic affect. This is an important musical issue as he states on the inside cover of the octavo to the directors “above all, trust the silences” (2). The tenor opens on m. 20 as the voice of David, alone, and softly wailing a motif consisting of descending fourths and ascending sevenths. The choral framework is then built and contrasted until the entire choir shouts a different musical motif. The section concludes on m. 46 with the sopranos gasping for air as they sing descending fifths on each syllable of the word “Absalom.” In the next section, on m. 50, the altos sing the last of the musical ideas Whitacre employs in the development section, a mournful first phrase of quarter notes echoed by a phrase of eighth notes. The choir echoes “O my son” at a pianissimo dynamic and then the piece progresses with an expansion of the themes already presented.

At m. 115, Whitacre begins his ascent to the peak of the piece by recalling an idea from the beginning of the arrangement. He builds a cluster chord which blooms slowly from a unison alto part into eighteen parts sung on the text “my son.” After nine repeats he opens the cluster up more and allows sobbing quarter notes to descend through the second soprano, second alto, second tenor, and first bass parts in consecutive measures. The cluster then builds again quickly at m. 136, and opens up and climaxes into an open A chord with no third on the text “O my son, O Absalom my son, would God I had died for thee.”

Whitacre then winds the arrangement down by returning to earlier motifs and themes of wailing and grief that are imitatively set throughout the choir on the text “Oh my son.” This phrase is repeated forty times while the texture and dynamic volume of the choir is diminished one part at a time until we are left with only the bass and baritone holding an A in unison at a *pianissimo* dynamic. The piece concludes as it started on the text “When David heard that Absalom was slain he went up into his chamber over the gate and wept, O Absalom my son.” Whitacre changes the voicing of the chords by placing the women higher and in a more open position to make it sound brighter. He ends with the part of the text he focused on throughout—“my son”—which is repeated four times, and the last “n” of son is held for the last four bars as the chord progresses from an F major to a D minor to an open fifth of A and E.

The Golden mean of Whitacre's setting occurs at m. 133 as the choir comes out of a repeated cluster chord into an open G chord on the text "my son, my son." Other Fibonacci points occur at m. 80 as the choir homophonically weeps each syllable of "Absalom"; m. 50 as the women start a new expression of grief on "O"; m. 32 and 20 at the beginning and in the middle of the first counterpoint wailing section on the text "O Absalom, O my son"; and at m. 12 where the choir reaches the first eighteen-part cluster chord on the word "son."

The three settings of "When David Heard" have many things in common: they are all scored for mixed a cappella voices, each composer has chosen to color the grief of David by setting the piece in a minor key and then hinting at the relative major key as well as other keys throughout. They all use half-step and whole-step motions to display the weeping of David; they contrast homophonic and polyphonic textures; the voice of David can be heard in individual vocal parts throughout the three arrangements; and each composer uses textual repeats to add to the dramatic effect of the piece, in particular the "O my son, Absalom my son" section of the text.

The main differences in the settings by Tomkins, Billings and Whitacre occur because of the choral writing styles of the periods they composed in. The use of rests in the Whitacre is prevalent and utilized for text separation throughout the piece. Billings uses a measure of rest once between the dramatic repeat of the text "O my son," whereas Tomkins uses long periods of rest within individual parts. Both Tomkins and Whitacre choose to spend long periods of time developing the text "O Absalom my son, my son," while Billings, who was composing for a less sophisticated performer and audience, states the text in a more straight forward fashion with little to no lingering on one idea. These three musical works are all highly effective in expressing the text of II Samuel 18:33 and will surely stand the test of time.

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