

Introduction: Dante and Music

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ABSTRACT

This essay cluster in Textual Cultures considers the importance of music in Dante.

AMONG THE MANY INTERDISCIPLINARY TOPICS RAISED BY DANTE AND developed during the recent 7th-centennial celebrations, the presence of music in the *Comedy* ranks among the most fascinating and complex. Music represents a steady reference in the semantic and poetic horizon of the early Italian lyric (CEROCCHI 2010) and its metaphors are frequent in Dante's own linguistic universe. If the categories of anti-music and disharmony have been used to describe the language of *Inferno*, it is undoubtedly in the second and third *cantica* that musical images become more and more pervasive, with Casella's canto (*Purgatorio* II) often pointed to as the gateway to a renewed function of singing and music in Dante's *Comedy* (DE VENTURA 2012), that finds its climax in *Paradiso*, where more specific references to technical issues in music and harmony can be found (e. g. CAPPuccio 2008 on the *Cielo del Sole*). To what extent music and its language are key factors to interpret the third *cantica* is — however — a multifaceted issue: while Slawinski 2008 has addressed the verbal harmony (or lack thereof) of music in *Paradiso*, there is little doubt that an appropriate methodological approach to such a debated issue should be handled via true interdisciplinary scholarship and direct knowledge of the technical issues involved.

Indeed, authors of this section have solid backgrounds in musicology and/or the complex relationship between poetry and music. Building on specific competences, Francesco Ciabattoni has authored what is arguably the most important book on the role of music in the *Comedy* (CIABATTONI 2010), studying also the lyrics of Italy's songwriters (CIABATTONI 2016), and coordinating a website on their study (theitaliansong.com). Twice the recipient of a Marie Curie Skłodowska Fellowship in Medieval Studies, Maria Clotilde Camboni has published extensively on the connection between music and verse in the Romance languages during the Middle Ages, both in terms of

metrics and musicality and actual sung delivery (CAMBONI 2017). A distinguished pianist (holding a MM from the Conservatory of Perugia), Paolo Scartoni has a special interest in the role of sacred and secular music in Dante (especially *Purgatory*) and the medieval discourse at large, particularly in connection to modules of prayer.

Within the diverse range of musical references in the third *cantica*, Francesco Ciabattoni addresses a specific issue: based on Pythagorean and Platonic formulations, the notion of the “harmony of the spheres” — i.e., harmonious sounds produced by planets revolving around Earth — was generally opposed by Christian thinkers but seems adopted by Dante since the first canto of *Paradiso*, although — Ciabattoni argues — more as a source of linguistic and rhetorical imagery than an actual metaphysical assumption. By means of a fascinating survey of possible sources for Dante’s text (Ambrose, Cassiodorus, Isidore of Seville), Ciabattoni assesses the diverse reception of the “harmony of the spheres” in the Middle Ages: its popularity was driven by a passage of *The Dream of Scipio*, commented upon by Macrobius, and by St Ambrose’s *Hexameron*, and the mention of angels as origin of the harmonious sounds seemed to suffice in overturning the pagan notion of music originated by the planets themselves, which had in any case been debunked in Dante’s times by Thomas Aquinas on Aristotelian grounds. Rather than taking a definite stance, however, Dante develops a subtly Platonic narrative of the “harmonic” nature of the various Heavens, suggesting rather than declaring the musicality of their movement.

Casella’s episode in *Purgatorio* stands primarily as proof of the importance of the dimension of *performance* in Medieval thoughts on music. Camboni’s essay focusses on this dimension, seeking textual evidence for the delivery of vernacular poems, an aspect that appears to be secondary in Dante’s works, overshadowed by the technicalities of composition. In fact, reference to performance is incidental even in Dante’s treatises: in his *Convivio* he marks the distance from other poets in disregarding the rhythmic obligations of canzoni; an emphasis on the geometrical proportions of musical rules appears also in a famous passage of *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (II viii 4) that introduces an opposition between *actio* and *cantio*, where only the latter term is associated with poetic creation, but not necessarily with sung performance. Given the usual correspondence between metrical stanzas and melodic units, it is not strange that Dante’s take on *cantio* may also apply to phonic / acoustic issues; yet, his analysis of Arnaut Daniel’s compositions makes

it clear that poetry must be addressed independently by its possible musical component, hence the need for a mainly verbal and technical appraisal of this lyric form, which is functional to its primacy in Dante's hierarchy of poetic styles. In the final part of her essay, Camboni reverses the issue, exploring a broad range of contemporary textual evidence — from the *Memoriali bolognesi* to Vatican Lat. 3973 — of Dantean texts being performed with music, possibly during his own lifetime.

Also drawing upon Dante's treatises, Paolo Scartoni's essay analyses the relationship between two paramount liberal arts in the Medieval educational system: *grammatica* and *musica*. He argues that Dante's reflections on these issues are directly influenced by Augustine's *De Ordine* and *De Musica*, thus making the "verbal sound" of language his main area of interest, as shown in the famous list of "poetic" words in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* II vii 5. In other words, the rules of harmony and melody are applied to the combination of sounds, i.e., to language (in Dante's terminology, *vox* — at the root of both music and grammar). If Virgil was considered the apex of the acquisition of grammar, it is hardly surprising that the first cantos of *Inferno* — deeply watermarked by all sorts of references to the *Aeneid* — already set the backdrop of a linguistic itinerary from "cacophony" to "harmony", in terms not just of a quest for expression but of ethical progress, as Scartoni persuasively contends. Within such context, the "parole di colore oscuro" (*Inf.* III, 1–9) on the Gates of Hell may be granted a poignant value also as a "signification" of words, i.e., concepts translated into words which in turn are translated into signs. For the pilgrim, the combination of such elements is prompted by the act of reading the inscription: hence, Scartoni's essay displays a constant attention to the various aural / acoustic references scattered in Dante's *Comedy*, interpreted as steps in a long journey from various forms of infernal *tumulto* to verbal and musical harmony.

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