

Editor's Note

The motet "Absalon fili mi" has come down to us in two somewhat different forms.

Source A is British Museum Royal MS 8 G VII, folios 56'-58 and has no attribution to a composer.

Pitch is extremely low - a major third below the version printed in this edition, going down to a final low B-flat in the bass part. Original clefs and signatures:

Superius - C3 (key signature B♭/E♭, time signature C2). Initial note b♭ (below middle C)

Altus - C4 (key signature B♭/E♭, time signature C2)

Tenor - F3rd space (key signature F♭/A♭, time signature C)

Bassus - F5 (key signature E♭/A♭/D♭, time signature C2)

Source B is no. 24 of "Selectissimae necnon familiarissimae cantiones", published in Augsburg by M. Kriesstein in 1540 (RISM 1540-7), which attributes the piece to Josquin. This is a collection of pieces in 2-8 parts, described as suitable for singing and also playing on instruments. This version is reprinted with minor corrections as no. 10 of "Tertia pars magni operis musici", published in Nürnberg by J. Montanus and U. Neuber in 1559 (RISM 1559-2). Pitch is very high, with the superius part rising to B♭ above the treble clef. Time signature is C2 in all parts. Original clefs:

Superius - G1 (key signature B♭/F♭). Initial note c" (an octave above middle C)

Altus C1 - (key signature B♭)

Superius - C2 (key signature B♭)

Superius - C4 (key signature B♭)

As a lament, it might appear appropriate for Absalon to be performed at either very low or very high pitch, though it is by no means certain that it was performed at either of the written pitches at today's A=440. We do not know what pitch would have been taken as standard by performers of the two versions of Absalon, or even if they thought in terms of a standard pitch at all. The limits of the notational systems current in the early 16th century meant that pieces could be notated only at certain pitch levels, though it seems likely that transpositions were used in performance. Pitch levels would not necessarily have been the same for vocal and for instrumental performance.

The present edition is based on Source B. In the absence of any firm evidence as to the original sounding pitch, the motet is printed at a low pitch (a minor 7th below Source B and a major 3rd above Source A). This pitch will be found convenient for singers ATBarB, viols, renaissance wind instruments or recorders ATB, GtB. Where a great bass recorder in C is not available, the Bassus part may be played on a normal bass in F by playing the alternative for the final note.

A few accidentals which need to be added as ficta in B are supplied on the staff in A. In the present edition, these accidentals are placed on the staff but in brackets. They are to be taken as applying only to the note so marked, as are editorial ficta above the staff. Ligatures are shown with the usual continuous brackets above the affected notes and coloration with broken brackets. One on-the-staff accidental in source A is worthy of note - bar 42 bassus, note 2 - F natural (as transposed in this edition). The scribe of A has avoided "mi contra fa" (F♯ against C-natural in the Altus part), whereas a G-F♯-G cadence even at the cost of the forbidden tritone evidently sounded better to the editor of source B (and to the present editor, who has rejected the F-natural here). An interesting case of divergence of opinion among sixteenth-century musicians as to correct application of musica ficta.

Absalon is ascribed to Josquin only in a late source (Josquin died in 1521) with no obvious connection to the composer's circle, a fact which has caused recent scholars to cast doubt upon Josquin's authorship. This should not however prevent us from enjoying a fine work.

Vince Kelly

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