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English Madrigal and Text Painting Techniques: A Comparative Study on Works by Morley, Weelkes and Wilbye

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ABSTRACT

As the presence of a stable monarch arrived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, English musical practices witnessed a new level of growth and innovation. A demand for vocal and instrumental pieces for small groups stemmed from interests in every sector of society. One of the secular genres which suitably filled this niche was the madrigal. English madrigal school was brief but intensely flowering along with the composers who produced them. Thomas Morley, Thomas Weelkes and John Wilbye are considered among the finest composers of this period. Though many features of their works are common to conventions, they retains unmistakably English qualities in their interpretation of a popular Italian genre and succeed in contributing many innovations of their own. One of the most prominent characteristic features of the English madrigal is its text painting. In this study, selected works by Thomas Morley, Thomas Weelkes and John Wilbye were collected , analyzed and compared to demonstrate the development and craftsmanship of text painting technique by those great masters.

INTRODUCTION

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, English musical practices witnessed a new level of growth and innovation. While the Italian led the way in developing new genres and the influence of humanist thinking on the Continent engendered a belief in the significance of music's place in daily life, England had remained relatively quiet. Renaissance ideology was late in its arrival on English shores and was only made possible by the presence of a stable monarch. During the mid sixteenth century, writers like Sir Thomas Elyot began to look directly at Italian models for inspiration. Elyot stated that the musical training is not only a fashionable and essential part of a gentleman's education, but also serves a uplift the soul and inspire right action. Though the emphasis on music initially took root in the upper class, it was consciously emulated by a growing number of affluent merchants and tradesmen. The nobility who could afford to do so were known to hire musicians into their service not only for the purpose of providing entertainment, but also to educate the children and direct the entire musical life of the estate (Pattison, 1948). Such a luxury was only available to a select circle, but the middle class found itself eager to seek ways to capture some of the refined qualities of royal life through different means. A demand for vocal and instrumental pieces for small groups stemmed from interests in this sector of society .

LITERATURE

FORERUNNER-ITALIAN MADRIGAL

Nicholas Yonge, a wealthy merchant, hosted a "madrigal society" at his home involving informal gatherings of amateur musicians like himself who desired a forum to share their common interest. The reasons for their fascination with the Italian madrigal itself were often purely musical, since few of them understood Italian well enough to appreciate the subtleties of textual nuance. Yonge compiled Musica Transalpina in 1588, a book of madrigals with texts that had been translated to English (Fellowes, 1972).

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Another such publication of translated madrigals was put forth by Thomas Watson, an English poet. His Italian English ed of 1590 includes many works by Marenzio (Kerman, 1962). By this time, the Italian madrigal had already evolved into a highly stylized form with its own set of conventions and distinct characteristics. It is curious that the madrigal's influence on English music came nearly fifty years after its beginning in Italy. Some historians have speculated that religious instability kept England preoccupied with internal affairs while other writers point to the late development of English printing as a possible cause.There is evidence that a publication of English madrigals entitled Wynkyn de Worde came out as early as 1530, but its author is unknown and only the bass part-book has survived (Boyd, 1948). Prior to the importation of the madrigal, English secular vocal music primarily consisted of small works like those by William Cornish which were written for three voices and contained a strong folk element. The color and vitality characteristic of the mature Italian madrigal as well as the freedom inherent in its composition evidently appealed to the English taste. A flurry of activity surrounding this genre began in the last two decades of the sixteenth century and continued into the dawn of the seventeenth century. Nearly forty volume of English madrigals by Morley, Weelkes and many other composers were published during the years 1590-1620.

Musical Form and Style

The term "madrigal" itself was used very loosely by the Elizabethan composers, often mixed in with similar pieces such as the canzonet. Thomas Morley, for instance, published volumes of so-called canzonets, many of which were actually madrigals, while some of his self-proclaimed madrigal collections contain a large number of canzonets (Ibid). A madrigal does not adhere to a predetermined scheme and take shape through the specific emotions or events presented in its text. Canzonets often involve formal repetitions of music and multi-stanza texts. But both genres are fairly similar in the sentiments they express; there is also plenty of crossover in musical technique from on to the other. Most of the madrigal written at this time were of a lighter character than the madrigals produced in Italy. Serious madrigals were tied to the presence of musical academies and also to a strong literary tradition which had no parallel in England (Kerman, 1962). English madrigals also varied in the number of voices called for in performance, ranging from three up to six while their Italian counterparts rarely contained less than five. Perhaps the wide variety in vocal texture was necessary to ensure broader base of musical appeal (Mackerness, 1964).

Text and Subject Matter

Compared to the madrigal in Italy, the literary aspect of the English madrigal was far less important (Pattison, 1948). The "New Poets" of the Elizabethan era actively studied, emulated and plagiarized the work of French and Italian writers, particularly Petrarch, whose significance in the cultivation of the madrigal in its mature form can hardly overstated (Kerman, 1962). In nearly all the publications I examined, no reference to the authors of the texts were made. Some of the texts were roughly translated from Italian madrigals. The Others merely mimicked "Petrarchan" style and subject matter, describing the pangs of a rejected lover, the image of a woman whose beauty is idealized, happy pastoral scenes, or the juxtaposition of violently contrasting emotions. Such strong expressions lend themselves easily to a musical setting, whereas more abstract or intellectual feelings are difficult to depict. In this capacity, the model set forth by Petrarch allowed for an equality of textual and musical importance to be reached (Pattison, 1948). The contrast in philosophy between the English and Italian madrigal schools is adequately summarized by this statement: "The English madrigalist is first of all a musician; his Italian colleague is often more of a dramatist."

REPRESENTED COMPOSERS

Thomas Morley

Thomas Morley, one of the most prolific Elizabethan madrigal composers,was a student of William Byrd. Between the year 1593 and 1597, he was the only person who published English madrigals.This was probably due to his privileged position as being both an active composer and licensed printer of music. Morley's compositions enjoyed wide circulation, as is evident in the relatively high number of reprinted editions of his music that occurred within a short period of time. Perhaps Morley, more so than Weelkes or Wilbye, should be credited with the first efforts to digest the style of the Italian madrigal and

internalize it within the context of his native culture. He is largely responsible for the creation of the English madrigal.

The first of his publications, Canzonets to three voices (p.1593), falls within that gray area between the genres. Overall, the pieces are madrigalians in their equal treatment of voices and alternation between contrapuntal and homophonic textures. They are all of a lighter spirit that is descriptive of Morley's overall output (Ibid). In No. 6, *Good morrow fair ladies of the May*, we can see a sample of the composer's imitative technique. As in Italian madrigals, often the voice entrance do not occur at equal intervals, nor are the imitative phrases always at the same pitch level. Suspension are planned out to coincide with the word "cruel" in m. 5 and at the end of the first section, where it is drawn out for emphasis before embarking on a new point of imitation shown in figure 1. Other interesting features occur in mm.21-22, where the object of the singer's love is equated to a "Queen" and is illustrated by soaring to the highest note of the piece, and in mm. 26-31 where the tenor enhance the mood of this " Maying" song by engaging in rhythmic dialogue with the upper voices as shown in figure 2.

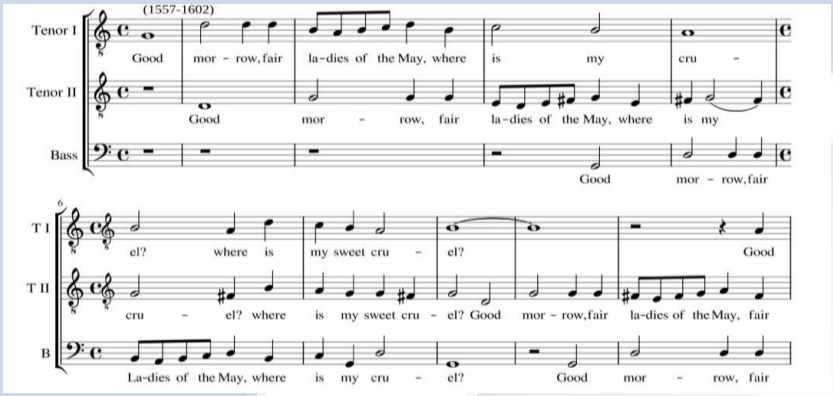

Figure 1. Good morrow fair ladies of the May

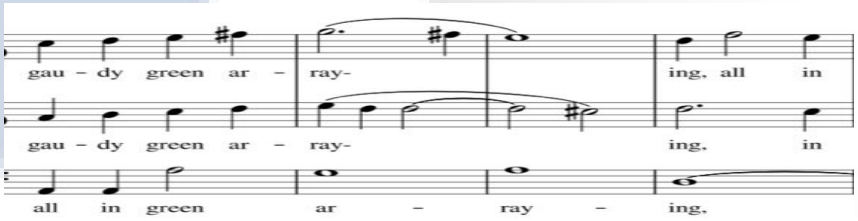

Figure 2. Good morrow fair ladies of the May

More complex examples from this series come at the end of the volume. In No.19, *Say dear, will you not have me,* as shown in figure 3, the voice that enters last moves down a diatonic scale in contrary motion to the ascending melodic entries of the other two voices. Morley displays his elegance in setting text with moments of hocket writting as in mm. 30-32 to convey the lover's plea for one last kiss.

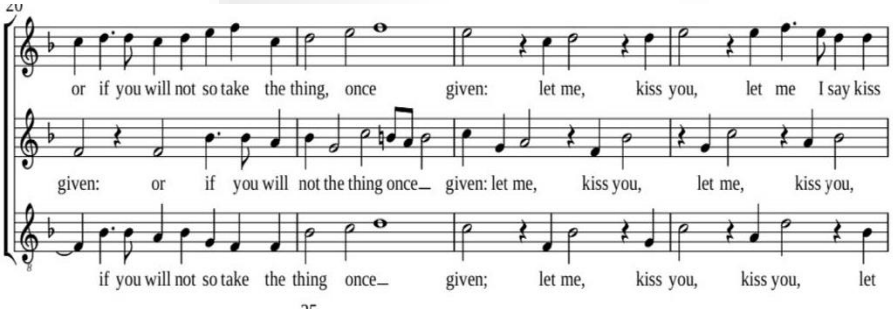

Figure 3. Say dear, will you not have me?

Perhaps the most colorful piece of the entire set is No. 20, *Arise, and getup.* It uses a pastoral text celebrating the wedding day of a country maiden set by Morley in narrative form. The piece opens with a rising fifth motive, as shown in figure 4, on "Arise" as a summons to the bride-to-be. As in other madrigals, Morley explores this motive through the first section and ends with a clear cadence before

establishing a new motive. For the line "Run then, run apace," in figure 5, he heightens rhythmic activity but without breaking up the continuity of the piece.

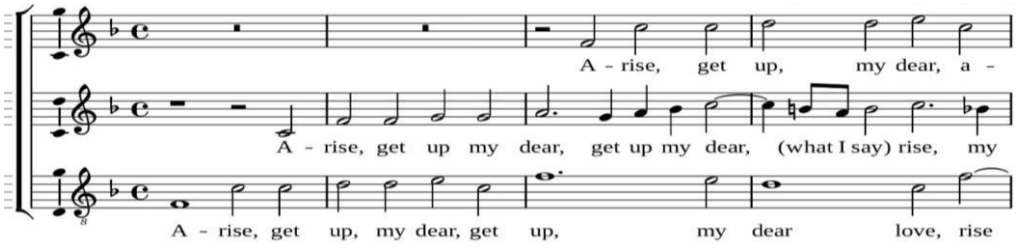

Figure 4. Arise, getup (mm.1-4)

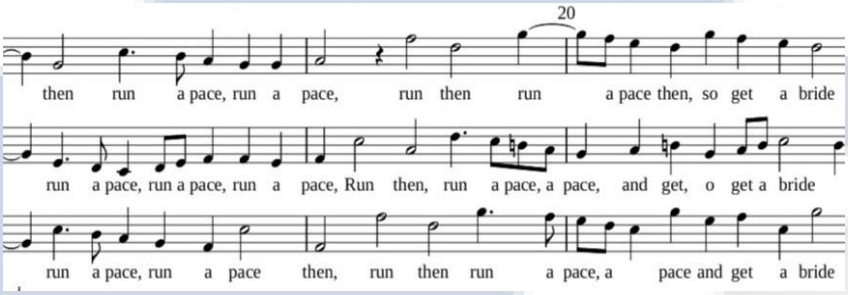

Figure 5. Arise, getup (mm.17-20)

Morley's narrative madrigal is a attractive piece. He alternates between triple meter for dance-related ideas and duple meter as the narrator calls upon the minstrels and guests to join the celebration. Action ceases momentarily as the apprehensive bride weeps (another appreciate moment of an agonizing suspension) and seeks reassurance from the storyteller before launching off in dotted rhythms towards the joyful conclusion.

The following year, Morley published the First Book of Madrigals to four voices (p.1594). Expansion of number of voices allowed for more interesting dialogue, as seen in the unintentionally amusing "angry lover" madrigal, *I will no more come to thee*. Stretto step-wise motives announce his indignation to the opening words, and the second half of the line,"thou floutest me," is proclaimed boldly with full chords and in declamatory fashion as shown in figure 6.

The following section (mm. 18-23) shown in figure 7, mimics the tears of the woman to whom the poem is addressed, flitting back and forth between all four voices. In m. 23, shown in figure 8, the voices are Paired off to augment the "sighing" effect of the words "O, say alas." The tone of the poem changes here as he bemoans her rejection of him. But with new resolve to end this hopeless venture, he commands her to "leave, alas" and the strong rhythms seen at the beginning return again. Harmonically speaking, the English composers were much freer in their use of cross-relations than Continental composers of madrigals (Kerman, 1962). However, Morley was perhaps the most conservative of his contemporaries in this aspect. He used a limited amount of chordal chromaticism to illustrate sorrow or string feeling, as in the following passage,"to grieve him so." Morley also oscillates between the major third and minor third in deceptive fashion.

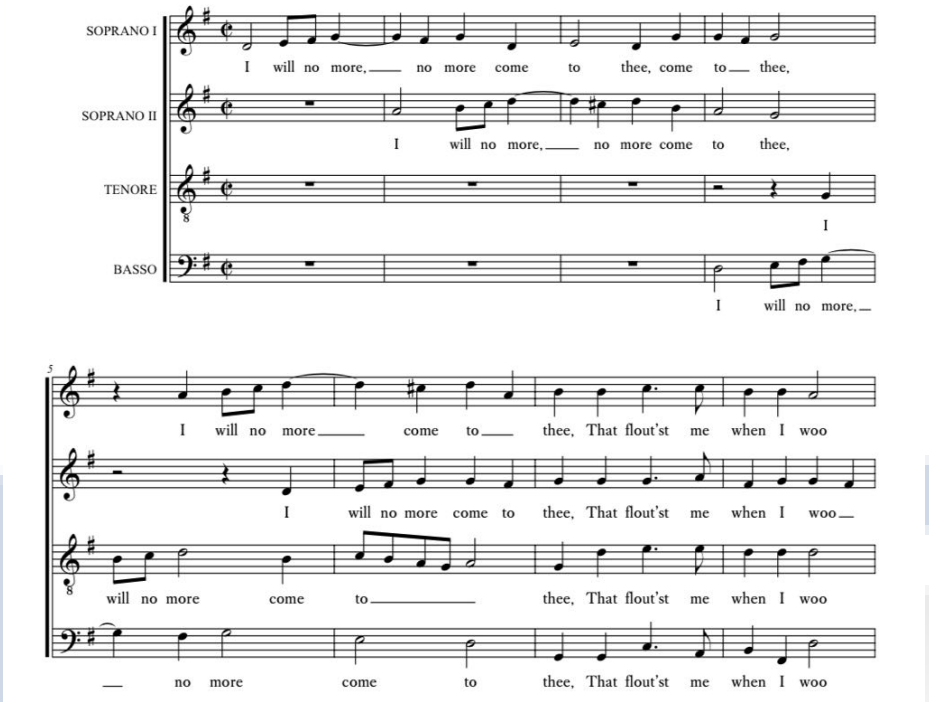

Figure 6. I will no more come to thee

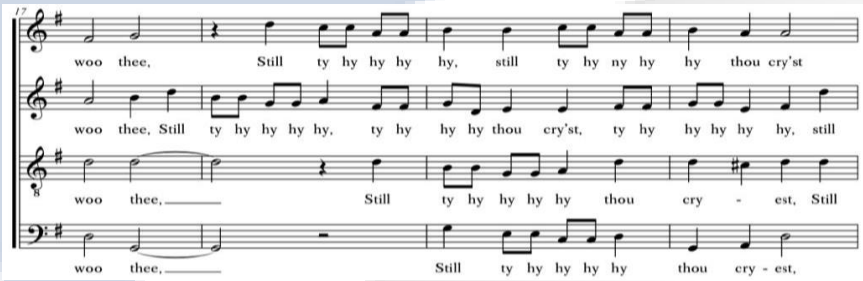

Figure 7. I will no more come to thee

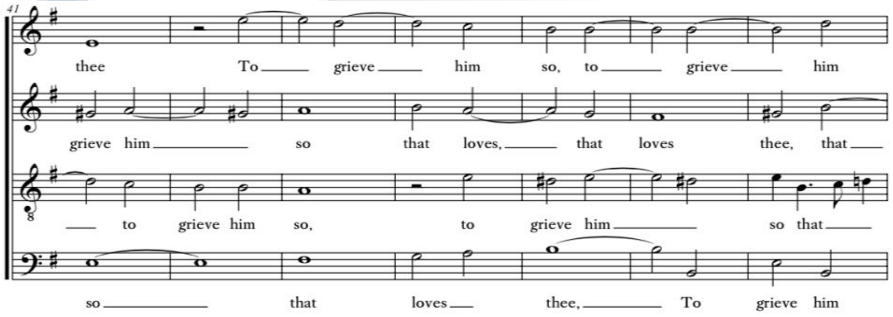

Figure 8 . I will no more come to thee

Thomas Morley's third publication Canzonets to five and six voices is prefaced with a note by the composer first dedicating the volume to Sir George Carey and then discussing the possibility of performing the pieces as solo songs with lute accompaniment. He wrote the lute reduction himself (Kerman, 1962). This does not indicate that the pieces were not conceived as vocal works because they do bear the stamp of full-blown madrigal style. Among the most famous of these pieces is the melancholy work *O grief ev'n on the bud*, which moves sedately and syllabically in regular note values. Also included is *Hark, Alleluia*, which possesses a more varied texture but keeps all six voices equally active after initial entrances.

Thomas Weelkes

During the same period of time, Thomas Weelkes came out with his first madrigal collection, Madrigals to three, four, five and six voices (p.1597.) His ventures in harmonic experimentation are his most distinguishing traits. *Cease, sorrows, now* is arguably the greatest three voice madrigal of English origin. The chromaticism of his melodic lines was unprecedented in England. The contrasts between Major and minor thirds already witnessed in some localized sections of Morley's music is carried to the extreme. And the use of raised and lowered sevenths in close proximity to one another or even simultaneously was a device often used by Weelkes. Morley specifically spoke out against this practice in his Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicalle Musicke. The most radical work of weelkes is contained in the set of Madrigals of five and six parts (p.1600). *O Care, thou wilt despatch me* begins with a startling passage of chords shown in figure 10. The vocal lines themselves weave around in half steps, whole step and minor third, but the composite effect is far from the stereotypical English sound. Not all of Weelkes's work is this extreme in pushing pr-existent boundaries. His diatonic madrigals are every bit as colorful as Morleys'. Inevitably though, Weelkes finds an opportunity to launch into chromatic passages, depending on the sentiments of the text.

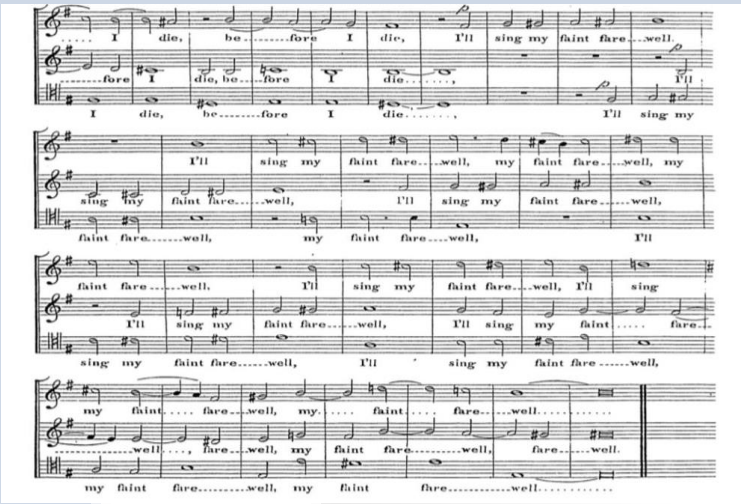

Figure 9 *Cease, sorrows, now*

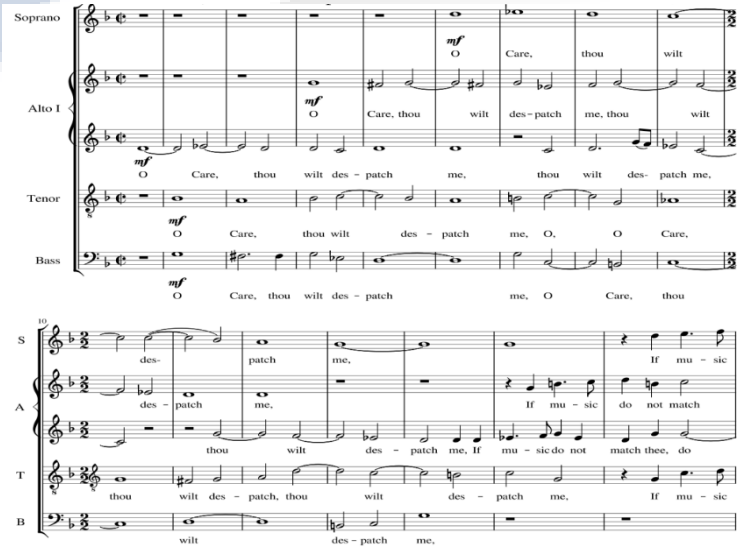

Figure 10 *O Care, thou wilt dispatch me*

John Wilbye

In contrast to Thomas Morley's and Thomas Weelkes, who both worked as church musicians for the majority of their lives, John Wilbye served the Kyston family as music director and pedagogue for most of his career. Though it is probably that he composed music in many different genres, hardly any scores outside of his madrigals have survived (Fellowes, 1972) is output falls somewhere between that of

Morley and Weelkes in terms of conservatism. Wilbye's music is characterized by a self-conscious, smooth and elegant quality much less sensational than that of Weelkes and less frequently broken into sectional divisions because of text. The First Set of Madrigals (p. 1598) contains a number of light hearted pieces that represent his basic style. *Adieu, sweet Amaryllis* possesses a sweet and serene sound throughout with recurring "Adieu" motives in the cantus which are punctuated by rests in the other voices and then echoed softly in harmony. The text is rounded of with a repetition of the first line at the end of piece, but the musical setting is quite different. Typically, a piece based in a minor key will not end on the tonic of that key. Instead, it was customary to move to the parallel major for the final chord. Wilbye actually modulates to G Major (from g minor) several lines before the end. The transition occurs just before the return of the text from the beginning of the piece. His decision to take such an unconditional harmonic route perhaps was guided by a desire to add a deeper layer of expressiveness to the bittersweet sentiments of the lover's farewell. The shifting of the opening melody to a major key lends a nostalgic, sweetly sad aspect that is dramatically effective. One more piece in this volume, *Sweet honey sucking bees* also employ this process. No.3, *Ay me, can every rumor?* another unusual harmonic technique is used as shown in figure 11. To the text "Then burst she forth in passion," the basses line sustains a pedal point for four measures while the remaining voices slide down in thirds. The process is repeated for one more phrase on a different pedal note. Because the bass is singing in sustained note values, he does not complete the full line of text until reaching the end of the second progression.

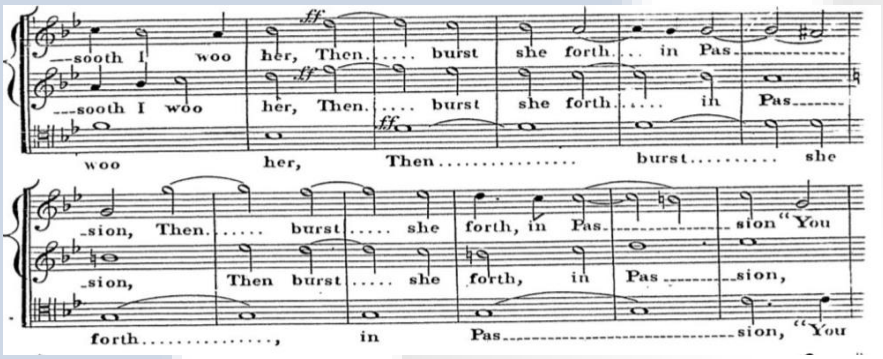

Figure 11. Ay me, can every rumor?

The ending of Wilbye's *Happy, Oh Happy* He gives yet another example of his innovative use of pedal point. To the words "the world a stage, whereon man acts his weary Pilgrimage," the bassus drops out altogether, while the other three voices engage in a circle of fifth progression; the tenor line sustains pedal notes while the cantus and altus wander freely up and down in thirds; the soprano line in particular moves in free chromatic descent, creating suspensions against the tenor's pedal point. A broader concept of textual expression is implied in Wilbye's harmonic and structural choices here at the end of the piece. Wlibye did not resort to the use of cliche gestures to convey the emotional content of the words (Kerman, 1962).

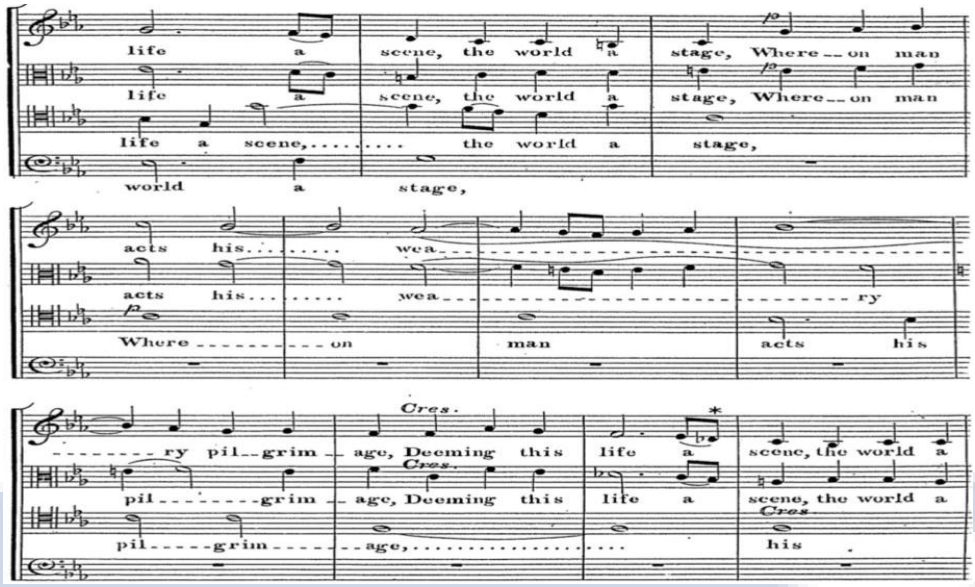

Figure 12. Happy, Oh Happy

CONCLUSIONS

Nearly forty volume of English madrigals by Morley, Weelkes, Wilbye and many other composers were published during the years 1590-1620. But by the tail end of this period, the madrigal itself had fallen out of popular taste, partly due to the rise of the English air. Even Morley in the later years of his career turned to this new mode of composition. Because the Elizabethan madrigal enjoyed only a limited life span, little developmental progress in the form itself can be detected although the chromatic experiments conducted by Weelkes and Wilbye are this genre's most interesting features. Perhaps one of the most comprehensive sources of this genre is the Triumphs of Oriana, a compposition of madrigals edited by Morley and modeled after a similar anthology in Italy. Nearly all the English madrigal composers contributed to this endeavor, which was created as a tribute to Queen Elizabeth. These mature musical works, as well as those in the publications by individual composers of the late sixteenth century, comprise a fascinating body of work representative of the English school of the late Renaissance. The so called madrigalism style of text painting continued to flourished well into the Baroque period. There are also some examples of its influence on modern music from the late twentieth century.

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