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The Divine Comedy.”*

MUSIC AS MIRROR

Dante's Treatment of Music in the Divine Comedy

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A TIME OF GREAT MUSICAL DEVELOPMENT, THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY IS THE PERFECT BACKDROP FOR THE AUDITORY ALLUSIONS OF DANTE ALIGHIERI'S *DIVINE COMEDY*. THIS ARTICLE ARGUES THAT DANTE UTILIZES MUSICAL IMAGERY AS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF HIS ALLEGORY. INFLUENCED BY BOTH CHRISTIAN THINKERS AND PHILOSOPHERS, DANTE LIKELY VIEWED SCHOLASTIC MUSIC AS AN ADJUNCT OF RELIGION. IN THE *DIVINE COMEDY*, THEREFORE, DANTE PRESENTS AUDITORY ALLUSIONS AS AN INEXTRICABLE FACTOR OF THE PROTAGONIST'S EPIC PILGRIMAGE THROUGH HELL, PURGATORY, AND HEAVEN. THROUGH A PROGRESSION OF ANTI-MUSIC IN INFERNO TO HUMAN CONTEXT IN PURGATORY TO THE MUSIC OF THE SPHERES IN PARADISE, THIS ESSAY EXPLORES HOW THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF DANTE'S *DIVINE COMEDY* CONVEYS HUMANITY'S INNATE CONNECTION WITH GOD.

From the crude cacophony of *Inferno* to the celestial music of the spheres in *Paradise*, music abounds in *The Divine Comedy*. The text contains one hundred and forty-six references to music: twenty-nine in *Inferno*, fifty-nine in *Purgatory*, and fifty-seven in *Paradise*. Rich in hymns and liturgical songs, including “Regina Coelis”, “Gloria”, “Sanctus”, “Miserere”, “Agnus Dei”, “Te Deum Laudamus”, and “In Exitu Israel”, *The Divine Comedy* also features instruments of all kinds: drums, horns, trumpets, harps, kitharas, and lutes. There are choirs, polyphonic choruses, and even dances, from the fickleness of Dame Fortune in *Inferno* to the joyful symmetries of the blessed in *Paradise*.

Undoubtedly, Dante Alighieri was deliberate in creating such an overwhelming number of musical references. These allusions thematically unite the three books of the *Comedy*, and as the academic Robert Lansing contends, “The *Commedia* is a phonic structure whose mortar is music.”ⁱ Dante’s philosophical training and his personal interest in music suggest that he employs the language of music throughout the *Divine Comedy* to support his allegory. Three key passages of *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise* outline this assertion: Dante’s auditory experience

with the lukewarm in *Inferno*, the song of Casella in *Purgatory*, and the celestial music of the spheres in *Paradise*. Each specific passage, especially seen in context of the *Comedy*’s other musical references, illustrates Dante’s overall thematic thesis of humanity’s relationship with God. In *Inferno*, the auditory atmosphere of chaos and suffering expresses estrangement from God. In *Purgatory*, psalms and hymns have an active role in purification, where Dante emphasizes the distinction between ‘good’ music of expiation and ‘bad’ music of sheer enjoyment.ⁱⁱ Even the celestial music of the spheres encountered in *Paradise* symbolizes perfect union with God. Music plays distinct, specific roles in each book and respective realm.

Discussion of Dante’s work must begin with its biographical and cultural context. For example, it is impossible to read his poetry without understanding his great love for the city of Florence and his adoration of Beatrice. Biographies of Dante likewise reveal that he was also an enthusiast of music. In *Vita di Dante*, Giovanni Boccaccio writes:

He greatly delighted in playing and singing in his youth, and was a friend to all who at that time excelled in singing and playing, and frequented their company . . . as a youth,

WHILE DANTE RECEIVES A CROWN OF LAURELS, A MEDIEVAL MUSICIAN PLAYS A FLUTE



he derived great pleasure from music and songs. He also cherished the friendship and company of all the best singers and musicians of his day. Drawn on by this delight, he composed many lyrics, which were then embellished by pleasant and masterful melodies.ⁱⁱⁱ

This excerpt illuminates two distinctions in Dante's musical experience. Michele Croese divides his exposure to music into a first stage of experience and a second stage of exploration. The first stage includes the practical musical training Dante received due to his high class. For example, Dante and his contemporaries who wrote in the *dolce stil nuovo*, or the "sweet new style" of Italian lyric poetry considered music a critical pastime. The second stage regards Dante's own philosophy of music. This probably developed during his highly scholastic period prompted by the death of Beatrice. During this time, Dante encountered philosophical texts that likely pushed his musical knowledge from the practical world to the theoretical realm.

Among these philosophical texts was Aristotle's *Politics*, which states that music has the power to affect the morality of society.^{iv} As a humanist and a theologian, Dante presumably combined this principle with the thoughts of early Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Cassiodorus.

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These scholars felt that music was an essential component of religion. In *Psalmum XXXII Enarratio*, St. Augustine writes, "The sound of jubilation signifies unspoken love . . . if you cannot speak Him into words, and yet you cannot remain silent, what else is left to you if not the song

of jubilation, the rejoicing of your heart beyond all words, the immense latitude of joy without limits of syllables?"^v These combined Christian and philosophical influences propelled Dante to a scholastic view of music as an adjunct of religion, an art capable of promoting contemplation and inspiration in the faithful. This philosophy seems to be the theoretical backdrop for the auditory allusions of *The Divine Comedy*, which presents music as an inextricable component of the protagonist's epic pilgrimage through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.

Dante's primary and practical exposure to the art also likely influenced his writing. The *Dante Encyclopedia* states that Dante "saw music involved in the human activities of singing, playing, and dancing. He saw music in the macrocosm and the microcosm, hence his *musica mundana*, *musica humana*, and *musica instrumentalis*."^{vi} Originally penned by Boethius in his *Fundamentals of Music*, this tripartite division was standard in medieval musical thought. *Musica mundana* refers to the music of the universe; *musica humana* represents the human soul and body; and, *musica instrumentalis* classifies sounds of the voice and instruments.

Dante wrote about these three categories precisely in *Vita Nuova*, but explored them thematically in *The Divine Comedy*: "The troubadour song in *Purgatory* is the worldly *musica instrumentalis*, the shades sing hymns to . . . reach *musica humana*, and the celestial 'armonia' of *Paradise* ascends to *musica mundana*, the music of the spheres."^{vii} Dante the Pilgrim realizes that music is often the way characters express their union or lament their dissociation from God. This is another characteristic of the medieval era, when often "the purpose of singing was to offer praise to God in a heartfelt, joyful way."^{viii} In *Paradise*, music is "an outward expression of an inward bliss. The picture of a kind of choric dance often rises before us as we read of the manifestations of joy in the successive spheres."^{ix} In an ideal form, music represents positive expressions of God's love.

Therefore, the reverse applies for those who are farthest from God—those in *Inferno*. *Inferno*, the physical center of Dante’s universe but the farthest from its spiritual center, is the realm of disharmony. Dante combines the ideas of eternal confinement and lack of harmony with his usual forcefulness: he dubs *Inferno* a *cattivo coro*, or “petty choir”. This *cattivo coro* is the definition of anti-music: “There sighs and moans and utter wailing swept / resounding through the dark and starless air. I heard them for the first time, and I wept.”^x Screams and sighs resound instead of song, an experience that is more than the pilgrim can bear. He weeps because the hopelessness of this anti-music is beyond his expectations for humanity.

“Shuddering din of strange and various tongues / sorrowful words and accents pitched with rage / shrill and harsh voices, blows of hands with these.”^{xi} This infernal disharmony is chaotic, abrasive, and devoid of order. A strict student might classify these indications as *musica instrumentalis*; however, it suits Dante’s overall theme to suggest instead that this is tumultuous noise devoid of any human qualities. Dante the Pilgrim even inquires, “My Teacher, what are all these cries I hear? . . . What grief is it that makes them wail so loud?”^{xii} He discovers that these neutrals received what they deserve and what their own disordered love has warranted. Their grief is their absence from God’s presence. Their utter loneliness manifests itself through noise, but this same anti-music compounds their pain.

This infernal disharmony continues in the “noise” of the suicides in Canto XIII^{xiii} and the “harsh and clacking rhymes” of Canto XXXII.^{xiv} The lustful cry “as the cranes go singing their lays,”^{xv} and the diviners silently advance “at the pace taken by litanies.”^{xvi} Virgil even announces Lucifer by stating: “Vexilla Regis prodeunt” or “the standards of the king of Hell advance.”^{xvii} This is a play on a liturgical hymn: “The parody of a liturgical hymn—more symbolic than ironic—heralds the presence of the prince of darkness.”^{xviii} By sardonically referencing a hymn, Virgil hints at Hell’s desolate nature by suggesting the distorted humanity and estranged nature of *Inferno*.

Dante also makes intriguing references to musical instruments throughout *Inferno*. In the medieval era, instruments were often too costly to be commonplace. Vernacular aside, the inclusion of instrumental imagery indicates an attempt to reach an audience of the merchant middle class, a group that would have had the ability to purchase instruments. Nevertheless, Dante still uses this imagery to emphasize his theme of man’s relationship with God. His first instrumental reference is a description of Master Adam of Brescia. The poet plays on the duplicitous nature of this counterfeiter and describes Master Adam in terms of two instruments. His swollen body is a “fat lute,”^{xix} he says, and, after another sinner strikes him, his stomach “booms as if it were a kettledrum.”^{xx} The counterfeiter first appears as what he is not, a superior instrument of perfection. When sounded, however, his body “produces the disharmonious sounds of an inferior instrument, a drum.”^{xxi}

Canto XXXI continues this instrument metaphor when Barbariccia, a devil torturing the barrators, “made a bugle of his arse.”^{xxii} Additionally, Dante the Pilgrim notes Nimrod’s babbling as the “deep blast of a horn / loud enough to make roaring thunder faint.”^{xxiii} These two examples imply, like the parody of the hymn, the distortion of humanity that occurs in the miserable landscape of Hell. Even the chattering teeth of the traitors in Canto XXXII contribute to the wretchedness of Dante’s auditory inferno. Characterized by silence, screams, or disharmonious noises, *Inferno* demonstrates that those disconnected from God have also separated themselves from their ability to utilize music in a positive manner.

As Dante the Pilgrim moves beyond *Inferno* to Purgatory, he notices a distinct change in auditory atmosphere: “How different are these holes from those below! / Here you go accompanied by song, / down there you pass the jaws with cries of woe.”^{xxiv} In this passage, Dante underscores the contrast between Hell and Purgatory through musical language. In *Inferno*, the damned utter vivid cries of anguish, including shouts, sighs, wails, and shrieks. This

THE LOUD BLAST OF A HORN IN CANTO XXXI OF THE *INFERNO* ADDS TO THE OVERALL DISHARMONY.



cacophony remains consistent with Dante's unrelenting belief that mortal disconnection from God leads to eternal loneliness and pain. However, the souls in Purgatory all know that they will eventually ascend to heaven. While their counterparts are in endless agony, those in Purgatory still maintain hope. In Purgatory, spirits endure their punishments with prayer and song rather than cries of pain. While *Inferno* featured anti-musical moments that echoed the hopeless nature of damned souls, *Purgatory* reminds the reader that its inhabitants are only there until they reach complete purification—they sing a “song” instead of “cries of woe.”^{xxv}

In *Purgatory*, *musica humana* serves three functions for repairing a relationship with God: soothing, worshipping, and teaching. All souls in Purgatory are *en route* to achieving happiness with God after his or her allotted time; therefore, the hopeless nature of *Inferno* disappears. There is still one similarity to *Inferno*, though: the worship hymns, or antiphons, sung as part of the purification process often echo the virtue of the specific sin purged from the souls. The gluttonous sing, “O Lord, open thou my lips” in Canto LI, mirroring similar acts of Dante's *contrapasso*.^{xxvi} Additionally, the souls of the violently slain sing the “Miserere”, and the souls of those purified from the sin of avarice repeat the verse, “my soul cleaveth to the dust.”^{xxvii}

These psalms and hymns help souls to expiate their specific sins. Those killed by violence and saved from damnation sing the “Miserere”, for example, and Dante reinforces their humility by having them sing “Beati pauperes spiritu,” a hymn based on the first Beatitude—“blessed are the poor in spirit.”^{xxviii} The envious sing “Beati misericordes,” or “Blessed are the merciful,” because while on earth they were far from gracious.^{xxix} The two songs of the Siren also demonstrate the educative aspect of music: “the dream of the Siren warns against the spiritual dangers of music's misuse, and the singing of Lia is a symbol of the power given to music of stirring and spurring men to action.”^{xxx}

It is through Casella's song that Dante explores the soothing aspects of music. “The Purgatory is full of sounding music—*musica instrumentalis*. Yet it is not a place for the pleasures of music.”^{xxxi} Evident in Dante's own *canzone*, “Amor che nella mente mi ragiona”, which the actual Casella set to music, this song is not for mere joy, although it may appear as such at first glance. The composer sings it to him beautifully as the poet reflects on how music “used to quiet all my desires.”^{xxxii}

“If no new law has stripped you of your art / or seized your memory of those songs of love / which used to still the yearnings of my heart,” / said I, ‘oh let it please you now awhile / to soothe my soul, which has, in coming here, / walked with my body many a weary mile.”^{xxxiii}

This passage exemplifies the soothing quality of music. “Amor che nella mente mi ragiona”, indicates music's power of soothing and diverting the mind.”^{xxxiv} What begins as soothing, however, goes too far and becomes discomforting. As the passage continues, this otherworldly music takes hold of both Dante the Pilgrim and others: “So sweetly did he then begin to sing / I can still hear the sweetness of his sound. / And so my Teacher and that throng of souls and I stood listening so contentedly / it seemed our minds were touched by nothing else.”^{xxxv} Transfixed in aesthetic admiration, the pilgrim and his fellow fans encounter the emotive aspects of music, a concept that romantic madrigals were beginning to introduce in medieval Italy. These madrigals emphasized the expressive nature of music by creating a close connection between lyrics and overall musical effect.^{xxxvi}

Ultimately, Cato's harsh reproaches break the spell; “What's this, you sluggish souls! Get to the hill! / What lingering, what carelessness down here!”^{xxxvii} This rebuke indicates that only a particular kind of *musica instrumentalis* may enhance our relationship with God. For example, there is no ethical or spiritual content within profane lyrics. Rather than inspiring the pilgrim to love God further, the sweet sound of Casella's song distracts souls from devotion



MUSIC BECOMES EXULTATIVE AS DANTE ASCENDS
THROUGH PARADISE.

to God. Therefore, the only music heard after this incident is such that it “is instrumental to the purgation and perfection of the soul, to the full realization of the highest values of *musica humana*. Thus, prevailing in the Purgatory is either the sound of psalms or, still attuned to the stern recitation of psalm tunes, that of other religious texts.”^{xxxviii} Although Dante makes allusions to the new style of emotive music, in doing so he also indicates its dangers. If one is to maintain a pure soul in his or her relationship with God, he or she must not allow *canzones* to sweep them off their feet. Only a focus on the pragmatic psalms and hymns that purge the soul of wrongdoing is truly safe. This accounts for the constant singing of hymns such as “Salve Regina”, “Te Lucis Ante”, and “Te Deum”. Through their soothing, worshipping, and teaching aspects, *musica humana*, or music of the mind and body, dominates. These three components combine when souls of the Wrathful

repeat with one accord the “Agnus Dei”, the whole of Purgatory sings the “Gloria in Excelsis” as a purified soul rises to true life, and the mystic group around Beatrice sings the “Benedictus qui venis”.

This merger leads the Pilgrim to witness *musica mundada*, which heralds the beginning of Dante’s heavenly journey through Paradise. Dante’s “trasumanar,” his experience in the first canto of *Paradise* of transcendence beyond humanity that “cannot be expressed in words,” has as its first connotation the perception of an omnipresent concord.^{xxxix} The experience moves the pilgrim to be “intent to hear the harmony.”^{xl} This implies the music of the spheres, or notes that compose an intellectual harmony of ultimate beauty. Dating from the tradition of ancient Greek philosophers, the medieval notion of the music of the spheres emphasizes celestial order. This is music where God tunes the relevant notes and determines their pitch. Therefore, its perfection is quite different from the earthly music that the pilgrim previously encountered.

As a result, Dante the Pilgrim speaks in amazement: “The newness of the sound, the swelling gleam / lighted desire in me to learn their cause— / keener than any appetite I’d known.”^{xli} As the pilgrim ascends higher into Paradise, something else becomes even more apparent. Song in the lower spheres often accompanies symbolic pageantry or elaborates on theological concepts. However, the higher the pilgrim ascends, the tropes shift to simpler, purely exclamatory texts, such as “Gloria”, “Sanctus”, and “Hosanna”. These texts maintain complexity through their polyphonic setting, but have simple words. This is a direct contrast to the monophonic setting of the psalms of Purgatory, where there was simple music but many words. This progression indicates Dante’s deliberate reflection on the musical evolution of his own society from monophony to polyphony. His declaration of Gabriel’s song to the Virgin Mary in Canto XXIII as a circular melody and his notation of a harmonizing circle of theologians in Canto XII cements Dante’s nod towards emerging polyphonic tradition.

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“Hosanna, holy God of power and might, / illuminating with your clarity / these armies and their joyful flames of light!” / I heard, in rhythm with the harmony / of hosts, the singing of that radiance.”^{xlii} These seemingly simple yet eloquent exclamations of praise and joy facilitate the pilgrim’s discovery of the reality that a closer relationship to God sweeps earthly matters away. While theological concepts and pageantry are a part of humanity, these matters are inconsequential in God’s presence. He states that heavenly music remains superior—“such songs as puts our poetry to rout.”^{xliii} When he describes Gabriel’s song to Mary, he comments, “The earthly melody of sweetest tone / pulling the human soul with fullest power / would seem the thunder of a flatted cloud / Compared against the sounding of that lyre.”^{xliv} Therefore, the heavenly music of Paradise far surpasses earthly music.

Those in Paradise enjoy the presence of God through song. Their music represents the solace that they have achieved; “Various voices make the sweeter song: / here in our life the various thrones endow / the wheels of Heaven with sweet harmony.”^{xlv} However, this superior music may yet be beyond mortal human comprehension. The Eagle in Jupiter informs Dante: “As my song is unfathomable to you

/ so too to man, the judgments of the King.”^{xlvi} The mortal pilgrim attempts to describe heavenly music using earthly musical terms. These include musical instruments, polyphonic song, and dances. There is a vibrating cross in Canto XIV, a lyre tuned by God in Canto XV, and a comparison of the singing of both the Eagle and Gabriel to a heavenly lyre. Dante the Pilgrim even claims in Canto XXX that his trumpet is too lowly to herald the transcendent beauty of Beatrice.

This language is logical, for one cannot read Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in a vacuum. His attitudes regarding polyphonic celestial music resonate for a dramatically changing cultural world. Nevertheless, his insistence on the purificative psalm texts found in *Purgatory* also reflects several medieval ideas, particularly the evolving musical traditions of his society. Even his statements regarding the anti-music of *Inferno* model tropes of his time. While his affinity for music explains the prevalence of his references to it, his philosophical and religious background also certainly account for the way he uses musical language to explain one’s relationship with God.

From the first mention in *Inferno* of “where the sun is silent”^{xlvii} to the “sweet symphony of Paradise,”^{xlviii} it is evident that musical references pervade the text of the *Divine Comedy*. Representative of an increasingly musical trend within the medieval world, Dante uses this terminology to his advantage. Dante’s auditory experience with the lukewarm of *Inferno*, Casella’s song in *Purgatory*, and Gabriel’s song to Mary in *Paradise* are each distinct ways in which music conveys the nature of humanity’s connection with God.

For those who reject Him and encounter *Inferno*, the anti-music of silence and screams is torturous. All noises in this realm are abhorrible. For those who are not yet ready to be in His presence, the souls of *Purgatory*, music soothes their minds and teaches them throughout this interim state. Dante even designates ‘good’ music that helps souls atone for their sins and ‘bad’ music that distracts them.^{xlix} For

those in Paradise, or true harmony with God, music expresses humanity's ultimate fulfillment. Although unintelligible to a mortal ear, it is of the highest quality. While the anti-music of *Inferno* reflects dissociation from God and the purifying music of *Purgatory* echoes progress towards God, the sublime music of *Paradise* indicates unity with God. Through this progression from anti-music to human music to celestial music, Dante effectively utilizes musical language to represent the various states of humanity's relationship with God.

ENDNOTES

- i. Lansing (252)
- ii. *Ibid.* (632)
- iii. Musical Times Publications (446)
- iv. Wright (27)
- v. Pirrotta (257)
- vi. Lansing (251-252)
- vii. Pirrotta (21)
- viii. Wright (21)
- ix. Musical Times Publications (447)
- x. *Inferno* (III.22-24)
- xi. *Ibid.* (III.25-27)
- xii. *Ibid.* (III.32, 44)
- xiii. *Ibid.* (XIII.15)
- xiv. *Ibid.* (XXXII.1)
- xv. *Ibid.* (V.46)
- xvi. *Ibid.* (XX.8-9)
- xvii. *Ibid.* (XXXIV.1)
- xviii. Pirrotta (253)
- xix. *Inferno* (XXX.49)
- xx. *Ibid.* (XXX.103)
- xxi. Lansing (632)
- xxii. *Inferno* (XXI.139)
- xxiii. *Ibid.* (XXXI.12-13)
- xxiv. *Purgatory* (XII.112-114)
- xxv. *Ibid.* (1.38)
- xxvi. *Ibid.* (XXIII.11)
- xxvii. *Ibid.* (XIX.73)
- xxviii. *Ibid.* (XII.110)
- xxix. *Ibid.* (XII.112)
- xxx. Pirrotta (254)
- xxxi. *Ibid.* (254)
- xxxii. *Purgatory* (II.108)
- xxxiii. *Ibid.* (II.109-111)
- xxxiv. Pirrotta (254)
- xxxv. *Purgatory* (II.113-117)
- xxxvi. Wright (86)
- xxxvii. *Purgatory* (II.120-121)
- xxxviii. Pirrotta (254)
- xxxix. *Paradise* (I.70)
- xl. *Ibid.* (I.78)
- xli. *Ibid.* (I.82-84)
- xl. *Ibid.* (VII.1-5)
- xl. *Ibid.* (XII.7)
- xliv. *Ibid.* (XXIII.97-100)
- xl. *Ibid.* (VI.124-126)
- xlvi. *Ibid.* (XIX.98-99)
- xl. *Ibid.* (I.60)
- xl. *Ibid.* (XXI.59)
- xl. *Ibid.* (XXIV.49)

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