Jay Loomis - 5/10/13
Prof. Fuller - MUS 350
Text & Music Relations, Late 16th century.

During the late 16th century in western Europe a trend developed in secular and sacred music in which composers sought to create musical expression that supported and paralleled the emotions described in the words of a song. At this time two music theorists, Giuseppe Zarlino and Thomas Morley, wrote specific suggestions regarding how composers should write music to achieve a coherent, expressive relationship between the text of a piece and its musical setting. Two composers who clearly followed the suggestions of Zarlino and Morley were Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525/6 - 1594) and Tomas Luis de Victoria (1548 - 1611). They both wrote several different genres of music, both secular and sacred. Among the religious music that they composed are two motets that were inspired by the Old Testament Biblical story that recounts the sorrow of the Jewish people after the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. Palestrina and Victoria both succeeded in creating sorrowful music to accompany the sad words of the Old Testament texts, but they implemented Zarlino's and Morley's suggestions in different ways.

Zarlino and Morley made it clear that the emotional expression of a song ought to parallel the meaning of text (Morley, 1597). For the most part these music theorists agreed on different techniques that could be followed to make sure the emotion of the music would suit the emotions described by the text. For example, Morley states that if words express "complaint, dolour, repentance, sighs, or tears… [the composer] must cause the parts to proceed in their motions… by whole notes, sharp thirds, sharp sixths…" . He continues to say that accidentals make a song sound more "effeminate and languishing". Morley also mentions that when writing a motet, the composer should use "discords and bindings" only in long notes in order to express "majesty" (Morley,

1597). Zarlino influenced the writing of Morely, and in his writing he offers similar suggestions regarding accidentals. Zarlino emphasized the importance of paying attention to "consonances and the natural and accidental movements" in order to match the expression of the music with the meaning of the words of a text (Zarlino, 1558). Both Zarlino and Morley also wrote about how to use appropriate rhythmic structures and rests so that the music accurately expresses the meaning of the text.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's motet, *Super Flumina Babylonis*, is based on verses 1 - 2, from Psalm 137.

By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept
when we remembered thee, O Sion.
On the willow trees, in the midst of them
we suspended our musical instruments.

Luis de Victoria based his motet, *O Vos Omnes*, on a verse from the book of Lamentations (chapter 1, verse 12):

Lamentations, 1:12
All you who pass by,
look and see if there is any sorrow similar to my sorrow.
Look all peoples
and see my sorrow,
see if there is any sorrow similar to my sorrow.

Both of these texts are laments whose words describe sorrowful situations; consequently, the composers made efforts to express sadness through the music that accompanies the words. In their effort to communicate sadness through music, the composers used slow pacing, dissonant harmonies, and accidentals, as Zarlino and Morley suggested in their writings.

In addition to the general guidelines described by the music theorists above, Palestrina used other musical language to express the meaning of the words of Psalm

137. One of the most striking characteristics of *Super Flumina Babylonis* is the frequent use of points of imitation; motives are layered in different voices several times in constant succession. There are also only three measures in the motet where there is a clear break from one section to the next (see mm. 14, 23, 55). Throughout most of the piece Palestrina introduces new motives that begin without pause. At the same time, the few times that Palestrina does pause in this motet, he makes a clear break and transition for specific rhetorical reasons. For example, in measure fourteen, the phrase "*illic sedimus*" begins, which describes the moment of sitting down; the musical gesture for this phrase suggests the idea of stopping, when the music slows down and the active energy produced by various voices interacting in frequent points of imitation stops. At this point the composer creates another contrast by writing the next section with a chordal texture (see figure 1). This homophonic section is a short but clear contrast to rest of the piece which is in constant motion.

Figure 1. The only chordal section of the piece, measures 14 & 15.

The continuous movement in the melodic lines of almost all of Palestrina's motet suggests the sound of the flowing water of the river described in the Psalm. The continuous interaction of all of the voices can also reflect the collective suffering of the Jewish people, which is clearly stated with the first person plural narration of the sorrowful situation that the Jewish people find themselves in; "we sat down and wept." Another example of the musical rhetoric that Palestrina uses to match his music to the words of Psalm 137 can be found in the last section of the motet starting at measure 55.

The text says that the people "suspend their musical instruments..." This is an expression of great sorrow; the people are so sad that they refuse to play music. In this section, the melodic contour of the motive on "*suspendimus…*" is falling; this melodic line expresses the emotion of giving up, as if heaving a great sigh of sorrow. This motive is repeated several times in all of the voices, which suggests the collective experience of sadness from the shared experience of defeat (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Falling line motive on the phrase that starts with "*suspendimus.*"

In his motet, *O Vos Omnes,* Luis de Victoria uses musical rhetoric in different ways to effectively express the sorrow communicated by the text of Lamentations 1:12. This verse describes the sorrow of one person, who speaks for himself or herself, in the first person singular. It is an isolated experience of sorrow that is represented musically through the mostly homophonic, chordal texture throughout the piece. Although there are a few short sections with points of imitation, within most of Victoria's motet the musical expression can be interpreted as a single, languishing voice. Victoria uses dissonance in every phrase of *O Vos Omnes*, which creates a constant sense of instability and unrest. The lines of the text are divided into clear musical phrases which are separated by rests and cadences in measures 10, 15, 23, 33, 39, 50, and 58. Victoria uses mostly open cadences, which creates in the listener a sense of unrest and a desire for the (harmonic) relief that comes from a stable, closed, authentic cadence.

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The only closed cadences are in measures 50 (A to D) and measure 68 (the last cadence, also A to D); see figure 3.
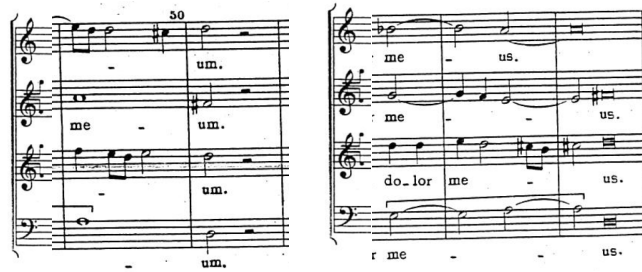

Figure 3. The only closed cadences in Victoria's motet (mm. 50 and 68).

The composer expresses a sense of unchanging sorrow in this motet by writing static melodic contours with plenty of repetition of tones within phrases (see measures 23 - 40). The only time that Victoria uses imitation is in the sections where he repeats phrases about pain (mm. 17 - 24); these sections remind the listener over and over how great the subject's sadness is. One of the most striking motives in this piece is on the word "*attendite*" (See figure 4). These words are imperative commands that demand that the audience and the onlookers "pay attention!" Accordingly, Victoria writes emphatic music with repeated notes that create clear, static melodic lines that contrast to the previous rising and falling motives. The soprano line especially stands out because of the higher register and the delayed entrance (see below). This section is also especially noticeable because it follows a strong cadence and a half rest; this way the words and music effectively get the listener's attention.

Figure 4. Notable motive with the text "*attendite*".

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Although both Palestrina and Victoria wrote music that followed the suggestions of Zarlino and Morley, and they both effectively communicated a feeling of sadness through their pieces, there are certain stylistic differences that are clearly heard in *O Vos Omnes* compared to *Super Flumina Babylonis*. One clear difference is directly related to the text that each composer chose. As was mentioned above, the text for Palestrina's piece is in first person plural, and the text for Victoria's piece is in first person singular. This difference in the narrative voice of the text was represented in the music by contrasting textures and styles: homophonic in *O Vos Omnes*, and intensely imitative in *Super Flumina* (see above). Another clear contrast is related to how these composers use the repetition of phrases in these pieces. Palestrina repeats musical motives that accompany the text in continuous waves of imitations throughout the piece which suggests the sound of many people suffering together. On the other hand, Victoria uses the repetition of phrases only in the sections that refer to "*dolor,*" in order to emphasize the intensity of that pain, as described earlier. Another difference is that Victoria uses accidentals more often than Palestrina. Finally, each of these composers used different methods to delineate phrases of text and music. The phrasing in Palestrina's motet is created by introducing different musical motives that accompany new sections of text, even if there is not a clear cadence or rest. Victoria, on the other hand, articulated the sections of text by creating separate musical phrases that are clearly divided by cadences and rests. Both of these composers succeed in creating pieces that inspire a strong sense of sorrow, even if the meaning of the words is not clear, and they achieve the effective expression of this feeling by following similar guidelines, which were described by Zarlino and Morley, yet they apply the suggestions of the 16th century music theorists in different ways.

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