

The Trombone as an *Instrument of Fate* in Heinrich Schütz's Sacred Concerto, "Fili mi Absalon"

by Karen Marston

One of the most memorable moments in the trombone repertoire is the obbligato passage which occurs during the opening bars of the "Tuba, mirum [spargens sonum]" ("The trumpet, scattering a wondrous sound") section of the *Dies Irae* ("Day of Wrath") in Mozart's *Requiem Mass*. The appearance of the trombone at this moment is significant not only for the beauty of the passage itself, but because it speaks to a long standing musical association between the sound of the trombone and images of death and the afterlife. For this reason, Classical-era composers did not employ the trombone in symphonic settings, but freely used it to signify supernatural forces in both sacred works and operas. For example, the arrival of Il Commendatore's specter in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is announced by the trombones, which in turn follows the example established by Gluck's *Don Juan*; however, this symbolism appears to have been well in place even prior to

had long been practiced by the Gabriellis. Both Andrea and his nephew Giovanni, who was also Schütz's teacher, employed brass instruments, especially the trombone, as "heterogeneous block[s] of sonority" which filled the cavernous spatial requirements of their musical home, *San Marco Cathedral* (Arnold and Carver). It can be deduced then that Schütz's choice of instrumentation was intended to emulate these rich textures.

Even given this connection, it is apparent that Schütz's intention for the trombones was not only timbral, but artistic as well. The short text, taken from the *Lament of King David* in the Book of Samuel, focuses on the moment David learns of the death of his beloved son, Absalon:

The intensity of this dramatic passage was a clear match for the Baroque desire to investigate and exploit moments of emotional epiphany and as such, was a popular choice with a

Fili mi Absalon fili mi Absalon
Quis mihi tribuat ut ego moriar pro te
Absalon fili mi fili mi

O my son Absalon, my son, my son Absalon!
Would God I had died for thee,
O Absalon, my son, my son! (Brodersen)

that time. Handel's "Dead March" from *Saul* (Guion) and Eurydice's tragic descent into the underworld in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (Whenham) both feature the trombone prominently.

While the origins of this metaphor are not clearly known, there are a number of early sacred works which capitalize on the sonority and lyricism of the trombone, and this repertoire may have provided the inspiration for later composers to use the instrument as a messenger of supernatural forces. The intensely beautiful sacred concerto "Fili mi Absalon" (1629) by German composer Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672) is a masterwork from this canon. The piece explores grief and loss, while positioning the trombones, both through structural and tonal devices, outside of the action, as observers of the human suffering portrayed by the text. This employs the symbolic connotation of fate to great artistic effect.

"Fili mi" is part of a larger collection of pieces published in 1629 which Schütz titled *Symphoniae Sacrae*. The set consists of twenty-two sacred concerti for mixed combinations of instruments and voices; however, only two, "Attendite, popule meus" and "Fili mi," specify the unique instrumentation of a trombone quartet, basso continuo, and bass voice—although, both indicate that the top two parts may be played by violins (Van Veen). Schütz likely discovered this sonorous timbre through his connections to Italian composers, particularly in and around the Gabrieli family. In fact, he had just returned from a trip to Italy a few months prior to the publication of these pieces. He reflected on his experiences, writing that the Italians "tickle[d] the ears of today" with a number of musical innovations (Rifkin and Linfield). Among them were colorful instrument combinations, a free use of expressive dissonances, and the *cori spezzati*, or an antiphonal style, which

composers of the period. Josquin des Prez and Pierre de la Rue also produced notable settings (Meconi), both of which are purely vocal. Given Schütz's departure from convention, it is probable that the trombone quartet was intended to fulfill a symbolic, expressive role in the piece.

Further, despite the sacred origins of the text, it is doubtful that *Symphoniae Sacrae* was intended for the church of Schütz's homeland. *Song of Songs* is taken from the Hebrew Bible, and would have been out of place in Lutheran services. (Van Veen) It is more likely that these pieces would have been performed in a courtly venue, where their international flair would have been considered quite fashionable; therefore, Schütz would have been unencumbered by the formal restrictions of sacred convention and free to explore an artistic realization of the text.

This perspective is strengthened by an investigation of textural elements. Schütz was compositionally active during the transitional years between the Renaissance and Baroque, and logically his style displays influences from both periods. In his preface to the *Geistliche Chor-Music* ("Religious Choir Music"), he discussed his views of the new musical conventions of the Baroque, noting that the older, motet style of contrapuntal layering must be mastered before advancing on to the modern technique of monody (Rifkin and Linfield), a style allegedly more nuanced and certainly more transparent. Not surprisingly, *Fili mi* uses both, creating a pleasing tension between canonic imitation in the trombones and the sparse texture of a continuo and solo bass voice.

While this interplay may be interpreted as simply a reaction to the changing conventions of the period, it nonetheless sets up an important structural element which lends theatricality to the

work. The resonant, contrapuntal layering of the trombone quartet is a notable juxtaposition against the comparatively simple texture of monody, which is used to introduce the text. This coupling was certainly intentional, given that such techniques were a favorite tool for composers of this period. The use of contrasting forces was fundamental to the Baroque aesthetic, primarily because it is an effective way to draw the listener's attention toward musical details and desired affective states; therefore, Schütz almost certainly intended this play of textures to serve as a vehicle for bringing the emotional impact of the text into clearer focus.

Artistically, this allows the two ensembles to take on different perspectives relative to the dramatic elements of the story. While King David stands alone, isolated from the world through the impact of his suffering, the trombones are positioned to interject from their vantage point as observers. This establishes a dialogue in which the quartet plays a reflective role, akin to the traditional Greek chorus. They respond to and comment on the action, but are not directly involved in it. The interplay between their initial statements of objectivity and the empathy for David's suffering which gradually appears as the text unfolds evokes a sense of emotional immediacy which is both powerful and moving.

This contrast is quickly established in the opening section of the piece, as each of the performing forces is introduced in turn. The work begins with a lushly scored trombone madrigal outlining a simple, triple meter melody derived from the first and fifth triads of A Dorian; however, frequent allusions to the neighboring G major mode make the tonal center feel unsettled. This harmonic tension defines the underlying emotional effect of the work, and does not fully reach a resolution until the closing measures of the piece.

When the bass trombonist and continuo enter (m. 10), they imitate the opening phrase, but with one jarring alteration. The third measure, which was previously harmonized in E minor, is treated to a transient tonality in G major. Like the opening, this phrase cadences in A minor, but the tonal center makes a quick modal shift soon after, with a IV-V-I progression in C Major (mm. 21–23). From there, Schütz makes strong references to the major mode with sequences on both F and C, which are in turn contrasted by intense appearances of D minor and passing shifts through A minor. This play of modes evokes the sense that the transcendence of the major is close at hand, even as the atmosphere remains unsettled and unpredictable. The listener's empathy and sensitivity is thus heightened and subsequent appearances of major tonalities, whether on G or otherwise, feel especially poignant. Schütz brings this opening section to a conclusion through an interesting but short-lived tonicization of C Major.

The second section (m. 43, **Fig. 1**) is marked by the stark and austere entrance of the solo bass voice on the text "Fili mi Absalon" ("Absalon, my son"). Although the initial motive matches the opening bars of the trombone madrigal, Schütz re-harmonizes the third measure, giving David a G# over E Major in the place where the trombones played G-natural over E minor. In addition to enhancing the sense that the instrumental ensemble and the voice represent fundamentally different perspectives, this alteration brings the human element of the story into focus. As representatives of fate, the trombones are not connected to David's suffering; they

tell his story with impartiality. By contrast, when he gives voice to his own pain, Schütz employs the major tonality to highlight the intensity of David's feelings.

Fig. 1. Entrance of the Bass Voice and alteration to E Major.

As the tonal center gradually shifts into A Major, David repeats his son's name. The urgency of his words is capped by the sudden entrance of the trombones on an exquisite, fully voiced A Major triad (m. 54, **Fig. 2**). As the first instance of this tonality played by the quartet, its impact heightens David's mantra of "Absalon" to transcendent levels. This intensity is both prolonged and strengthened as the quartet imitates David's cries of "Absolon" (mm. 57–72), with the final appearance of this motive (a descending minor third) crying out from the second trombone part in measure 72. The artistic implication of this section is that the emotional detachment of the trombones has been momentarily compromised after experiencing the tenderness of David's words. From this perspective, the moment is especially moving. The hope inherent to the experience of love, even in the place where love has been lost, is cemented as this section closes with a strong cadence in A Major.

Fig. 2. Fully-voiced A major triad

Fig. 3. Entrance of the trombones in G Lydian

The image shows a musical score for five trombone parts. The key signature is G Lydian (one sharp, F#). The score begins at measure 135. The parts are arranged from top to bottom: Trombone I, Trombone II, Trombone III, Trombone IV, and Trombone V. The lyrics 'Ab - sa - lon, Ab - sa - lon, Ab - sa - lon, fi -' are written below the Trombone V staff. Measure numbers 7, 6, and 5 are indicated below the Trombone V staff.

The short instrumental *Sinfonia* which follows moves back into A minor and concludes with a half cadence on the dominant chord, E Major. Dance-like rhythms in the trombones seem to provide an emotional break from the anguish and tenderness of the preceding music, but tensions reappear and continue to build through extended chains of suspensions built on hemiola patterns, such as in measures 95–104. Also notable is the role of the continuo, which doubles the bass trombone as a melodic voice within the imitative texture.

The fourth and concluding section focuses on David’s plea, “Quis mihi tribuat ut ego moriar pro te” (“Would God I had died for thee”), and as such takes on a sense of tonal urgency. The opening key of E Major, taken from the concluding phrase of the *Sinfonia*, seems strongly rooted until the fifth bar, where A minor makes a tragic reappearance as David sings “moriar” (“died”). This word is repeated, and major tonalities in B (m. 113), A (m. 115), and E (m. 123) leap out of a descending, sequenced melodic shape as if to fight for hope. A unison dominant-tonic melodic statement

in the voice and continuo concludes this passage and leads to the appearance of Absalon’s name in measure 132. The trombones punctuate the tenderness of this moment with a stunning entrance on a C major triad (Fig. 3), which is followed by a shocking II-V-iii-I progression in G Lydian.

This brings the emotionality of David’s grief to a climactic peak, with the third appearance of his son’s name coinciding with the arrival of the G major triad (m. 137, Fig. 3); however, this catharsis is bittersweet and short-lived. The first trombone colors the moment with an intense suspension on F#, which then makes a descending resolution to E, thereby quickly transforming G major into E minor. David dejectedly mirrors this with a descending minor third in the melody (m. 137), tragically recalling the “Absalon” motive that the trombones had previously echoed with him in imitation (mm. 57–72). Despite their intermittent empathy, at the height of David’s agony, the trombones, fulfilling their role as fate, pull the momentum out of the major tonality and offer no escape from the angst of the text.

Fig. 4. Ending cadence

The image shows a musical score for five trombone parts. The key signature is G Lydian (one sharp, F#). The score begins at measure 154 and ends at measure 155. The parts are arranged from top to bottom: Trombone I, Trombone II, Trombone III, Trombone IV, and Trombone V. The lyrics '- sa - lon, Ab - sa - lon!' are written below the Trombone V staff. Measure numbers 6 and 5 are indicated below the Trombone V staff.

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From there, G major loses its momentum through a series of secondary relationships to the mediant triad (mm. 138–140). D Major tantalizingly appears in measure 144, hinting at the potential for a strong dominant relationship to G; however, the resolution is a deceptive cadence to E major (m. 145), which is strengthened by an arpeggio in the second trombone, beautifully scored in anticipation of the actual arrival of the chord. This becomes the dominant of A minor, facilitating a shift back to the tonal center of the work. (Fig. 4)

As David gently repeats “Fili mi Absalon,” (“Absalon my son”) A minor seems to take hold through strong dominant-tonic relationships; however, the shift is quickly diluted by four measures which strongly stress D harmonic-minor (mm.150–154). At this point, D still feels like the dominant of G, making its repetition and ultimate failure to resolve particularly affecting. A major at last makes its appearance three measures before the final cadence, but even at this penultimate moment, the arrival feels tentative. The ear has been pulled away from tonic by D minor, and the first and second trombones further emphasize this affect with suspensions on F-natural and D (m. 154). The closing bars are meditative, with David woefully singing one final plea of “Absalon!” before his words are overtaken by the trombones, who intone three chant-like utterances of A major to close the piece.

Despite coming to rest in the major mode, the final cadence is unsettled. The recurring presence of G major throughout the piece is strong enough to make A major feel suspended and listless, an affect which is intensified by the absence of a leading tone or fully voiced dominant chord. More importantly, the trombones dominate this ambiguous moment, and ultimately offer David no comfort. This is especially poignant given that at key moments in the piece, they joined with David’s suffering, crying out along with him; however, in the closing statement, they move away, leaving his grief and pain unresolved.

The implication for the performer is that the role of the quartet is a theatrical one, and as such, should be approached with sensitivity to the dramatic pacing of the text. Schütz enlists the trombones both as a source of emotional intensity and respite, alternatively merging them with David’s anguished words, and pitting them against him, as the objective, and even unfeeling, voice of destiny. This play of opposites is effectively mirrored and

strengthened by the rich contrast between the sonority of the low brass timbre and the solitude of David’s lone voice, as well the cleverly crafted modal shifts which blur the home key of A major so that nothing feels settled or resolved, even in the final bars of the piece. Because *Fili mi* never comes to rest, it conveys to the listener a poignant sense of loss and longing that gives powerful voice to the intensity of the text. The trombone as an instrument of fate did not originate with Schütz, but his treatment of it certainly elevated the metaphor to artistic levels.

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