

# Comparison of Palestrina's and Gombert's *Quam Pulchra Es*

Matt Wright, Music 301A, December 12, 2003

The Song of Songs, *Canticum Canticorum*, is some of the most beautiful love poetry ever written. It consists in large part of descriptions of the beauty of the beloved, likening her and her body parts to many beautiful things from the natural world. Nicolas Gombert and Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina each set portions of this text to music in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They must have felt a special challenge, with such beautiful poetry on the subject of beauty, to compose music that was itself beautiful. I will compare two motets with the title “*Quam Pulchra es*” (“How beautiful you are”): Gombert’s for five voices and Palestrina’s for four. Both pieces start with the same four lines of text, after which the texts diverge. (The texts of the two motets follow this essay as an appendix.)

The two compositions have a remarkable amount in common. Both are heavily imitative<sup>1</sup>, and predominantly heterophonic in texture. Both use duple meter throughout. Both are in the F mode with Bb in the key signature for all voices. Both have a substantial number of B natural accidentals written in by the composer<sup>2</sup>, plus more suggested by various editors. Both end not just on the same F major triad, but with the same “plagal” cadence from a Bb major triad with the same voice leading: the top voice going from Bb to C, the next voice holding a long sustained F, the next voice going from D to C, and the bass skipping from Bb to F. Both are extremely consonant, with almost all pitches either parts of triads or well-prepared suspensions and passing tones. Both consist mainly of F, Bb, and C major triads, with occasional “nearby” chords such as D minor, G minor and major, and A minor, as well as some diminished triads that serve a cadence-like function of a major sixth expanding to an octave.<sup>3</sup> Both have a very striking brief use of an Eb major triad near the end<sup>4</sup>, around the time that the highest voice reaches its highest note of the piece<sup>5</sup>, a G. Both give interesting melodies to all the voices, consisting primarily of stepwise motion but with a few well-chosen leaps, for example, a perfect fifth at the beginnings of some phrases (Palestrina’s “*statúra*” and Gombert’s “*carissima*” and “*videamus*”).

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<sup>1</sup> Gombert’s opening phrase is imitated at unison while Palestrina’s is imitated at intervals of a fifth, but none of Gombert’s subsequent imitations are at unison.

<sup>2</sup> According to the score I found in Palestrina’s collected works, Palestrina wrote sharp signs rather than natural signs to indicate B natural instead of B flat.

<sup>3</sup> Gombert gives the lowest voice the third of the triad much more often than Palestrina, and even sometimes gives the bass the fifth, for example on the last beat of m. 50, which Palestrina completely avoids.

<sup>4</sup> Eight bars earlier, on the downbeats of measures 79 and 80, Gombert wrote the triad E, G, Bb; some editors suggest making these E flats as well.

<sup>5</sup> Palestrina gets to the single high G of his motet by climbing up the scale from the octave below to word-paint “*ascéndam in palman*”; Gombert touches his highest note three times in mm. 95-99 on “*mala punica*” without any apparent textual motivation.

For me, the most important difference between Gombert's and Palestrina's settings is texture. One enormous textural difference comes from the vocal ranges; Palestrina's upper voices are about an octave higher than Gombert's upper voices, requiring high falsetto or female singers, while all of Gombert's four parts could be sung comfortably by a baritone. Here is a chart of the ambitus of each voice in each piece, with "C4" indicating middle C. (The names of the voices come from Palestrina; Gombert seems not to have labeled his four parts.)

	<b>Palestrina</b>	<b>Gombert</b>
<b>Cantus</b>	F4 to G5 (major 9 <sup>th</sup> )	E3 to G4 (minor 10 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>Altus</b>	B <sup>b</sup> 3 to C5 (major 9 <sup>th</sup> )	B <sup>b</sup> 2 to D4 (major 10 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>Quintus</b>	G3 to C5 (perfect 11 <sup>th</sup> )	[none]
<b>Tenor</b>	F3 to A4 (major 10 <sup>th</sup> )	B <sup>b</sup> 2 to C4 (major 9 <sup>th</sup> )
<b>Bassus</b>	B <sup>b</sup> 2 to D4 (major 10 <sup>th</sup> )	E2 to F3 (minor 9 <sup>th</sup> )

*Table: Ambitus of each voice*

The basic textural and contrapuntal strategy is the same for both motets: a new melody for each new line of text, carried by successive voices in imitative entrances, with the voices always on nearby words of the text but rarely on the same syllable at the same time, and with potential full-ensemble cadences almost always thwarted by another voice starting the next line before the other voices finish. This incessant, self-interrupting style seems very well suited to the structure of the Song of Songs, with its long stream of fairly undifferentiated praise and similes. Setting the text without cadential pauses avoids interrupting this stream of ideas.

Yet while Gombert basically sticks to this procedure for his entire piece, Palestrina is much more free with alternative textures. Palestrina thins out the texture many times, for example, in mm. 14-15 the lower three voices enter on "charíssima" while the upper voices pause, then after the upper voices enter and all sing together during mm. 16-17, the lower voices drop out to leave the upper voices to sing alone in mm. 18-19. As another example, the upper voices sing alone in mm.33-35, then the lower voices enter in m. 35 and sing alone briefly in mm 36-37 before the full texture returns.

In contrast, Gombert employs all four voices nearly continuously, resulting in a very consistent texture and sound. Basically, all four voices are sounding at almost all times, usually with just a quarter note rest after a phrase for a quick breath while the other three voices keep sounding. In fact, after the fourth voice enters in m. 6, there are only 31 instances in which any voice rests for more than two beats, and only 10 in which any voice rests for more than four. In stark contrast, Palestrina generally gives each voice about 8 beats' rest after each phrase, resulting in a more open and spacious sound; there are only 14 bars in his entire piece in which all 5 voices sound and 4 of these are the ending cadence. Of course some of this difference must be attributed to the difference between writing for four voices versus five; in a way both pieces are the same in that most of the time four voices are sounding. Yet Palestrina's textural variety is more than just having the voices take turns pausing between phrases.

Palestrina's setting uses much more homophony<sup>6</sup> than Gombert's, starting right away in mm. 3-6 with the top two voices singing "et quam de cóna" in parallel thirds. Adjacent voices sing homophonically in parallel thirds four more times: mm. 8-10 (bassus and tenor "et quam de cóna"), mm. 17-19 (altus and quintus "charíssima in deliciis"), mm. 33-34 (altus and quintus "úbera tua"), and mm. 36-37 (tenor and bassus "úbera tua"). In mm. 11-12 altus and quintus sing homophonically in contrary motion, in mm. 46-47 altus, quintus, and bassus sing "et apprehéndam" in block chords, in mm. 50-52 between cantus and altus, and in mm. 53-54 between quintus and tenor there is homophony starting in parallel thirds but then diverging, and in mm. 54-56 the outer voices sing in parallel tenths.

In contrast, Gombert uses homophony quite sparingly. In m. 22 the inner voices sing two quarter notes "in de..." in parallel thirds. In mm. 26-28 they sing "Statura tua" in parallel thirds, followed by the bottom voices singing "...milata est" in parallel thirds in m. 29. The top two voices sing "et ubera tua bo..." in parallel fourths in mm. 39-40. The bottom two voices sing "Caput tu..." in parallel thirds in mm. 45-46, after which Gombert completely avoids all homophony until the final cadence, where the bottom two voices sing "mea" in the same rhythm.

Palestrina also uses more rhythmic<sup>7</sup> variety. Gombert's piece consists almost entirely of quarter notes and half notes, with the occasional dotted quarter followed by an eighth note, typically for a suspension. About every ten bars there are four eighth notes in a row, and occasionally there are two or three eighth notes. One gets the impression that Gombert used eighth notes only when he needed a little extra leeway for his voice leading. Palestrina uses many more eighth notes and even a good many sixteenth notes, as well as more held notes of four or more beats. Palestrina is much more liberal with eighth note runs, notably in the ascending lines that word-paint "ascéndam" in mm. 40-44. In Gombert's piece a voice holds a note across 36% of the bar lines (43 times in 119 bars), while Palestrina has a voice hold a note across 56% of the bar lines in his piece (38 times in 69 bars).

Both motets are set mostly syllabically, but Palestrina usually gives a melisma at the end of a phrase, as well as a few in the middles of phrases, such as "tua" in mm. 33-34 and m. 37, as well as the aforementioned "ascéndam." Gombert, on the other hand, is quite stingy with melismas; they are the exception rather than the rule, and generally only appear in the upper voice.

Neither piece has a "complete" cadence until the end, by which I mean all voices resolving to a consonance at the end of a text line followed by a pause. Gombert has only two instances where even some voices cadence. In m. 22 the outer voices expand from a major 6<sup>th</sup> to an octave on "tuis" (with a suspension in the top voice), but the middle voices

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<sup>6</sup> Here I use "homophony" to mean two or more voices singing the same text with the same rhythm.

<sup>7</sup> I will describe the rhythms of the two pieces in terms of the modern rhythmic notation used in the scores I have for study, even though I realize that neither piece was originally notated in "eighth notes," "ties across the bar line," etc.

continue through with a repetition of “in deliciis.” In m. 45 the top two voices reach the second syllable of “botris” together on a downbeat consonance, and the bottom two voices courteously wait a beat before entering (homophonically) on “caput.”

Palestrina’s cadences are more numerous and stronger. On the third beat of m.13 the top four voices come to the second syllable of “cora” together, though the quintus begins the next phrase a single beat later. From m. 31 to m. 32 the bassus and altus expand from a major 6<sup>th</sup> to an octave while the quintus moves up by step to take the fifth, but the tenor clouds the issue with a suspension and by the time it resolves the cantus has already started the next phrase. Palestrina’s strongest internal cadence comes in m. 38 on “botris”: the four lowest voices resolve to an open D (with no third) with tenor and quintus resolving from a minor third to unison (with suspension), bassus leaping from A to D, and altus sustaining the A. The missing F is filled in one beat later by the cantus, beginning the next phrase on “dixi.” The next cadence is on the downbeat of m. 46, to C major on “palman”; again, the next phrase begins a single beat later. There is a sort of cadence from G to C on “víneae” on the downbeat m. 58, though the quintus has already begun the next line “et odor.”

After this the chords continue to move along the circle of fifths: F, B<sup>b</sup>, E<sup>b</sup>, a lovely sort of quick recapitulation of the harmonic areas of the piece extending further than ever in the flat direction.<sup>8</sup> Then Palestrina goes through G minor to D major, completing his inventory of major triads that had appeared in the motet, then back to G major on the last beat of m. 62 in full 4-voice homophony on “sicut”, which shifts into a first inversion E minor triad that resolves with old-fashioned double-leading-tone cadential voice leading to F on the “o...” of “odor”, and then immediately to C major on “...dor.”

Both motets use the same text, the same pitches and chords, and the same imitative contrapuntal procedures, and both are lovely in their own way. Palestrina’s greater diversity of register, rhythm, and vocal deployment results in a composition that is more varied, spacious, and, to my ears, interesting. Gombert’s low ambitus, unrelieved density, scarcity of melismas, and near complete lack of cadence, homophony, or textural variety give his setting a heavy, almost burdensome quality that seems at odds with the grace and sweetness of the poetry.

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<sup>8</sup> The bassus’ low B<sup>b</sup> in this progression is also the lowest pitch yet in the piece.

## Appendix: The Texts

Quam pulchra es et quam decora, Charissima, in deliciis Statura tua assimilata est palmae, Et ubera tua botris Dixi: "Ascendam in palmam Et apprehendam fructus ejus"; Et erunt ubera tua sicut botri vineae Et odor oris tuis sicut odor malorum	How beautiful you are and how lovely dearest love, in your delights! In stature like a palm tree, your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, "I will climb that palm tree, and lay hold of its fruit." And your breasts will be like clusters on the vine And the scent of your breath like apples
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(Palestrina's text, trans. Clarence Zaar)

Quam pulchra es et quam decora, Carissima in deliciis tuis! Statura tua assimilata est palmae Et ubera tua botris Caput tuum ut Carmelus Collum tuum sicut turris eburnea Veni, dilecte mi Egrediamur in agrum Videamus si flores parturierunt mala punica Tibi dabo ubera mea.	How lovely thou art, most beloved in thy pleasures! Thy figure is like a palm tree and thy breasts like bunches of grapes. Thy head is like the Carmel. Thy neck like an ivory tower. Come, my beloved, Let us go forth to the fields; Let us see if the flowers have given way to purple fruits: I give thee my breasts.
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(Gombert's text, trans. Mapa Mundi, Tom Skipp)