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IRONIZING UGOLINO

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This article analyzes an adaptation of Canto 33 of the Inferno, a musical setting of Count Ugolino composed by Gaetano Donizetti (1828). The composition is first presented within the frame of its contemporaneous aesthetic, one that treats Ugolino as a pathos-inspired tale of human suffering. Donizetti’s composition, however, fails to align itself to this tragic reading due to structural contradictions that prevent the listener from sympathizing with the musical agent. To address this divergence, the article extends the most recent theories of musical narrative by Byron Almén and Michael Klein to propose an ironic reading of the work, essentially a subversion of the structural and ideological expectations of a nineteenth-century setting of the character. This strategy opens up an interpretative space for a richer understanding of the composition by placing extant Dantean criticism and musical analysis in dialogue—thereby, considering Ugolino through the lens of his insincerity and paternal failings.

Keywords: Dante, Inferno, Ugolino, Gaetano Donizetti, Musical Semiotics, Musical Narrative Theory, Hermeneutics

From its medieval origins through our postmodern age, the Commedia of Dante Alighieri has presented intellectual challenges to legions of students and scholars. On its surface this tripartite metaphorical journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise traces the transcendence of sin toward purification and salvation, but abundant complexities within its content and formal structure thwart the clear construction of further meaning. Dense webs of literary, theological, and political allusions lie within the narrative content, often obscuring the protagonist’s linear journey. The intricate structural topography of the three canticles provides additional analytical obstacles, as the nine circles of Hell, seven terraces of Purgatory, and ten heavens of Paradise do not clearly align sins with their corresponding virtues, thereby obscuring thematic parallels and contesting the underlying logic of the poem. These aforementioned complexities, among many others, have been examined through a rich tradition of literary hermeneutics that attempts to

1 This article is based on material from the author’s thesis entitled “Two Musical Settings of Ugolino: Tragedy, Irony, and the Hermeneutics of Dante,” master’s thesis (University of Georgia, 2017).
interpret the *Commedia* in order to decipher its “enigma of meaning.” These interpretative efforts have led to a “veritable ocean of exegesis … an interminable and ever-growing mass of hermeneutics” that has become both the fountainhead and bulwark of Dante studies and collegiate Italian departments. Despite their academic ubiquity, Dantean hermeneutics are surprisingly insular, existing only within the bubble of literary and rhetorical scholarship and very rarely crossing disciplinary lines. This is most unfortunate in consideration of the extraordinary number of artistic adaptations that the *Commedia* has inspired—settings, which have been examined in the scholarly discourses of art, music, and theater but remain detached from the insights of literary criticism.

From the infernal sculptures of Auguste Rodin to Franz Liszt’s symphonic setting of the poem, the creative potential embedded within the *Commedia* has encouraged centuries of diverse and thoughtful adaptation. Dante’s vivid descriptions of his demonic and angelic environments, as well as the myriad of compelling characters and personal narratives found within them, have been prime subject material for painters, writers, composers, and dramaturgists. Scholarly discourse on these adaptations, however, has focused primarily on surface representations of the character or concept depicted, resulting in two-dimensional, superficial perspectives that do not attempt to place the artistic rendering within the field of hermeneutic possibility. This is particularly problematic in musicological discourse (treated in the general sense here to include both historical study and musical analysis), where a number of analytical methodologies are employed to study the musical settings of the *Commedia* but few incorporate extant criticism of the literary text. Not only do these restricted views of Dantean concepts ignore the alternative perspectives offered by hermeneutics, they also frequently undervalue the semiotic capabilities of music in signifying complexities beyond surface representations. Is it possible for a musical adaptation to encode a literary interpretation within its structure that reaches deeper than just superficial characteristics? How might the critic, analyst, or listener perceive this interpretation based on his or her own understanding of Dante? If we allow extant literary criticism to guide our path of research, we can go beyond the what, when, and where that often dominates this

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brand of musicological discourse, and move into the how and why of its signification processes.

This article, first and foremost, seeks to incorporate Dantesian literary hermeneutics into musicological discourse. While the separation of these two realms of academia have bared much fruit in the past, only through their integration can we dig below the musical surface of Commedia adaptations to discover new ways of listening and understanding. Adopting this interdisciplinary framework as my “Virgilian guide,” this paper will analyze a small song setting of Canto 33 of the Inferno, a musical portrait of the Dantesque character Count Ugolino written by Gaetano Donizetti (1828). To begin, I present the work within the frame of its own contemporaneous cultural aesthetic, one that treats Ugolino as a pathetic tale of human suffering, isolated from the moral geography of Dante’s infernal underworld. Donizetti’s composition, however, fails to align itself to this tragic reading due to structural contradictions that never quite allow the listener to sympathize with the musical agent. Thus, in the following section, I build upon the most recent research on musical narrative archetypes by Byron Almén and Michael Klein to instead propose an ironic reading of Donizetti’s “Il Conte Ugolino” that subverts both the structural and ideological expectations of a nineteenth-century setting of this Dantesque character. Here, irony is not the interpretative endgame but rather opens up an ideological space for a richer hermeneutic understanding. In the final two sections, I analyze the deeper structural underpinnings of this setting, where we can form musico-literary correspondences to extant Dantesian criticism, thereby suggesting an interpretation of Ugolino colored by a moral and religious perspective.

**UGOLINO IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ITALY**

La bocca sollevò dal fiero pasto
quel peccator, forbendola a’ capelli

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4 While redundant to name in the text above, the composition is titled: Gaetano Donizetti, “Canto XXXIII della Divina Commedia: Il Conte Ugolino,” Antologia Classica Musicale, Gazzetta Musicale di Milano (Milan: Ricordi, 1843).


del capo ch’elli avea di retro guasto.7 (Inf. 33.1–3)

With this gruesome rhetorical flourish, Dante Alighieri begins Canto 33 of the *Inferno*, preparing the reader for the violent yet poignant content of the tale of Count Ugolino della Gherardesca. Dante the pilgrim encounters Ugolino in the ninth circle of Hell—reserved for the wicked sin of treachery—where the latter is partially encased in ice and vengefully devouring the head of his own betrayer, Archbishop Ruggieri. Flabbergasted by the act of cannibalism, Dante requests an explanation for this unimaginable sin, which incites Ugolino to recount his own personal narrative in the form of an extended monologue. In his attempt to consolidate political power, Count Ugolino chose to betray his own Guelph faction and allied himself with the Ghibellines and Archbishop Ruggieri, thereby gaining complete control over the Italian city of Pisa. Ruggieri then turned on Ugolino and provoked the citizens to rebel against him, imprisoning Ugolino and his four sons in the famed “Tower of Hunger.”8 In perhaps the most poignant depiction of pathos in the entire *Commedia*, Ugolino then watches his children die one by one as they succumb to starvation, ultimately perishing himself.

These provocative images of cannibalism and pathos resonated with nineteenth-century readers and facilitated an interpretation filtered through the ideals of Italian Romanticism. Much like Francesca da Rimini in Canto 5,9 Ugolino was restricted to an episodic reading, bookended by his introduction at the end of Canto 32 to Dante’s castigation of Pisa10 in line 80 of the following Canto. By limiting an understanding of the character to this small segment of Dante’s grand poem, Ugolino is ostensibly pulled out of the

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7 If the reader requires translations of Dante’s poetry, please see the following: Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2000).
8 Like many of the characters presented in *Inferno*, Ugolino is not a fictional construction, but rather is based on a true story. For a more comprehensive description of the real Ugolino as well as Dante’s recontextualized character, please see: Frances A. Yates, “Transformations of Dante’s Ugolino,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 14, no.1/2 (1951): 92–117.
9 The tale of Francesca da Rimini was the most popular of all the Dantean episodes in the nineteenth century, inspiring more than one hundred music adaptations. While Romantics perceived Francesca as the innocent victim of lust, a sin that can be easily committed (if not accidentally committed), Dante scholars generally frame this tale as the dangers of misreading literature—how a text can inspire marital infidelity if not read in an intentionally allegorical light.
10 The musical treatment of this line is quite significant in the later analysis. Furthermore, interest in the lines that follow (lines 81–90) suggests a far different perspective in understanding Ugolino than what is discussed above.
moral geography of the underworld, obscuring his exact location in Hell as well as the nature and punishment of his sin.

Francesco De Sanctis eloquently summarizes the nineteenth-century romanticized interpretation of Ugolino in an article published in *Nuova Antologia*. The author spotlights Ugolino’s own suffering as the central focus of the story, turning the sinner into the victim (“In Ugolino it is not the traitor who speaks but the one betrayed”) and further exculpating Ugolino through the transformation of the grotesque act into a demonstration of the “sublimity of horror.” While we see Ugolino’s desire for vengeance in his ferocious gnawing of Ruggieri’s head, the act is justified due to the atrocious actions that were committed upon him. De Sanctis further states that “Ugolino is more savage than his deed, he is revealed by that gesture but not appeased by it, like an unsatisfied artist who cannot find his ideal expressed in his work, and despairs of ever achieving it. Ugolino’s grief is ‘desperate,’ not sated, not placated by that vengeance.” It is not only that the character is unable to attain true retribution (since he cannot starve Ruggieri’s own children), but his current vengeance can never fully assuage his grief or equal his hatred. His “preternatural expression of immense hate” is timeless, a horrifying act that will never reach an inevitable conclusion—allowing the reader to “conceive the infinite.” The tragedy of the story, therefore, lies not only in the unimaginable experience of watching your own children starve to death and the immense grief that is its direct byproduct, but also in the impossibility of attaining true closure in this miserable existence. According to De Sanctis’s interpretation, one that delineates the interpretative norm for the nineteenth-century reader, Ugolino should be a character whom is sympathized with, not scorned for his own sinful actions.

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 49.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
IRONIZING UGOLINO

How might a nineteenth-century interpretation of Ugolino be set to music? It is safe to assume that the pathos-saturated nature of this story would suggest an alignment to the tragic topical field; an expressive musical surface saturated in minor keys, sigh motives, low registers, harsh chromaticism, and wandering tonality that depicts the inner suffering of Ugolino’s world. Donizetti’s setting immediately aligns itself to the topical expectations of this morbid tale (see Example 1).

The piano part begins with low tessitura tremolos outlining the key of D minor. These tremolos are transferred to the right hand in m. 8 as the left hand sets up a chromatically descending bass line, harmonized by secondary dominants and augmented-sixth chords, signifying the lament bass trope. Meanwhile, the recitative-style vocal

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17 As defined by Robert Hatten, topical fields are overarching observations that account for a collection of musical topics within a composition. They can also be understood within larger areas of musical expression, including the “tragic, the pastoral, the heroic, and the buffà.” For a more complete description, see: Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

18 Donizetti composed the “Canto XXXIII della *Divina Commedia: Il Conte Ugolino*” in January 1828 shortly after the world premiere of his opera *L’esule di Roma*. This small song setting written for bass voice and piano was dedicated to the celebrated singer Luigi Lablache (who played the role of Murena in *L’esule*) as a token of gratitude for his splendid performances. The complete musical score may be viewed here: https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/27236.

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part displays an anxious, almost tense mood with its wavelike melodic contour and chromatic inflections. This begins offering a predictable alignment to the tragic topical field that sets Dante’s gruesome opening rhetoric and offers few surprises.¹⁹

Beyond this surface representation, the Romantic listener would also expect a temporal unfolding of musical events that tracks the downfall of Ugolino as he recounts the deaths of his children and is denied the permanence of revenge. If we assume a tragic narrative archetype, ²⁰ one of the four musical organizational patterns theorized by Byron Almén, ²¹ the composition would present the defeat of a musical agent by the structural order that facilitates his downfall. While we place our sympathy with Ugolino and his grief and suffering, the temporal unfolding of the composition should confirm the character’s fate, which ends in great catastrophe. These expectations, as we will see below, are not met by Donizetti’s composition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Text Description</th>
<th>Musical Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A: Dante/Ugolino mini-crescens scene</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>mm. 1-7</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td>No text</td>
<td>Order 01: Establishment of tonal center and possible expectation of tonal return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>mm. 8-18</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td>Dante describes scene with Ugolino and Ruggieri</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>mm. 18-28</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td>Ugolino responds to Dante</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>mm. 29-41</td>
<td>D minor</td>
<td>Ugolino implores Dante for sympathy</td>
<td>Order 01: Ugolino’s melody to be transformed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B: Ugolino’s prologue</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>mm. 42-54</td>
<td>F major</td>
<td>Ugolino assumes Dante is from Florence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>mm. 54-67</td>
<td>F major to A major</td>
<td>introduces himself and Archbishop Ruggieri</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>mm. 67-80</td>
<td>A major to A-flat major</td>
<td>speaks of Ruggieri’s treachery</td>
<td>Marked modulation (unmarked is third-based modulation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>mm. 80-95</td>
<td>A-flat major to C minor</td>
<td>continue to transfer blame</td>
<td>Parallel octaves, call-and-response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C: Ugolino’s portentous dream</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>mm. 95-105</td>
<td>C minor</td>
<td>dream begins; Tower of Hunger introduced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>mm. 106-116</td>
<td>C major</td>
<td>dreadful dream to portend the future</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>mm. 117-126</td>
<td>A minor</td>
<td>introduce wolf/cubs which represent Ugolino/children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>mm. 126-136</td>
<td>A major to E major</td>
<td>hounds (Ruggieri) make chase</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>mm. 136-147</td>
<td>F major to F-sharp minor</td>
<td>wolf/cubs eaten by hounds</td>
<td>Highly marked section: Transgression 2 (deceptive cadence); Transgression 3 (fused cadence after VI chord)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹⁹ Here, the tragic topical field works by integrating the separate tragic elements, those topics that oppose the comic or non-tragic genre, into a unified expressive entity.

²⁰ This should not be confused with the tragic topical field. As explained by Almén, “... narrative tragedy is a strategy of signification in which temporality is implicit and full recognition requires the unfolding of the piece in its totality. By contrast, one can perceive the effects of a tragic topos within the first measure or two of a piece, as befits an essentially static signifying process.” A Theory of Musical Narrative, 130.

²¹ Archetypes are “narrative organizational patterns [that] are formed by the conflict between two or more hierarchically arranged elements within a [musical] system; this conflict results in a revaluation of the constituent elements.” Almén, “Narrative Archetypes,” 12.
Heinsen: Ironizing Ugolino

In order to examine the temporal and formal elements of Donizetti’s “Il Conte Ugolino” as a through-composed work, I divide the composition by the narrative’s textual partitions and further subdivide them into smaller units motivated by similarities in harmonic, motivic, melodic, and periodic properties. Figure 1 charts the formal organization according to the parameters mentioned above. The first column indicates a large-scale ABCBA structure, or arch form, where Dante’s descriptions and reactions to Ugolino (A) circumscribe the tragic character’s monologue (B) and the portentous dream interruption (C). The second and third columns form the subdivisions of the larger structures (termed

**Table 1: Paradigmatic Analysis of Donizetti’s “Il Conte Ugolino”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time (mm)</th>
<th>Formal Function</th>
<th>Textual Details</th>
<th>Formal Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14-163</td>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>Dante describes Ugolino’s doom</td>
<td>B: A returns to A minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>164-167</td>
<td>Episode 1</td>
<td>Ugolino’s despair</td>
<td>B: A returns to A minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>168-174</td>
<td>Episode 2</td>
<td>Ugolino’s monologue</td>
<td>A: B returns to A minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>175-200</td>
<td>Episode 3</td>
<td>Ugolino’s reaction</td>
<td>A: B returns to A minor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201-226</td>
<td>Episode 4</td>
<td>Ugolino’s dream interruption</td>
<td>C: A returns to A minor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Paradigmatic Analysis of Donizetti’s “Il Conte Ugolino.”

Units) and their measure numbers, respectively, which are generally delineated by authentic cadential arrivals or modulations. These reinforcements or changes in key are stated in the fourth column and are followed by short summations of Dante’s text in the fifth column. The final column is reserved for moments of importance within the musical narrative, which I will return to later in this paper. Lastly, select Units and Unit groups are bold outlined for their salience to my forthcoming arguments.

While the abundant periodic divisions and shifting tonalities recorded in Figure 1 might suggest further alignment to our expectation of tragedy, a contradictory musical event near the end of the work (Unit 26) denies the pathetic resolution that we assumed was inevitable. As I will argue below, by subverting the tragic topical field and narrative archetype, this musical moment operates as Klein’s master signifier of irony, which forces the perceiver to actively seek an explanation within the subsequent musical material.

Donizetti’s composition clearly begins in D minor, which accompanies both Dante’s mise-en-scene and Ugolino’s initial response, and cycles through a diverse assortment of keys (mostly organized in thirds) before the expected tonal return in m. 310 near the end of Ugolino’s speech. However, at the pivotal moment in the poem where Ugolino ends his tragic monologue and transitions to Dante’s response (Unit 26, m. 363), something bewildering occurs that directly contradicts both the previously established tragic topical field and the assumed tragic archetype (See Example 2). Where a tragic, Romantic reading might suggest a somber musical reaction to the brutality and misfortune of Ugolino’s narrative, Donizetti sets Dante’s response with an unexpected shift from the D minor tonal center of the work to the parallel major. This startling effect is compounded with a recapitulation of a minor-key melody, originally stated in Unit 4 (mm. 29 to 41), now transformed into D major—a melody that is not only marked for its unique status as the lone reoccurring phrase of the entire through-composed composition, but also the first periodic melody used by Ugolino earlier in the setting (See Example 3).

23 The term Unit is used by Agawu (in Music as Discourse) in its literal sense: one of the many meaningful subdivisions of the musical composition that are defined by musical similarities in key, texture, and melodic material. Most of the units that I delineate in this paper end with a strong cadence, either in the key the Unit begins or into a modulated tonal area.

Example 2. Reduction of Donizetti’s “Il Conte Ugolino,” mm. 363–407

The conjunction of these two musical events subverts our tonal, melodic, and narrative expectations; nothing that preceded Unit 24 seemed to suggest this upending of the topical field and narrative emplotment. It is as if Dante is mocking Ugolino and in turn disparaging the listeners for their lack of foresight. Our pre-existing idea of tragedy, therefore, is held up for scrutiny by this strange occurrence as the music denies a sympathetic reaction to Ugolino in the exact moment where one is expected.

Example 3. Comparison of melody from Unit 4 (mm. 29–35) on top line and melody from Unit 26 (mm. 363–369) on bottom line.
How should we read this strange occurrence? Michael Klein describes these curious moments as ironic, a contradiction of previously established musical conventions and narrative progress, which performs several perceptual functions. First, the ironic musical event acts as a distancing device that separates the listener from the music in order to view the culmination of the narrative action. Second, the ironic reading subverts the conventional, exposing the musical code of tragedy as a hollow expression. Third, it forms an ironic commentary on the ideology of the tragic topical field. By perceiving Ugolino within this frame, the contradictory musical event aspires to disprove what had come before it; to poke holes in the nineteenth-century tragic interpretation of Ugolino that was suggested by the topical field and predicted archetype. It, therefore, subsumes the role of a master signifier—in the ironic form of an abrupt mode change and melodic return—and opens up an ideological space that allows the listener to question the tragic conventions and pursue a clearer meaning from the musical structures surrounding this ironic musical event.

If this structural subversion yields a new interpretative strategy, then the purpose of the last three Units (26–28) are also called into question. To begin, several marked features further reinforce the significance of the master signifier and add further meaning to its ironic frame. While the majority of the composition uses clearly defined periodic phrases with frequent perfect authentic cadences, the final A section (Unit 26–28) features four different cadential oddities (see Example 2): a half cadence in m. 371, an elided incomplete authentic cadence in m. 378, a deceptive resolution to a flat-VI harmony in m. 389, and a final plagal motion in mm. 403–404. Although these features are not uncommon in the harmonic language of Donizetti, their relative absence earlier in the work and their condensed presentation here suggest a highly transgressive section of music.

Unit 26 forms a parallel period where the first half cadence in D major occurs in m. 371 and an imperfect authentic cadence in m. 378, yielding an unbalanced antecedent phrase (nine measures) and consequent phrase (seven measures). The marked consequent phrase hurriedly begins on an anxious anacrusis over the text “Ah Pisa.” The cadential function at the end of the consequent phrase

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25 Ibid, 98.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid, 99. Klein borrows the Lacanian terminology here. He defines the master signifier as “a sign that organizes our interpretation of a text . . . [which] restructures the narration of the past, making it readable in another, new way.”
is also compressed and urgently elided into the beginning of Unit 27. Both of these features create the impression of urgent necessity, but as it continues into the next Unit this urgency is transformed into anger. A left-hand piano tremolo and a grating series of seventh chords and diminished harmonies leads to a syncopated descending D harmonic minor scale in the melody. The melodic resolution to D3 in m. 389 occurs over a flat-VI deceptive resolution. With harsh accented whole notes, the melody hammers past this chromatic chord into a return to D minor and the final perfect authentic cadence in m. 389. This musical progression from mocking (our ironic event) through agitation to anger delineates Dante’s reaction to the monologue of Ugolino. When read with the text, starting from the half cadence in m. 371, a clearer meaning emerges:

Ahi Pisa, vituperio de le genti
del bel paese là dove ’l sì suona,
poi che i vicini a te punir son lenti,
muovasi la Capraia e la Gorgona,
e faccian siepe ad Arno in su la foce,
sì che’elli annieghi in te ogne persona! (Inf. 33.79–84)

This text clearly functions as an allocation of blame towards the people of Pisa, as Dante chastises the Italian city for its role in the deaths of Ugolino and his children. If we read this alongside the aforementioned musical transition of emotional states, Dante moves from mocking Ugolino and denying him a sympathetic reaction to a sense of dismay and anger toward Pisa. The anger, however, is not in reaction to Ugolino’s death, but rather for the unnecessary deaths of the children. As noted by Robert Hollander, “Dante’s apostrophe of Pisa, ‘new Thebes,’ blames the city not for killing Ugolino, which it had a reason to do (if not perhaps a correct one), but for killing the children. All of Dante’s sympathy is lodged with the children, none with Ugolino.28 The displacement of sympathy away from Ugolino and towards the children is further reinforced in the following text:

Che se ’l conte Ugolino aveva voce
d’aver tradita te de le castella,
non dovei tu i figliuoi porre a tal croce. (Inf. 33.85–87)

Donizetti, however, ends his Ugolino adaptation with line 84 of the poem (“sì che’elli annieghi in te ogne persona!”) and does not set line 85 through 87 to music. While I do not hope to speak

for Donizetti in regards to his compositional choices, ending the setting on “sì che’elli annieghi in te ogne persona!” instead of “non dovei tu i figliuoi porre a tal croce” seems to be an aesthetic choice—favoring the powerful condemnation of Pisa over the specific reasoning for that placement of blame. We can, however, read lines 85–87 as a literary coda over Unit 28, the final thirteen measures of the work. After two tonal reaffirmations of D minor, moving through a Neapolitan and fully diminished seventh harmony, two plagal motions are heard in mm. 403–404 that resolve to the final tonic chord. As mentioned earlier, these plagal motions are absent from the rest of the setting and are marked in relation to the ubiquitous authentic cadential progressions. While much of this coda seems perfunctory, the plagal harmonic motion signifies a feeling of reverence, or perhaps a eulogy for the deceased children. Dante’s anger toward Pisa is now reduced to a quiet resignation as he recalls the innocent victims of this terrible tragedy and solemnly memorializes their unintentional sacrifice.

To briefly review, a master signifier undercuts a nineteenth-century interpretation of Ugolino and forces a closer reading of the subsequent material, which clearly displaces a sympathetic response away from Ugolino and towards his children. How then should we view the character of Ugolino? Why is he unworthy of our sympathy? And by what analytical method can we read these possible meanings into the rest of the musical work? In the case of an ironic musical event challenging the logical emplotment of a narrative, Klein advises the use of a retrospective analysis to search for clues that point to this derailment of fulfilled expectation. To use Frank Samarotto’s terminology, the “retrospective causality” of a master signifier—a logic of continuation that explains the unexpected—facilitates the identification of features of initially minor importance that are now imbued with “retrospective incipience.” Adapted for our understanding of Ugolino, we can retrospectively search Donizetti’s setting for musical clues as to why the Dantine character does not deserve our sympathy.

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29 These chords, within the context of the coda, seem to function as a recapitulation of the tumultuous harmonies that are pervasive throughout Ugolino’s monologue. However, just like the previous D minor key that was subverted by D major in Unit 26, these chromatic chords are undercut by the subsequent plagal motion—upending the harmonic order that we have become accustomed to.


In order to employ this strategy, we need to move beyond the surface characteristics embedded in the semantic level of the music and pursue meaning within the deeper syntactic layer. Almén more thoroughly examines these layers of semiosis within his theory of musical narrative through the binary oppositions of unmarked structural Orders and marked Transgressions. By assessing the characteristics of musical events in both isolation and in context, we can understand how similar elements musically influence and define each other. The assignment of these musical structures to the opposing poles of this dichotomy, therefore, allows the analyst to more thoroughly describe the capabilities of the structures to communicate meaning or infer a narrative emplotment. As seen in Figure 2, a retrospective analysis of the musical Units preceding the master signifier reveals the following structural oppositions:

- **Clear perfect authentic cadences** versus **deceptive cadences**
- **“Tonic substitute”** (III and VI) chords used for predominant function before substantial PACs; cadences sound forced and incoherent.
- **Melodic and harmonic wandering**: labeled as an unmarked feature in this context due to ubiquity of volatile pitch content
- **Moments of stasis**: melodic repetitions of the same note through several measures; exaggerated use of pedal point

The master signifier has been included in this list of Order and Transgressions for posterity.

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32 Almén “A Theory of Musical Narrative,” 47–50. I only mention Almén’s work here as I appropriate his methodology in defining the relationships between structural Orders and Transgressions; the following analysis does not attempt to follow Almén’s description of an ironic archetype in its labeling of positive and negative valuations. However, just as the Transgression defeats the Order in an ironic archetype, each musical token of retrospective incipience that I discuss does defeat/undercut the previously established order, albeit temporarily. Also, please note that I have capitalized all subsequent uses of “Order” and “Transgression” to avoid confusion with the more standard meanings of these words.

33 The master signifier has been included in this list of Order and Transgressions for posterity.

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The Insincere Narrator

In determining the retrospective causality of our ironic master signifier, several highly marked Units emerge that contain two of the aforementioned structural Transgressions: marked cadences that divert a phrase’s tonal trajectory (Transgression #2) and tonic substitute chords that function as predominant harmonies in authentic cadences (Transgression #3). Both of these structural Transgressions suggest a failure of musical syntax, as the harmonic progression towards tonal closure is somehow undermined. When aligned with some of the most pathos-inspired language and grim narrative details of the entire setting, these Transgressions expose Ugolino as an insincere narrator incapable of attaining sympathy from the reader.

Unit 13 (mm. 136–147) occurs at the end of Ugolino’s portentous dream (Section C). Here, the Dantean character dreams of his eventual demise, as symbolic representations of Ugolino (wolf) and his children (wolf cubs) are brutalized by Ruggieri (hunter and his hounds). The text set within Unit 13 is as follows:

In picciol corso mi parieno stanchi
lo padre e ‘figli, e con l’agute scane
mi parea lor veder fender li fianchi. (Inf. 33.34–36)

This violent imagery is matched by an equally transgressive musical setting. The key of E major is emphatically stated at the end of Unit 12, but the harmonic center is quickly altered at the beginning of Unit 13 (see Example 4) through the use of bare open octaves in m. 136 and, in the following two measures, the repurposing of the bass E2 within a dominant seventh harmony in the key of A. The expectation of a resolution to an A chord is dashed, however, as the bass E2 slides upward to an F2, deceptively resolving to a vi chord and the new key of F major. This moment can be marked as the first cadential Transgression (#2). Up to this point in the composition there has been a frequent, almost trite, use of perfect authentic cadences to reinforce the tonal center or facilitate modulations. This deceptive cadence, in relation to the ubiquity of
authentic cadences featured before this, dashes the expectations of the listener as we are forcibly pushed into a new tonal area.

Example 4. Reduction of Donizetti’s “Il Conte Ugolino,” mm. 136–147.

After a brief lower neighbor motion to a dominant chord, the harmony once again becomes ambiguous starting in m. 142. The melody line and right hand of the piano outline the pitches of an F major triad while the bass voice descends down to a chromatic D-sharp2, forming a dissonant common-tone diminished seventh chord, and then back up to an F-sharp instead of the presumed resolution to an F. This descending third motion is repeated again in the bass with the newly stated F-sharp moving to a D in m. 145, the same descent as before just now a half step higher. The resolution of this third-based motion to the bass D2, which is now stated within a D major harmony, is followed by an authentic cadence in the key of F-sharp minor. The D major chord, therefore, is now obliged to function within the role of a predominant harmony, although it can be retroactively labeled as a VI chord and thus a tonic substitute function in the new key. As a result, the cadence in F-sharp minor sounds forced and unprepared by the musical events that preceded it. This sudden cadence that uses a tonic substitute chord as a functional predominant harmony can also be read as a marked Transgression (#3). Since earlier authentic cadences have always been preceded by a standard IV or ii predominant harmony, this musical event signifies a veering from the path of expected harmonic functionality.

Unit 24 (mm. 326–344) features Transgressions #2 and #3 within a similar literary and musical context to that of Unit 13. Occurring on the fifth day of his imprisonment, Ugolino has just described the death of his son Gaddo and then painfully watches

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It is important to note that the tonic substitute chord in place of a predominant harmony is not an uncommon occurrence in both the works of Donizetti and other Romantic-era composers. Here, this musical event becomes marked only due to the consistent use of normalized predominant functions throughout the setting.
the other three children succumb to starvation, thereby fulfilling the morbid predictions of the preceding dream. Often considered the narrative climax of the entire canto, the text set within Unit 24 is as follows:

Quivi morì; e come tu mi vedi,  
vid’ io cascar li tre ad uno ad uno  
tra ’l quinto di e ’l sesto; ond’ io mi diedi,  
già cieco, a brancolar sovra ciascuno,  

(Inf. 33.70–73)

Example 5. Reduction of Donizetti’s “Il Conte Ugolino,” mm. 330–344.

As evident in Example 5, Donizetti’s setting of these words begins after a cadential reaffirmation of the tonic key of D minor followed by the return of a short motive from Unit 3. In m. 330, a five-note melodic idea in the bass is sequenced upward where the last iteration, harmonized by a secondary diminished chord, suggests a resolution to the subdominant, but instead deceptively resolves to the Neapolitan area of E-flat major. A descending melodic motion in m. 335 reinforces the flat-II tonic with a perfect authentic cadence in the following two measures. This tonal stability, however, is short lived as an abrupt increase in harmonic motion leads to a tonicization of G minor (iv of D minor) with a strong half cadence arrival on m. 338; this is the subdominant resolution of the Neapolitan interruption from m. 333. Similar to the deceptive cadence in Unit 13, the half cadence in G minor is a marked Transgression (#2), not only in its avoidance of a tonic resolution, but for its sudden, unexpected appearance after the Neapolitan interruption.

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35 The first clause of this excerpted text is set in Unit 23, not Unit 24.
36 This motive is not included in the musical reduction of Unit 24.
Following the half cadence in G minor, increased eighth-note motion in the piano part leads to a descending-fifths sequence connecting the G minor tonic harmony with the sequence goal of B-flat major. This is immediately succeeded by a perfect authentic cadence in D minor in mm. 343–344, thus bringing about a tonal return of D minor through the two predominant areas of flat-II and iv. The problem, however, lies in the transition from the sequence goal of the B-flat major chord to the D minor cadence. The former harmony seems to act as a modulatory pivot between the preceding key of G minor and the return to D, and therefore can be labeled as either a III or VI chord, respectively. In either case, this chord suggests a tonic substitute function, although it is placed within a location where a predominant harmony should occur. This transgressive musical event (#3) is analogous to its Unit 13 counterpart. In both circumstances, a tonic substitute chord is forced to act in a predominant role, while the subsequent authentic cadence seems almost artificial and trite since it is not approached through its standard harmonic trajectory.

How can we read these structural Transgressions as tokens of retroactive incipience? In other words, what can these marked syntactical elements tell us about the character of Ugolino and our refusal to grant him sympathy? In both Unit 13 and 24, marked deceptive and half cadences hastily divert the tonal trajectory away from its harmonic foundation. As they progress toward a sense of closure, in the form of perfect authentic cadences, there is only a half-hearted attempt to fully attain this resolution; both harmonic progressions stall on a tonic substitute chord instead of continuing to the cadence through a predominant. When paired with two sets of poignant texts that should present Ugolino in his most persuasive and passionate state, the music falls short—whatever motivation compels Ugolino in his act of storytelling is rendered ineffective.

The failure of musical syntax to communicate this tragic story can be read in parallel to the failure of Ugolino to attain sympathy from the reader or listener. While these failures occur during the most gripping sections of Dante’s text (starting in Section C), it is not necessary to begin our interpretation of his faults that far into the monologue. In fact, many Dante scholars believe that we should withhold our sympathy and mistrust the words of Ugolino by closely reading his very first utterance:

Poi cominciò: ‘Tu vuoi’ ch’io rinovelli
disperato dolor che ‘l cor mi preme

37 Samarotto, “Determinism, Prediction, and Inevitability,” 76.
già pur pensando, pria ch’io ne favelli.’ (Inf. 33.4–6)

Even taken in isolation, Ugolino declares his pathetic state and seems to search for sympathy. These words, however, should not be interpreted by themselves, but rather read as an intertext with the Aeneas’s opening speech to Dido, from Virgil’s *Aeneid*—“infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem,” (“You command me, O queen, to renew my unspeakable grief,”), which was already paraphrased by the lustful sinner Francesca da Rimini earlier in Dante’s poem:

E quella a me: ‘Nessun maggior dolore  
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice  
Ne la miseria; e ciò sa ’l tuo dottore.’ (Inf. 5.121–123)

All three characters quoted here reference their tremendous grief when asked to recount their story, but it is Francesca’s words that are most significant in relation to Ugolino, as they extract the greatest sympathy from Dante. The keen reader, however, notes Dante’s regret in exhibiting this sympathy and does not get deceived by the similar rhetorical opening in Canto 33. Robert Hollander believes that Dante insinuates these intertexts in order to read Ugolino as a “self-exculpating narrative just as we have gradually learned to read Francesca’s similarly distorted and self-serving version of her history . . . we should distance ourselves from this last ‘sympathetic sinner’ in Hell.”

Through this awareness of Ugolino’s insincerity and our own emotional distance from his pleas, we can see Ugolino as a character that ignores his own sin and only narrates the crimes committed against him as to more effectively receive sympathy. Giuseppe Mazzotta describes this act as a *fictionalization of self*: “They deceive themselves into thinking that the reality they

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39 Francesca da Rimini is located in the second circle of Hell, punished for her sin of lust. She is murdered by her husband after she is caught kissing Paolo, her husband’s brother, during a moment of passion while reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. This is another highly sympathetic character, but in this case Dante does succumb to his own pity and faints at the end of the canto.
40 The use of “tuo dottore” translates to “your teacher,” a reference to Virgil that further reinforces this intertext to the *Aeneid*.
41 Dante faints after Francesca finishes her tale.
construct will be everybody’s accepted reality.”

If the reader believes this “fictionalized” account of suffering, Ugolino’s tragic tale is remarkably effective. Conversely, if we read between the lines and detect the intertextual relationship to Canto 5, Ugolino’s monologue becomes deceitful; he crafts a story that uses some of the most powerful language in the *Inferno* for a singular, selfish reason—to enable a sympathetic reaction.

Within Units 13 and 24 of Donizetti’s adaptation, we can read the musical Transgressions that underlie the textual climaxes as a signification of Ugolino’s insincere nature. Just as the musical syntax fails to convincingly achieve cadential closure, Ugolino also fails to represent himself truthfully and thereby falls short in garnering our sympathy. This musical token of *retroactive incipience* supports the presence of the ironic master signifier and justifies our initial displacement of sympathy away from Ugolino and toward the children. Nevertheless, our understanding of the nature of Ugolino’s sin cannot be addressed through these particular structural Transgressions. For this reason, we must move onto the more pervasive marked feature that alludes to the religious and moral failings of this Dantean character—that of structural stasis.

**The Failings of a Father**

The second musical token of *retroactive incipience* lies in transgressive occurrences of structural stasis that contrasts against the highly volatile use of pitch throughout the setting. As claimed earlier in this article, Donizetti adheres to the expectations of a tragic topical field throughout the majority of his adaptation. This is exemplified in his use of erratic melodies with frequent large intervallic leaps, chromatically jarring harmonies, and a constantly shifting sense of tonality. All three of these structural elements suggest intense emotional change, paralleling the grief-stricken and unstable psyche of Ugolino. There are musical moments, however, where this dynamic topical field is subverted in favor of one that is far more static. These moments of stasis (Transgression #4), which manifest themselves through single-note melodic repetitions and bass pedal points, are densely packed in between Unit 17 and Unit 23, corresponding with the onset of the children’s suffering and ending with their inevitable deaths. From the surface, these structural features all seem to reference a single line of text: in response

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44 These features can be easily found in any of the musical examples discussed in this paper so far, with the latter also noticeable in the key column of Figure 1.
to his children’s cries of hunger and pleas for help, Ugolino states, “Io non piangèa, si dentro impetrai” (“I was so turned to stone inside I did not weep”). The stoic reserve exhibited by Ugolino can easily be translated into music through the simple text painting of the word “stone.” But, as we will see below, the relative frequency of these static occurrences and their interaction with the location of the titular text suggest an interpretation that goes beyond this literal text setting.

The first moment of stasis occurs eight measures before the aforementioned “turn to stone” and foreshadows the imminent emotional stagnation. Unit 17 (mm. 194–206; Example 6) begins with an aggressive, accented bass motive in C minor that is harshly repeated two measures later outlining a secondary diminished chord of the subdominant harmony. While the bass does resolve to the IV chord as expected, the vocal line descends to an A-flat3 in m. 200 and then obstinately repeats for a full four measures (the A-flat is enharmonically respelled as a G-sharp in m. 203). The stationary A-flats are clearly marked from a melodic perspective, but they are counteracted with volatile harmonic motion. The bass descends in a whole-tone scale—F, E-flat, C-sharp, B-natural—while the harmonization of this seemingly atonal moment ascends up by thirds—F minor, A-flat major seventh, C-sharp minor, E major. While the progression is indeed functional, as it facilitates a modulation to A major in m. 204, the surface affect is that of emotional reconciliation—the stoic outer voice at war with the tumultuous inner voice.


46 We can also read the whole-tone scale as a form of stasis since it subverts prototypical harmonic trajectory toward tonic through its avoidance of half-step resolutions.
A similar musical event occurs in Unit 19, beginning in m. 237 (see Example 7). The stoic melody is frozen on A₃, but has now permeated the accompaniment with octave tremolos between A₄ and A₅. Instead of the volatile harmony from Unit 17, there is utter harmonic ambiguity as the chromatically ascending bass is the only voice that moves. The thin texture and lack of harmonic motion here creates the impression of emptiness—now the tumult has succumbed to the stoic.

The musical depiction of “stone” also manifests itself as bass pedal points, functioning both as tonic and dominant prolongations. As seen in Example 8, Unit 18 (mm. 206–232) begins in A major with an A₂ in the bass serving as a tonic prolongational pedal point over the titular text “Io non piangëa, sì dentro impetrai.” Meanwhile, the melodic line seems oblivious to the meaning of this stoic text, as the vocalist quickly leaps up a fourth and down an octave in m. 209, encompassing the wide range of an eleventh by the end of the phrase. The bass note A₂ achieves temporary reprieve in m. 211 as it ascends to a C♯₃, but it once again becomes frozen, only this time functioning as a dominant pedal in the relative minor key of F-sharp. This pedal point is unrelenting; besides the upper neighbor motions in mm. 216–218, the C♯ is fixed as a bass pedal through m. 227 even as the underlying chords move away from its prolongation of the dominant harmony. The melodic line continues its previous agitated character, most notably with its rapid, forceful descents starting in the high bass voice tessitura: C♯₄ in m. 213 and D₄ in mm. 220 and 224. While this Transgression is present throughout the entirety of Unit 18, it seems that the active melody and underlying harmonic shifts within

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47 It is also important to note that the final dominant C-sharp in m. 227 is followed by a forced cadence in A major. The C-sharp, therefore, can be repelled as a III chord in the new key – once again yielding a tonic substitute harmony in place of a traditional predominant (Transgression #3).
the bass prolongations seek to obscure the incessant repeating bass pedal—attempting to deny the importance of the stoic reaction within the musical narrative.


Moving past the three examples from Unit 17, 18, and 19, the static musical Transgression tenaciously persists. Unit 20 features tonic and dominant prolongations in F minor with bass pedal points. Unit 21 contains an eight-measure bass tremolo on C2 over a modulatory chord progression. The Transgression’s final appearance is similar in Unit 22 and 23. In the former, a pounding eighth-note bass pedal on A2 and A3, scale degree three of F minor, is respelled as a dominant prolongation in the dramatic return back to the home key of D minor. The latter features the same bass pedal
as a temporary tonicization of A minor, but quickly returns back to D minor.

While the text “turn to stone” is relegated to only a single utterance in Unit 18, the musical structure that underlies Units 17 through 23 obstinately refuses to move past this signification of stoic reserve. The sheer abundance of single-note melodic repetitions and bass pedal points forces the listener to recall Ugolino’s detached response to his children’s pleas until the death of the first child in m. 325.48 The significance of this musical Transgression, therefore, surpasses its use as a clichéd appearance of text painting and demands an interpretation that explains its widespread presence and unpacks the textual meaning. What do the children actually ask of Ugolino? How can we then read his response, or lack thereof?

Returning to Dante’s poem, Ugolino’s stony silence is in response to two preceding events: the nailing shut of the doors to the “Tower of Hunger” (lines 46–48) and the children’s request for bread. The latter is stated in the following text:

Quando fui desto innanzi la dimane
pianger senti’ fra ‘l sonno i miei figliuoli
ch’eran con meco, e dimandar del pane. (Inf. 33.37–39)

The close proximity of children asking for “bread” and Ugolino’s turn to “stone” connects this Dantean tale to a key passage in Luke’s Gospel, 11:5–13, Christ’s parable of the importunate friend. In this story, a friend requests bread from a baker in order to feed his houseguest. The baker is in bed and his children are already asleep, so he refuses to comply with his friend’s request. Jesus Christ comments on the parable, that if the friend perseveres in his importuning, he will eventually receive his bread: “If a son shall ask for bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone?” (Luke 11:11). Beyond the shared vocabulary, the similarities between the parable and Canto 33 are striking. Dante saw in Luke 11 a source of inspiration and reversed the narrative to fit Ugolino’s story: the children are now the importuners, seeking bread from their father; the friend that knocks at the door are Ruggieri’s unseen agents that nail the door shut; and Ugolino, as the recipient of the children’s importuning, remains as stone-hearted as the baker.49 Whereas the

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48 Ugolino’s musical reaction to the death of his children was discussed earlier in this article.

49 Hollander, “Ugolino’s Importunity,” 553.
baker eventually complies with the friend’s request, Ugolino gives his children only stony silence.\(^{50}\)

While Ugolino is powerless to give his children the physical nourishment they wanted, we should not assume that they were asking for “bread” in the literal sense. The similarities to Christ’s parable suggest that it was a spiritual bread that the children craved. As stated by Robert Hollander:

Ugolino fails to acknowledge the only antidote to his and his children’s spiritual malaise held out to him by Scripture. He could have, for instance, told the children that he was grieved to have been the unwilling cause of their torment (he rather pointedly does not do so). He also could have urged them to believe that their suffering would be only momentary, that they should hope for a better end, one that might be achieved if only they would pray.\(^{51}\)

Ugolino’s inability to understand the true meaning of his children’s words and provide them the spiritual bread that they so desired is indicative of his own paternal failings. His “turn to stone” should not be viewed as a stoic reserve or a tragic dignity, but rather the failings of a father to provide physical and spiritual comfort to his children in the last moments of their lives. In regards to Donizetti’s setting, we can read the pervasive musical Transgressions of stasis as Ugolino’s continued refusals to provide his children the spiritual bread they asked for and certainly deserved. Despite their apparent suffering, the children are met with nothing but the static disregard of fixed pitch melodies and bass pedal points. It is no wonder that these structural Transgressions disappear once the children succumb to starvation, as only then could Ugolino escape the obligations of paternal responsibility.

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In our search for the retrospective causality of the ironic master signifier, two musical tokens of retrospective incipience have emerged: a fusion of marked cadences and tonic substitute chords that function as predominant harmonies suggest Ugolino’s insincere, deceitful nature; and the pervasive use of musical stasis elucidates Ugolino’s paternal failings. While these tokens clearly delineate the moral and religious reasons why Ugolino does not deserve our sympathy, they also direct our attention to a larger idea about

\(^{50}\) Yet, ironically, it is Ugolino who importunes Dante for sympathy throughout his tragic monologue.

\(^{51}\) Hollander, “Ugolino’s Importunity,” 554.
our understanding of the Dantean character. The actions of Ugolino, whether in his political treason, fictionalization of self, or neglect of his children, converge upon the true nature of his sin—that of a proud will. While he is being punished in the second ring of the ninth circle of Hell (Antenora), a location reserved for the treacherous, Ugolino is not just guilty of switching sides in a politically divided Pisa. His pride facilitates his own self-serving political maneuvers, fuels his unrelenting desire to feed on sympathy, and hardens his emotional response in the time of his children’s greatest need. In this way, Donizetti’s adaptation presents the character as a prideful archetype, one that represents the entire ninth circle of Hell, not just the second ring of the final circle or Canto 33. This narrative “zooming-out” places Ugolino back into the moral geography of the Inferno, divorcing itself from the self-contained tragic reading that was common in the nineteenth century.

The ironic reading of Donizetti’s “Il Conte Ugolino” that is presented here is not just about unpacking structural contradictions or tracing the failure of a musical agent, but rather how the subversion of a cultural ideology can open a rich interpretative space primed for further analysis. By merging the analytical ideas of Klein, Almén, and Samarotto with Dantean literary criticism we can move toward a better understanding of a musical adaptation that can transform a superficial reading into one of hermeneutic clarity.