

## Malcolm Hill

(1944 - )

# WOMEN ON TOP

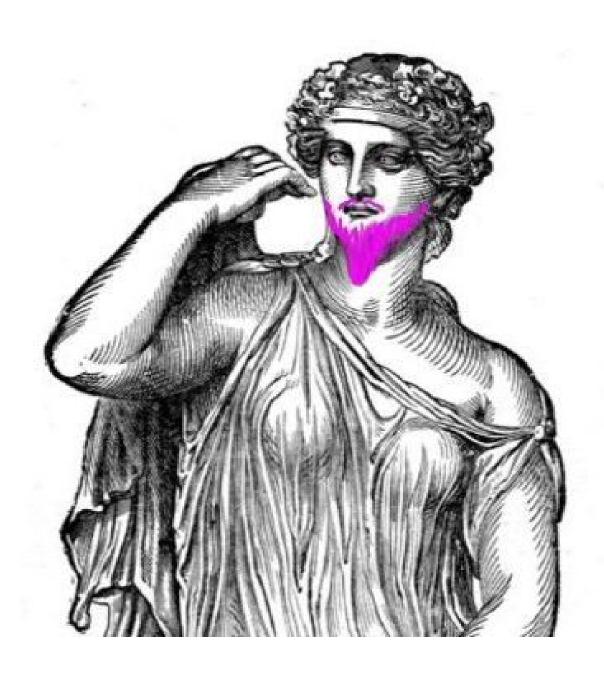
A Comedy-Opera based on Aristophanes' play The Assembly Women

## **SMTBarB** and Piano

mj335 2013

www.malcolm-hill.co.uk

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### **WOMEN ON TOP**

## Malcolm Hill's cross-dressing comedy-opera based on Aristophones' *Ecclesiazusae* (aka *The Assembly Women*)

- Sex and Socialism in Ancient Athens.

In ancient Athens, the women take over the government from the men, and pass new laws establishing common ownership and sexual equality. Based on Aristophanes' timeless, surreal and politically incorrect satire *The Assembly Women* with more cross-dressing and toilet humour than any Christmas panto, Malcolm Hill's music evokes operatic styles from Handel to Stravinsky.

The cast, which needs a minimum of five singers, in order of appearance:

Praxagora, an Athenian campaigning matron Soprano

Woman follower of Praxagora Mezzo-Soprano
Blepyrus, husband of Praxagora Bass Baritone

Young Athenian citizen Tenor
Chremes, friend of Blepyrus Baritone
Cantankerous neighbour of Blepyrus Tenor

Young loose woman Mezzo-Soprano

Young man attracted to her Soprano

'Shrill' female herald Mezzo-Soprano 1st old prostitute Bass Baritone

2nd old prostitute Baritone
3rd old prostitute Tenor

Praxagora's maid Mezzo-Soprano

### Accompanied on Piano

More than five singers would be needed if costume-changes would take too long in those theatres whose green-rooms are distant from the stage.

Duration, excluding gaps between scenes: 72 minutes

#### **SYNOPSIS**

Athens, 391 BC, has won a major battle against Sparta. Athens' favourite comedy-writer, Aristophanes, writes the play *Ecclesiazusae* (*The Assembly Women*, or *Women on Top*).

**Scene 1**: Just before dawn Praxagora summons the women of Athens to a meeting. Her motives are not made clear. The women plan to enter the Assembly, disguised as men, in order to 'have their say' in the government of Athens. The women discuss what they will propose, with various degrees of ability, before Praxadora outlines five reasons that women are more dependable and therefore would be better at taking charge of the state.

Scene 2: Mid-morning on the same day. Praxagora's husband, Blepyrus, wakes to find his clothes and his wife gone. He needs to relieve his painful constipation and is forced to dress in his wife's clothes. A passing neighbour has also mislaid his cloak, staff and wife. Blepyrus meets his friend Chremes who relates that unrecognised pale-faced men have taken over the Assembly and voted women as Athens' leaders. But this will mean that now it will be the women that have to work from day-break while the men can be the ones who gossip. Praxagora returns home and is falsely accused of visiting her male lover. In the ensuing row it becomes clear that she is now President of the Assembly.

**Scene 3**: Late afternoon on the same day. All private property is now to be shared and all needs to be communally provided. Chremes bids farewell to his precious possessions before taking them to the Forum. A cantancerous Athenian citizen is reluctant to give up all his worldly goods and decides to wait and see if everyone else does. A herald orders all to draw the lot which will assign where each shall sup at the awaiting feast. Cremes takes his goods to the Forum.

**Scene 4**: *Early evening on the same day*. An elderly prostitute summons her lovers. A young man is looking for a dalliance with his favourite young vamp, but hears that the Assembly has decreed that before he can woo a young woman he must first do the same with an elderly one. Three ancient sluts battle over whom he must favour. Insults lead to a general free-for-all. Eventually the young man frees himself from the battle and is joined by Praxagora's maid who calls everyone to a communal feast.

#### Dramatis Personae:

Script	Original Name	Description	M/F	Singer	1st Entry
S Prax	Praxàgora	Campaigning matron	F	Soprano	SL
M Kalo	"Kalonike"	1 <sup>st</sup> Woman, Prax's follower	F	Mezzo	SR
B Blep	Blepyrus	Husband of Praxagora	M	Bass	SL
T Tryg	"Trygaeus"	Ageing Citizen, small beard	M	Tenor	SR
Q Crem	Chremes	Friend of Blep	M	Baritone	SR
T Ctzn	Citizen	Heavily bearded Man	M	Tenor	SL
M Slut	Young Woman	Attractive prostitute	F	Mezzo	SR
S Chap	Young Man	Attractive chap	M	Soprano	SR
M Hrld	Female Herald	Any age	F	Mezzo	SR
B Cron	1 <sup>st</sup> Old Woman	Unattractive slut, Crone	F	Bass	SR
Q Hag	2 <sup>nd</sup> Old Woman	Even less attractive slut	F	Baritone	SR
T Tart	3 <sup>rd</sup> Old Woman	Exceedingly ugly slut	F	Tenor	SL
M Maid	Maidservant	Prax's servant, any age	F	Mezzo	SR

#### **Notes:**

M Kalo incorporates original 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Woman.

The three Old Women are all elderly prostitutes, and in no way pretty.

Praxagora has main stress on the second syllable.

Names Kalonike and Trygaeus come from other plays.

Anachronisms have been included on purpose, especially with the articles Chremes takes to the Forum.

Greek tax increase was 2% not 20%, the original play had lowering of salt tax not budget cuts.

#### **Theatrical Considerations**

#### **SETTING:**

The action takes place in a public square in a suburb of ancient Athens. A house on each side of the stage [possibly with a gap (alley) between the houses for alternative exits]. Each house has a window (or door/curtain) through which singers can be seen and heard. A narrow bench, not too long, is at the back of stage, mid-SL.

All four scenes are in the same location, moving between pre-sunrise and early evening. Scenes need only be separated by a few seconds, to allow lighting to be changed (possibly with blackout after each scene).

#### **PROPS:**

**Sop**: For Prax: a lamp (not red),

a beard with ribbons to tie it on,

a chaplet.

Mez: For Kalo: a lamp (not red),

a large and heavy-looking staff,

man's cloak (over her arm),

wool (to card),

under one arm hair,

a prop beard with ribbons to tie around the head,

portable looking glass.

For Herald: a scroll which can be unwrapped,

a hand-bell.

For Maid: goblet(s).

Tenr: For Tryg: small beard

For Ctzn; large beard

For Tart: a walking stick.

**Bar**: For Crem to bring onto stage (possibly all carried in a large sack):

A sieve for sifting meal,

a sooty porridge-pot,

black tripods with their water-pitchers,

a cock-a-doodle,

lesser personal belongings,

more tripods and a cruse of oil,

a modern hot water bottle,

a large, modern, bed-time teddy bear (initially covered over).

For Hag: a walking stick.

Bass: For Blep: yellow petticoat,

women's ornate bedroom-slippers (any era).

For Cron: a red lamp (with red light) suspended with coloured wool,

a scroll under her smock.

#### **LIBRETTO**

The first text which Malcolm Hill accessed was Adolphus von Velsen's 1883 Greek version with Latin footnotes. R.Smith's verse translation of 1833 was used as the basis for the final libretto; most of the verse was turned into prose but a few verse passages were "borrowed" towards the end of the work. Later translations were found to be either too verbose or still in copyright and thus discarded. The Greek "rule-of-three" for characters' names was upheld in the libretto. In order to maintain Aristophanes' inclusion of current events, a few "Shakespearean anachronisms" were purposely incorporated (e.g. Chremes' household goods).

The first performance of the 72-minute *Women on Top*was given by Bath Chamber Opera

at the Rondo Theatre, Bath on 11<sup>th</sup> February 2015.

It was preceded by Malcolm Hill's 37-minute comedy-opera *How the Viking got his Horns*which used the same cast plus a Narrator and female Chorus.

ORIGINAL CAST

JANE HUNT Soprano roles

JULIA RUSHWORTH Mezzo roles

ROBERT JACK Character Tenor roles

SIMON CALDWELL Baritone roles

PAUL FELDWICK Bass roles

MALCOLM HILL Composer, Director, Pianist

Pictures of this performance can be seen in "Others" section

For this performance, Malcolm Hill wrote: "After several performances of Chekhov's *The Bear*, I spent many months looking for another Russia-based comedy which could be set for just one soprano and two basses. Most plays were far too long, had copyright problems or were just not suitable for comedyopera. It became apparent that more singers would be needed and/or Bath Russian Opera might have to broaden its Russian ethos. I found an excellent 1833 verse translation by R.Smith of *Assembly Women* and with some rewriting

into prose, I saw that the play could be managed by a cast of five who might just have time to change costumes. With the rewriting came a need to link the operatic scenes – instead of prologues I wrote pseudo-Sapphic odes to open the outer scenes and set them to the same music. I kept the politically incorrect lines in the original play as much as I dared."

Aristophanes' play contains the longest word in Greek, transliterated (by Wiki) as:

lopadotemachoselachogaleokranioleipsanodrimupotrimmatosilphiokarabomelitokatakechumenokichlepikossuphophattoperisteralektruonoptokephalliokigklopeleiolagóiosiraiobaphètraganopterugón,

or, in the Greek alphabet:

λοπαδοτεμαχοσελαχογαλεοκρανιολειψανοδριμυποτριμματοσιλφιοκαραβομελιτοκατακεχυμενοκιχλεπικοσσυφοφαττοπεριστεραλεκτρυο-νοπτοκεφαλλιοκιγκλοπελειολαγωοσιραιοβαφητραγανοπτερύγων.

Liddell and Scott translate this as the "name of a dish compounded of all kinds of dainties, fish, flesh, fowl, and sauces." The Greek word contains 171 letters, which far surpasses Shakespeare's 27-letter word, "honorificabilitudinitatibus" in Love's Labour's Lost.

Malcolm amended R. Smith's translation (which lists the dishes) in order to fit the rhythm of the opera's final chorus: "Limpets and oysters and salted fish and skate too a dish, lampreys with the remains of sharp sauce and birds' brains with honey so luscious, plump blackbirds and thrushes, cocks' combs and ring doves, also wood-pidgeons blue with juicy snipes too, and spanakones, ortikia, calimari, barbouni, moussaka and kleftikon."

#### **BATH CHAMBER OPERA**

In autumn 2011, Malcolm Hill organised a three-day Russian Festival at the Rondo Theatre which consisted of Russian folk-tales performed by Fire Springs (Anthony Nanson and Kirsty Hartsiotis) illustrated with music by Malcolm sung by the Chandos Singers. The second evening included his revised version of the comedy-opera *The Bear* using Gene Tyburn's libretto based on Chekhov's play. This was sung by Julia Rushworth, Simon Caldwell and Paul Feldwick. As part of the Russian Festival, the group was named Bath Russian Opera, and in later years they performed under that title, with an expanding repertoire which included dramatic scenes from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. The communist aspects of *Women on Top* and the Novgorod setting of *The Viking* meant that the group was still concentrating on Russia, but when Russia annexed the Crimea, Bath Russian Opera changed its name to Bath Chamber Opera. Details of the ensemble appear at BathChamberOpera.co.uk

## Women on Top

Libretto by Malcolm Hill, based on Aristophanes' *The Assembly-Women* 

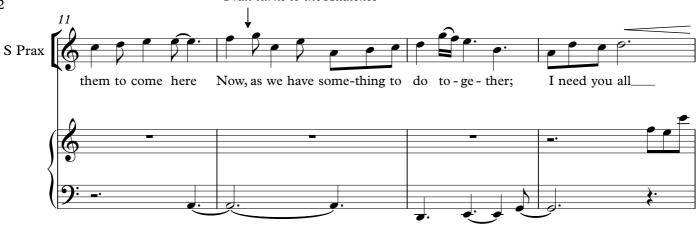
#### Scene 1

Malcolm Hill 2012 mj335

The stage should be a public square in a suburb of ancient Athens, a house on each side of the stage [possibly with a gap (alley) between for alternative exits]. A narrow bench, not too long, is at back of stage, mid-SL. It is an hour or two before dawn.





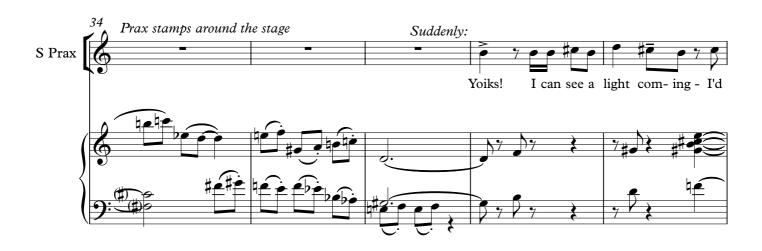


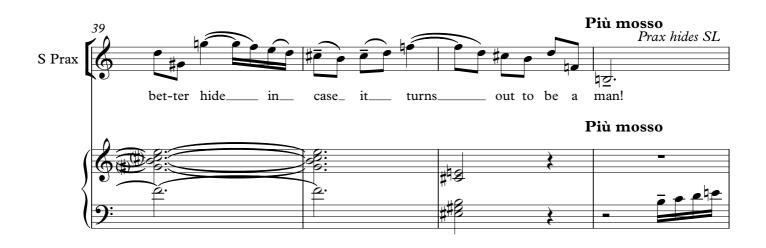


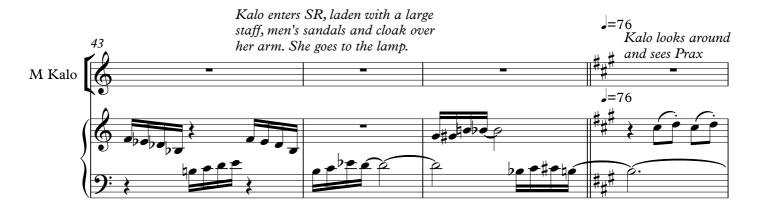








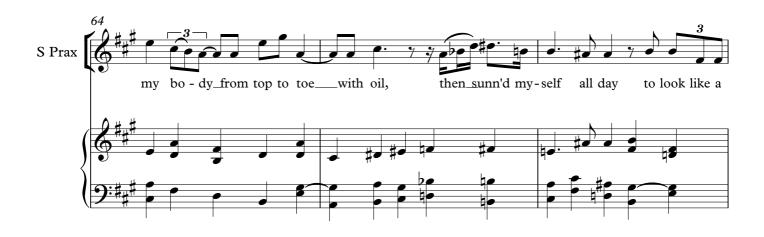




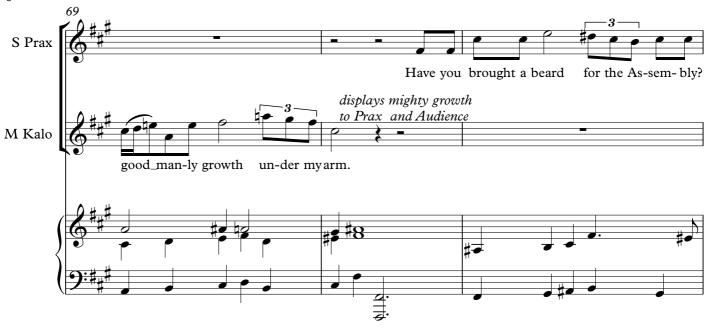


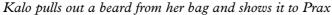


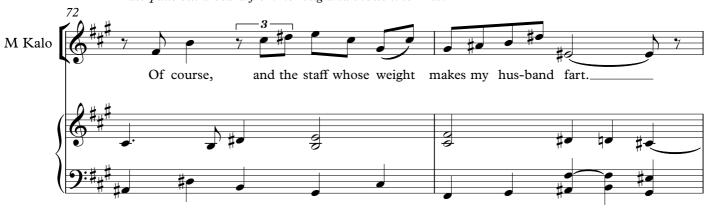


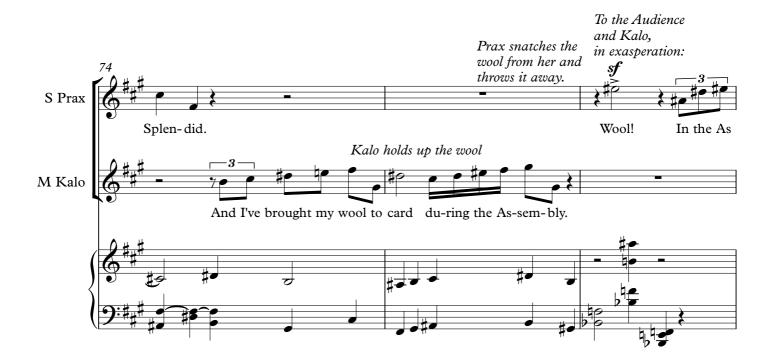












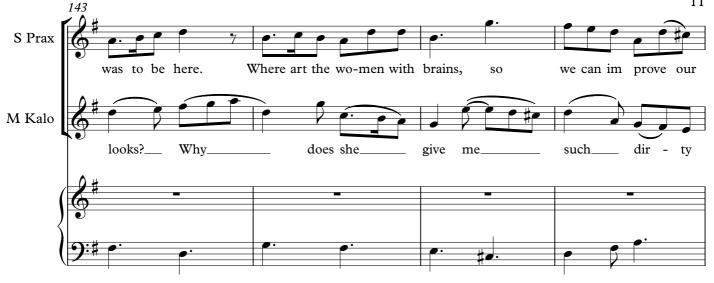








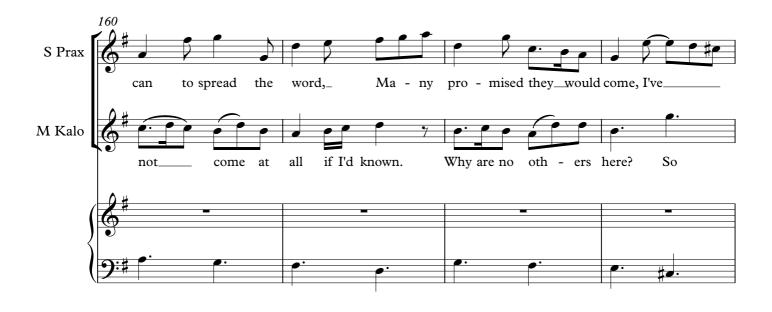


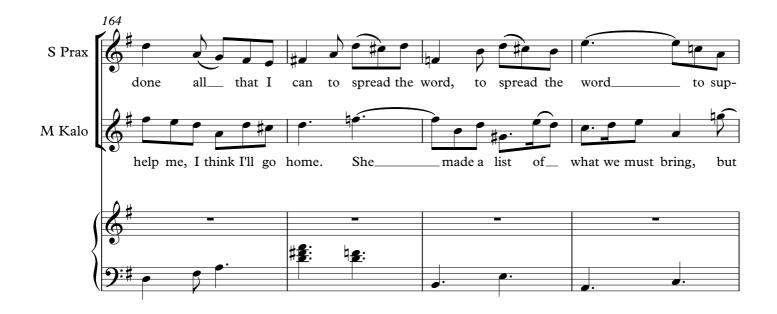


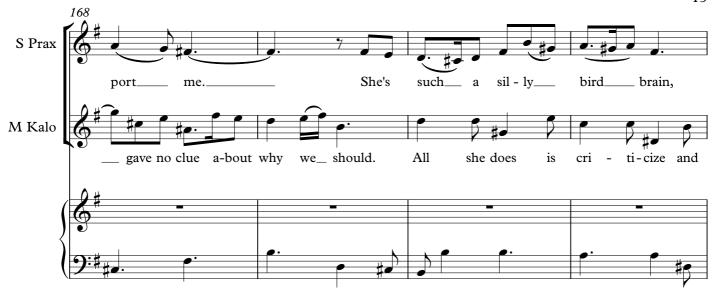












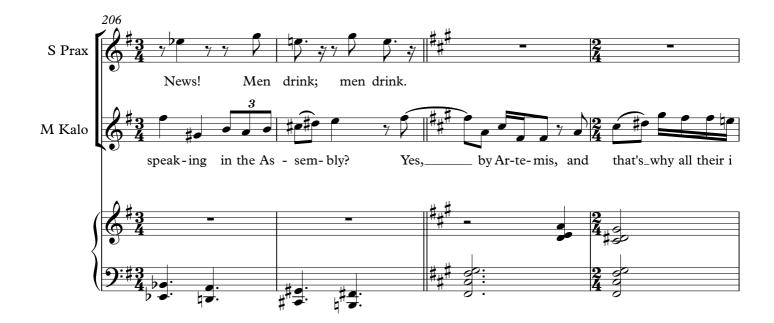




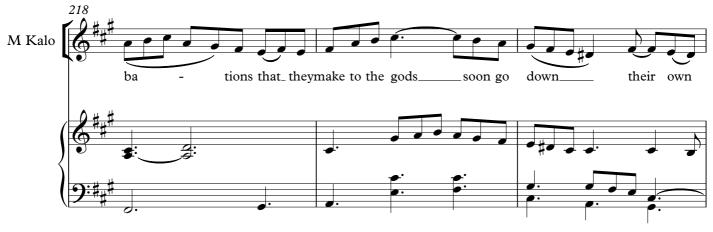








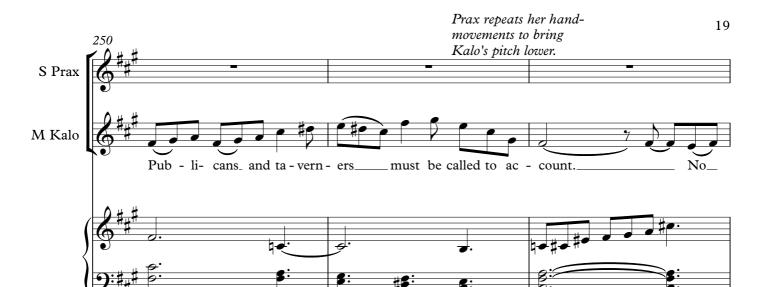


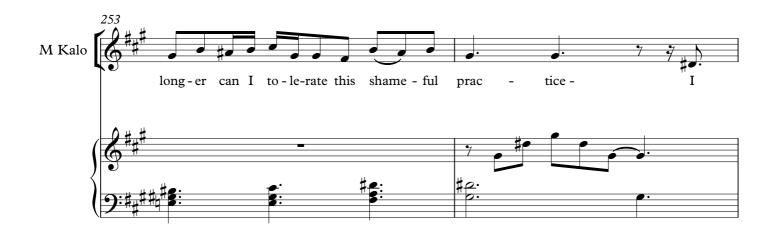




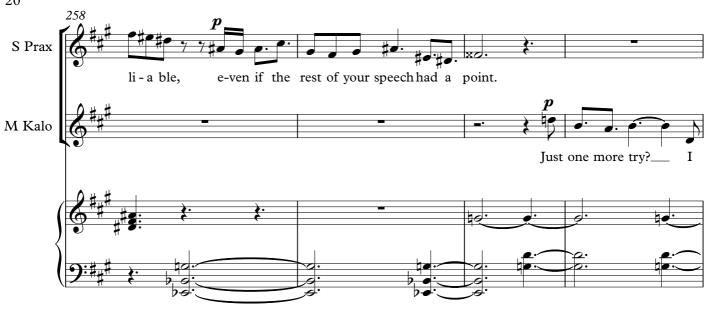


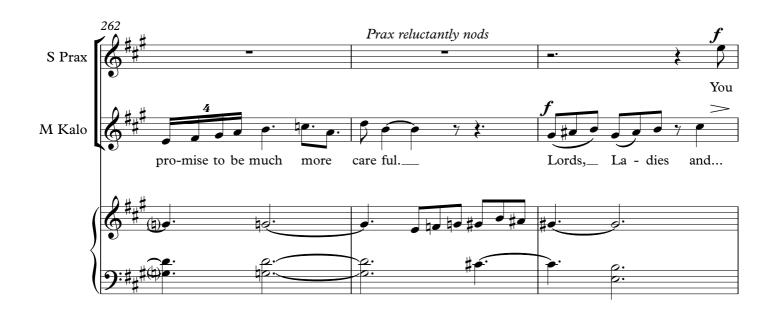














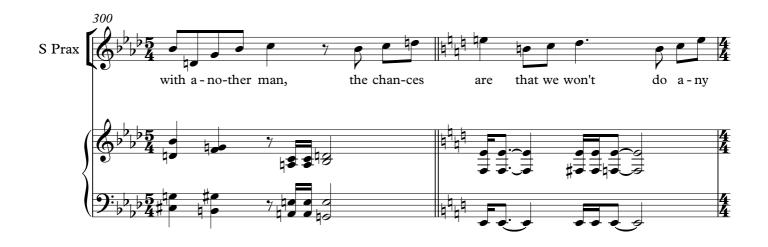






















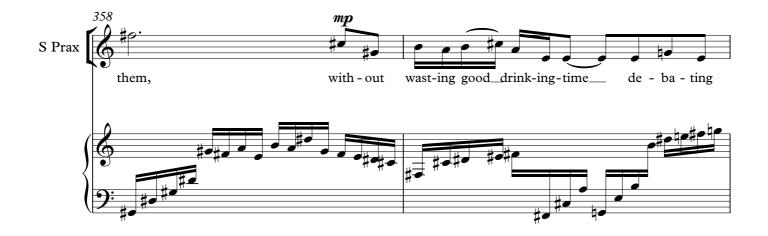


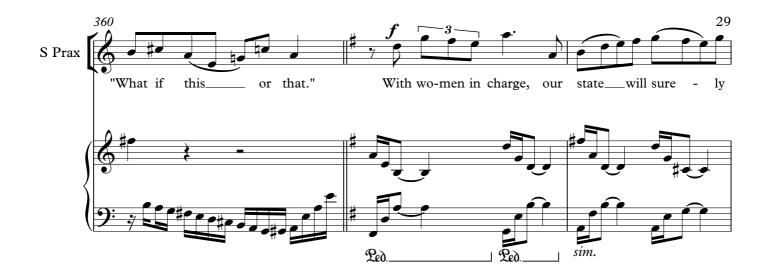
















Prax now sings to Kalo and to

