Apr 18th, 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM

“O! My Son”: Musical Interpretations of a Father’s Grief in the Age of Jacobean Rhetoric

Hannah Eby
Illinois Wesleyan University

Adriana Ponce, Faculty Advisor
Illinois Wesleyan University

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“O! MY SON”: MUSICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF A FATHER’S GRIEF IN THE AGE OF JACOBEAN RHETORIC

Hannah Eby and Adriana Ponce*
School of Music, Illinois Wesleyan University

This study presents an analysis of musical rhetorical strategies found in four early seventeenth century settings of II Samuel 18:33. Composers Weelkes, Tomkins, Dering, and Ramsey transform this simple yet powerful text, developing uniquely persuasive renditions of David’s lament for Absalom. As their illustrative techniques reveal the exceptionally close connection between words and music in Jacobean England, differences in dramatic emphasis place these settings within the evolving emotional rhetoric of the period. Dramatic innovations and intensification in pathos set Weelkes’s and Tomkins’s interpretations apart, and their progressive strategies create cohesive stories of David’s journey through the grieving process. In joining the contemporary scholarly discussion of these settings’ interpretative considerations and compositional intent, this paper seeks to explore the implications of these different musical rhetorical approaches to ‘When David heard.’