PROPHECY, HARMONY, AND THE ALCHEMICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE SOUL:
THE KEY TO LASSO’S CHROMATIC SIBYLS

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Orlando di Lasso’s Latin motet cycle *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* is an endur-
ing puzzle of the Renaissance repertoire. More than a century after its
discovery, the Sibyl cycle’s unusually pervasive chromaticism, uncom-
mon subject, unique texts, and unconfirmed provenance continue to
challenge our music-theoretical assumptions, and thwart our attempts
to situate the work within the context of sixteenth-century musical
culture.¹ Several modern analyses of the prologue motet, *Carmina*

¹ Little can be said with certainty about the *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*. The facts are as
follows: Four manuscript partbooks represent the only version of the cycle to survive
from Lasso’s lifetime (b. 1530/32–d. 1594). Originally part of the private collection
of Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria, under whose auspices the manuscript was copied
and illuminated, it is not known why, when, or how the work left Munich prior to
being listed as missing from the archive in the mid-eighteenth century. Purchased
from an anonymous owner in 1854 by an Augsburg agent representing the Wiener
k. und. k. Hofbibliothek, the Sibyl codex is now catalogued as Mus. Hs. 18.744 at the
Österreichische Nationalbibliothek. The partbooks measure 187 mm × 260 mm, are
copied on parchment, bound in red velvet, and are embellished with enameled metal
clapas. The musical notation for each Sibylline motet begins with a small portrait of
the Sibyl whose oracle comprises its text (Figure 1b, soprano partbook, Persian Sibyl,
fol. 24r. Image credit Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ÖNB/Wien E 28.421-C). An
identifying nameplate appears on the facing page (Figure 1a, soprano partbook, fol.
carryes no illustration and no nameplate (Figure 1c, tenor partbook, fol. 23r. Image
credit ÖNB/Wien E 29.980-C). There is general agreement that the illuminations
were executed by Munich court artist Hans Mielich, who supplied each Sibyl with a
Christological attribute and a number (presumably indicating her age). These
features bear no relationship to the motet texts that follow. A portrait of the composer ‘at 28
years of age’ originally appeared at the end of each partbook (the cantus portrait is
now missing). Lasso’s sons published the *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* after his death, dedi-
cating it to Abbot Paul Widmann of Tegernsee (Munich: Nikolaus Heinrich, 1600).
This print contains no Sibylline imagery, no portrait of the composer, and survives
incompletely (see RISM a I: L 1016). The motets of the *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* were
never included in the *Magnum Opus Musicum*, the collected edition of Lasso’s motets
published by his sons (Munich: Nikolaus Heinrich, 1604). No other musical settings of
the Sibyl cycle’s texts have been identified. The earliest scholarly mention of the work
appeared in 1864, when August Wilhelm Ambros wrote of its extravagant chromati-
cism: ‘Die angewendete Chromatik ist aber auch hier kein willkürliches Experiment,
Figure 1a. Soprano partbook, Persian Sibyl, fol. 23v. Image credit Austrian National Library, Vienna E 28.420-C.

Figure 1b. Soprano partbook, Persian Sibyl, fol. 24r. Image credit Austrian National Library, Vienna E 28.421-C.