DANTE, LISZT, AND THE ALIENATED AGONY OF HELL

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Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* portrays Hell as an alienated realm, in which the doomed spirits must spend eternity in isolation and regret. The Hungarian composer Franz Liszt (1811–1886) responded to this work with his *Dante Symphony* (1857) based on the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, in which he gave musical form to Dante’s textual expressions of agony. Throughout this two-movement work, Liszt offers a musical translation of the theological and emotional world portrayed in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. This article examines Liszt’s evocations of silence, memory, regret, and redemption in the *Dante Symphony*. These evocations are enhanced by Liszt’s use of quotations from Dante’s *Inferno*, which are printed in the score but never heard in performance. The unsung lines of text portray the silence and isolation in Hell, in contrast to the redemptive singing enacted in the *Purgatorio* movement.

Keywords: Dante, Liszt, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Dante Symphony*, *Divina Commedia*

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Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* portrays Hell as an alienated realm, in which the doomed spirits must spend eternity in isolation and regret. The Hungarian composer Franz Liszt (1811–1886) responded to this work with a *Dante Symphony* (1857) based on the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, in which he gave musical form to Dante’s textual expressions of agony. Throughout this two-movement symphony, Liszt offers a musical translation of the theological and emotional world portrayed in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. In this article, I examine Liszt’s evocations of silence, memory, regret, and redemption in the musical journey enacted in the *Dante Symphony*. My goal is to shed new light on Liszt’s aesthetics as well as Dante’s significance in nineteenth-century European musical culture.

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THE GATE OF HOPELESSNESS

The first movement of Liszt’s *Dante Symphony, Inferno*, opens with unheard words. The words are from the beginning of Canto 3 of Dante’s *Inferno*: “Per me si va nella città dolente / Per me si va nell’eterno dolore / Per me si va tra la perduta gente. / […] Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’intrate!” Liszt’s inclusion of these words, which are written in the score but not heard in performance (see Example 1), raises questions about the purpose of this unsung text. The majority of musical works, including those by Liszt himself, are either untested or have a text which is intended to be sung. This text, in contrast to usual practice, is visible but not audible. It is a “secret” message intended only for those who are looking at the score. I would argue that this inaudible message conjures up a sense of the isolation that prevails in Hell. The unsung words suggest that the human voice, with its powers of communication and social connection, is absent from this bleak domain. (In fact, as we will see later, Liszt does not introduce the voices of singers until the end of the second movement, *Purgatorio.*)

This opening melody, with its silent and foreboding text, is played in unison by several instruments, lending this unharmonized melodic statement a declamatory character (see Example 1 again). The lack of harmonic grounding creates a stark, barren sound, suggesting the bleakness of the domain that Dante and Virgil are about to enter. To underscore the sense of dread and foreboding, the percussion instruments enter in the third measure with an ominous thud, punctuating the final syllable of *dolente.* The entire opening melody, in measures 1–10, is bereft of harmonic support. There is, however, an implied harmonic structure: a diminished-seventh chord, outlined by the contour of the melody. This type of chord is highly unstable and dissonant, especially when used at the very opening of a work. Most musical works begin with a stable, consonant chord, in order to establish a solid grounding at the outset. Departing from this standard practice, this movement expresses a tormented affect from the beginning. This sense of rootlessness mirrors the feelings that Dante and Virgil are experiencing as they step into the abyss of Hell.

\[^2\textit{Inf.} 3.1–3, 9.\]

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Three more times in this movement, the words “Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate!” reappear (see Example 2 for an example of its return in measures 260–270; the remaining two instances will be discussed later). The return to this line of text is unexpected: these words appear only once in Dante’s *Inferno*, at the beginning of Canto 3 as Dante and Virgil enter the gate to Hell. Liszt’s decision to return to the gate is an unusual move that departs from the source text, suggesting a cyclical structure that is not present in Dante. This cyclic return underscores the bleak stasis of Hell:
Eternally caught in a monotonous spiral, no one ever progresses toward any new state of being.

Example 2. Liszt, *Dante Symphony*, Inferno, measures 260–268

**MORE UNHEARD WORDS: FRANCESCA’S VOICELESS LAMENT**

With Liszt’s approval, the music critic Richard Pohl wrote an essay outlining the correspondences between particular sections of the
Dante Symphony and specific passages in the Commedia. The essay was distributed along with the concert program at many performances of this symphony; it was also included as the preface to the Breitkopf and Härtel score of the work. It offers an invaluable hermeneutic guide to the poetic meanings and subtexts in the Dante Symphony.

According to Pohl’s description, the middle section of the “Inferno” movement portrays Francesca da Rimini, one of the most developed characters in Dante’s Inferno. Francesca’s salacious story captivated the attention of numerous Romantic composers, including Gaetano Donizetti and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. She is a transgressive figure who engaged in an extramarital affair with her brother-in-law, Paolo. She and Paolo met a tragic end: Her husband caught her in flagrante delicto. Overcome by a fit of vengeance, he immediately killed them both. In Canto 5, Dante poignantly describes how Francesca and Paolo have been condemned to eternal torment, with their bodies tossing about in an eternal storm and their backs fused together. They are conjoined and yet isolated: they have been rendered incapable of face-to-face contact.

Liszt first introduces Francesca in measure 286 through a solo passage for bass clarinet, identified in Pohl’s essay as Francesca’s theme (see Example 3). This unaccompanied recitative, preceded by several beats of silence, conveys her loneliness and isolation. The shape of the melody reflects the agony of Francesca’s solitary contemplation. The melody rises to a high note as she remembers the happiness that she experienced on earth, followed by a descent to a low pitch as she contemplates her current suffering. Certain interval patterns in the melody, such as augmented seconds, produce a dissonant effect. The same bass clarinet melody returns a few moments later (measure 301). The identical repetition of this melody indicates the obsessive nature of Francesca’s thoughts: she is eternally doomed to relive the same memories—and to re-experience the same feelings of remorse.

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3 This essay is cited several times throughout my article in support of my programmatic interpretation of the symphony. See Richard Pohl, “Einleitung zu Liszt’s Dante-Symphonie,” in Eine Symphonie zu Dante’s Divina Commedia by Franz Liszt, 1–8 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1857). The essay and score are available online at the following link: http://ks.imslp.net/files/imglnks/usimg/6/69/IMSLP414792-PMLP22465-FLisz_Dante_Symphony_S.109_firstedition.pdf.

4 This was not the first time that Pohl had served as an expositor of Liszt’s program music. For Liszt’s 1850 Prometheus symphony, Pohl wrote introductory paragraphs for each chorus, based on material from Johann Gottfried Herder’s Der entfesselte Prometheus.

4 Franz Liszt, Eine Symphonie zu Dante’s Divina Commedia (1857).
Example 3. Liszt, *Dante Symphony*, Inferno, measures 284–286
Beginning in measure 311, the melody occurs for the third time (Example 4). This iteration is, however, different in some significant ways. No longer solo, the melody is now accompanied by the harp, which perhaps represents Francesca’s yearning for Heaven throughout her eternal confinement in Hell. Further intensifying the sense of memory and fantasy, Francesca’s melody is now played by the English horn. In his influential orchestration treatise (1844), the composer Hector Berlioz wrote that the English horn “has a retiring remote quality that makes it superior to every other
instrument when it comes to arousing images and feelings of the past, or when the composer wants to pluck the secret string of memory.”

This version of Francesca’s melody contains a striking feature: a line of text is written above the notes. The text is a quotation from Francesca’s line in Canto 5 of Dante’s *Inferno*: “Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice / ne la miseria.” Like the unsung words at the beginning of the movement, these words are visible in the score but absent in the performance. The words function as a “secret” message intended only for someone who looks at the musical score. I would argue that the unheard words imply that Francesca is attempting—and failing—to speak about her pain. Or perhaps she is trying to *sing* and finds herself without a voice. The florid lyricism suggests an operatic style of singing, a *bel canto* style associated with Italian opera. It is as though a singer’s voice is lurking mutely behind this instrumental line.

Francesca’s voice is doomed to remain forever mute. She cannot communicate her thoughts in any audible form; neither song nor speech is available to her. The unsung words thus paint a vivid picture of Hell as an isolated, alienated realm. Francesca (and by extension, all the other damned souls) must suffer not only the agony of the specific punishments, but also the existential pain of being estranged from human contact.

Recall that these inaudible words had been absent from the first two statements of Francesca’s melody, appearing only in the third statement. The initial absence of the words conveys the extent of Francesca’s profound alienation. For the previous two statements of her melodic motive, she seems to have been alienated from her own thoughts, unable to summon forth any words, even silent ones. This third statement, in which the words finally appear, thus indicates a progression of sorts. She has made some (limited) progress in her ability to communicate—at least now she has managed to put her tormented thoughts into words, albeit silent ones. Yet this is a bleak progression in which Francesca ultimately fails to reach her goal: the unsung words never break through the barrier of silence.

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6 *Inf.* 5.121–123.
In measure 324, Francesca’s melody returns yet again, for what is now the fourth statement. The obsessive repetition of this melody reflects her own obsessive thought: the pain of remembering joyful times while suffering torment. In this fourth statement of her melody, the unsung words have disappeared. It is as though even the mere suggestion of her voice has been now been obliterated by the torments of Hell. This fourth statement thus represents an even starker plunge into isolation. At this moment, Francesca finds herself incapable of producing even unsung words, let alone an audible expression of her pain. Such is the degree of her solitude and isolation, like a brain-damaged patient who is locked in.

IMAGES OF ISOLATION IN LISZT’S SOURCE TEXT, DANTE’S *INFERNO*

Liszt’s emphasis on isolation and silence, which finds its most poignant expression in Francesca’s unheard words, is rooted in Dante’s own conception of Hell as an uncommunicative domain. Of course, Dante and Liszt, working in different mediums, conjured up images of isolation in different ways. Dante’s *Inferno*, unlike Liszt’s much later musical response to the work, does not include any unheard words. This particular device would be difficult, if not impossible, to employ in a literary work. This genre does not lend itself to linguistic suppression. Indeed, Dante chose not to render the sinners utterly silent. For the sake of literary interest, the spirits in Hell must speak to Dante and Virgil. Otherwise, the reader would be unable to gain insight into the thoughts of the damned. Liszt, using music as his primary medium, was able to represent wordless suffering to a much greater extent than Dante. There are, however, some allusions to silence in Dante’s text as well, which probably provided the stimulus for Liszt’s musical exploration of wordless sound. For example, Dante describes how Hell is filled with inarticulate, incoherent sounds:

Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
parole di dolore, accenti d’ira,
voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle
facevano un tumulto, il qual s’aggira
sempre in quell’aura senza tempo tinta,
come la rena quando turbo spira.”

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This passage suggests that Hell is largely devoid of coherent verbal communication. The syntactic functions of language have been replaced by meaningless noise.

Similarly, a passage in _Inferno_ 4 describes a wordless soundscape: “Quivi, secondo che per ascoltare, / non avea pianto mai che di sospiri / che l’aura eterna facevan tremare . . .”8 In this circle of Hell, even the groans heard in _Inferno_ 3 are absent; the sounds have grown softer, dwindling to nothing but a series of trembling cries.

A particularly terrifying example of infernal silence is to be found at the beginning of _Inferno_ 5, in which the devil Minos does not speak when he assigns each sinner to their place in Hell; he simply uses his tail to indicate the place: “cignesi con la coda tante volte / quantunque gradi vuol che giù sia messa.”9 This depiction of wordless communication sets the stage for the forthcoming scene with Francesca and Paolo, which occurs later in the same _canto_. In this scene, Dante implies that she and her lover are usually unable to be heard over the loud wind. The wind has to stop before she can tell her story: “Di quel che udire e che parlar vi piace, / noi udiremo e parleremo a voi, / mentre che 'l vento, come fa, ci tace.”10 Here, Dante hints at Francesca’s continual difficulty in making herself heard, while nonetheless temporarily circumventing those difficulties so that his narrative can proceed unhampered by distracting noises.

These types of passages provided the stimulus for Liszt’s depiction of wordlessness and inarticulateness. Dante’s _Inferno_, with its numerous references to wordless sound, lends itself to musical representation. By including unsung words in his symphonic retelling of the _Inferno_, Liszt is emphasizing—and amplifying—Dante’s quasi-musical moments in which communication breaks down, in which the sinners find themselves incapable of coherent language. This non-linguistic nature of Hell finds more direct expression in Liszt’s symphony than in Dante’s text: Liszt explicitly depicts Francesca’s inability to speak, whereas Dante only hints at her difficulties with communication. Liszt’s overt realization of Dante’s implications reflects his aesthetic of program music. As Nicole Grimes has

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8 _Inf._ 4.25–27.
9 _Inf._ 5.11–12.
10 _Inf._ 5.94–96.
observed, Liszt believed that program music should call attention to meanings that could not be fully realized in the verbal text.  

The German music critic Eduard Hanslick castigated Liszt for including unsung quotations from Dante’s text. He contended that it was preposterous for a musical score to include words that would remain unheard. Melodies accompanied by a text would, for Hanslick, “have meaning in sung music, but not in instrumental music.” It strikes me, however, that Hanslick failed to grasp the programmatic import of the unheard texts in the *Dante Symphony*. These lines of text derive their meaning from the very feature that Hanslick criticized: their silence.

**Music in the Past Tense: Francesca’s Memories**

According to Pohl’s prefatory essay, measures 354–393, marked “andante amoroso,” represent Francesca’s memories of her love affair with Paolo. This section, with a sensual character that suggests an (unsung) operatic love duet, constitutes a large-scale expansion of a mere two lines in Dante’s *Inferno*—the unsung lines that had already appeared above Francesca’s melody in the previous section: “Nessun maggior dolore / che ricordarsi del tempo felice ne la miseria.” This lavish re-enactment of Francesca’s memories forms a significant departure from the source text. Dante presents only Francesca’s words, not the specific content of her memories. Liszt, on the other hand, does not present Francesca’s words in audible form, focusing instead on the specific memories that run obsessively through her mind.

Thus, this entire section should be heard in the past tense, as a quasi-Proustian remembrance of things past. This raises the question of how music, an art form that unfolds temporally with a sense of immediacy, can depict events that have taken place in the past. Scholars have often debated whether music is capable of possessing a past tense. As Carolyn Abbate puts it, does music have “a way of speaking that enables us to hear it constituting or projecting events as past?”

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13 *Inf.* 5.121–123.
Example 5. Liszt, *Dante Symphony*, Inferno, measures 354-359

Benedict Taylor observes that Abbate’s “answer seems to be generally ‘no’ (although some exceptional instances when music works in conjunction with literary narrative or dramatic staging may hold out potential glimpses of this chimerical musical past tense).”\(^{15}\) Liszt’s portrayal of Francesca’s memories offers one such

potential glimpse, for it does indeed operate in conjunction with Dante’s narrative. How does Liszt manage to craft this section in such a way as to signify memory? I would argue that the very incongruity of the ensuing music—a voluptuous oasis in an otherwise bleak movement—frames the “andante amoroso” section as a mirage (see Example 5).

Not only the music, but also the textual indications, help to create a sense of pastness. The performance indication “amoroso” signals that this section must represent some other time and place. After all, there is nothing in Hell itself that would call forth an amorous mood. The odd time signature (7/4) of this section also contributes to the sense of memory, creating a rhythmic structure which sounds unstable and unreal. Moreover, the harp figures prominently throughout this section, casting this music as a chimera: the harp, a signifier of angelic music, has no place in Hell except as a dream of unattainable bliss.

Yet not everything in this section is angelic and heavenly: This is, after all, a memory of fleshly pleasures, not of religious transcendence. Indeed, according to Pohl’s introductory essay, this section indicates that “[w]o keine himmlische, da weilt noch die irdische Liebe.” In order to convey the erotic intensity of Francesca’s memories, Liszt relies heavily on rising sequential repetition—the restatement of a musical idea at a higher pitch level. In the mid-nineteenth century, this sequential technique was frequently used as a symbol for erotic tension; one of its most famous occurrences is in Tristan und Isolde, an opera completed in 1859 by Richard Wagner, the dedicatee of the Dante Symphony. Like Wagner, Liszt employs this technique as a way of building toward a musical climax. The melodic unit in measures 354–355 is immediately repeated a third higher in measures 356–357, followed by another repetition a third higher in measure 358 (see example 5 again). In measure 359, Liszt employs fragmentation in order to increase the excitement: here, the music repeats only the last half of the melodic fragment. The overall effect, created by means of a rising-third sequence and breathless fragmentation, establishes an

16 Where there is nothing heavenly, there still remains earthly love.” Pohl, “Einleitung,” 4.
17 The ways in which Wagner and Liszt influenced each other will be explored later in this article.
erotic mood, which contrasts sharply with the rest of the movement.

The sensual interlude is interrupted in measure 388 with a reminder of Francesca’s current (and eternal) reality: the words “Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate!” appear once again, for what is now the third iteration of this line of text. This time, it is set to an ominous rhythm intoned by the horns. Pohl observes that this is the “rhythmische Hauptmotiv des ganzen Satzes.”

Francesca, however, seems temporarily deaf to these tragic words and rhythms. Lost in memory, she ignores the command to abandon hope. She continues to cling to her dreams of an erotic heaven, as indicated by the extended harp solo (measure 393) that follows this unsung exhortation to abandon hope.

The harp underscores Francesca’s longings for Heaven and for erotic bliss; no other instrument could conjure up Heaven as powerfully. Indeed, the harp was an essential component of Liszt’s conception of this passage; he specified in the score that a piano must not be substituted for the harp: “In the absence of a harp this arpeggio is not to be played on the pianoforte, but one is to proceed, after a long pause, immediately to Tempo I Allegro.”

In the section immediately following the harp solo, the memories cease and the music returns to infernal reality. This section, which begins at measure 395, contains an indication in the score: “This entire passage is intended to be a blasphemous mocking laughter, very sharply accentuated in the two clarinets and in the violas.”

It is as though many devils are jeering at Francesca’s nostalgia. The music features numerous trills and staccatos in lower registers, creating a diabolical, cackling effect. The repetitive nature of this section—the same motives return again and again with almost no variation—depicts the monotony of Hell. There is nothing to strive for, no goals to reach. Hell, in Liszt’s conception, is characterized by infernal sameness.

Indeed, the Inferno movement ends where it began: with a statement of the (still unheard) words “Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate” (measures 637–641) set to the same musical motif that had opened the entire work. The cyclical return to the opening material underscores the stasis of Hell. Liszt’s Inferno movement envisions Hell as a timeless realm, transcendent in a bleak, negative

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18 “This is the main rhythmic motive of the entire phrase.” Pohl, “Einleitung,” 3.
19 Liszt, Symphonie, 86.
20 Liszt, Symphonie, 89.
The foreboding words on the gate to Hell thus operate as a framing device for the *Inferno* movement, serving both as introduction and conclusion.

**Redemptive Singing in Purgatory**

In contrast to the cyclical structure of the *Inferno* movement, which begins and ends with the same grim proclamation, the *Purgatorio* movement is oriented toward a goal: redemption. This movement outlines a gradual progression, which leads to its ultimate goal, moving through hope and purification toward a final heavenly ascent. In measure 314, which is toward the end of this movement, the quest for salvation culminates in a beatific hymn, *Magnificat*, performed by a choir of sopranos and altos. The entrance of the singers for the *Magnificat* creates a magical effect, made all the more thrilling because Liszt had withheld the human voice for such a long time. Indeed, this constitutes the first and only vocal section in the entire symphony. By saving the human voice for the final section of the *Purgatorio* movement, Liszt suggests that the spirits in Purgatory have attained the capacity for verbal communication. The redemptive singing in Purgatory stands in contrast to the wordless agony that prevailed in Hell. Taken as a whole, the *Dante Symphony* thus enacts a trajectory that moves from silence to song.

In his book on program music, Jonathan Kregor perceptively links this closing *Magnificat* to the theological underpinnings of Dante’s *Purgatorio*: “This text’s appearance at the end of the second movement is the ultimate expression of a type of humility necessary for entrance into Heaven that begins with the Annunciation, mentioned by Dante in the First Terrace of Purgatory (Canto 10).” To conjure up a sense of penitence and supplication, Liszt sets the *Magnificat* to a peaceful, flowing melody, in contrast to the jagged dissonances heard in the *Inferno* movement. Throughout the *Magnificat*, many of the harmonic progressions involve motion between the subdominant chord and the tonic chord, a type of progression associated with the final “Amen” cadence in many Catholic hymns.

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This *Magnificat*, with its blissful incantations and radiant harmonies, seems more heavenly than purgatorial. To some extent, this gradual ascent toward divine redemption follows the progression in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, which culminates in the arrival at the Earthly Paradise. Yet Liszt seems to go even further than Dante in portraying the ascent to Paradise. Whereas Dante depicted Earthly Paradise at the conclusion of *Purgatorio*, Liszt seems to approach the unearthly strains of *divine* Paradise (see Example 6).


Liszt had originally intended to write a third movement, *Paradiso*, corresponding to the third book of Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. He ultimately decided against the overt musical depiction of
Paradise, perhaps in part because of the advice that he received from Richard Wagner, to whom the *Dante Symphony* is dedicated. In an 1855 letter to Liszt, Wagner expressed reservations about the possibility of representing Paradise: “That Hell and Purgatory will succeed I do not call into question for a moment, but as to Paradise I have some doubts . . . About this Paradise, dearest Franz, there is in reality a considerable difficulty, and he who confirms this opinion is, curiously enough, Dante himself, the singer of Paradise, which in his *Commedia* is decidedly the weakest part.”23 In Wagner’s opinion, the metaphysical glory of Paradise transcends anything that a living human could possibly imagine.

Following Wagner’s advice, Liszt limited his *Dante Symphony* to two movements: *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. However, the aforementioned *Magnificat* at the end of *Purgatorio* seems to offer a veiled representation of Paradise. It is as though Liszt used the closing strains of *Purgatorio* as a substitute for the *Paradiso* movement that he had initially planned to compose. Following the letter of Wagner’s advice, but arguably not its spirit, Liszt seems to have included his intended musical depiction of Paradise after all, smuggled in under the guise of *Purgatorio*.

Alexander Rehding has pointed out the “almost inevitable final apotheosis” in many of Liszt’s symphonic poems, referring to Liszt’s penchant for grand, monumenta conclusions.24 However, Liszt’s *Magnificat* opts for a different approach to the concluding apotheosis. This section could be heard as an *inverted* apotheosis, in which the agonized groans of Hell give way to a hushed, reverent passage. The transcendent quality of this *Magnificat* is enhanced by Liszt’s decision to hide the choir from view, a direction explicitly indicated in the musical score. The invisibility of the choir casts the voices as transcendent and disembodied, spectral emanations from another realm.

Liszt’s inclusion of hidden performers resonates with Wagnerian staging practices. Rebelling against standard operatic procedure, Wagner chose to conceal the orchestra so that the audience could not see any evidence of physical labor. Carl Dahlhaus observes that Wagner’s “demand for an invisible orchestra” serves the function of “concealing the mundane origins of transcendent music.”25 By paying homage to Wagner’s aesthetic of invisibility, Liszt

23 Quoted in James Huneker, *Franz Liszt* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 151.
establishes an image of Purgatory as a domain in which the physical self (and its attendant sins) can be transcended.

**Liszt’s Narrative Aesthetic and the Musical Representation of Literature**

Now that we have examined the dialectic of isolation and redemption in Liszt’s *Dante Symphony*, we are in a position to explore some further questions about this work: why did Liszt choose to “translate” Dante’s writings into music, and what are the cultural forces that shaped his musical response to Dante?

Liszt’s fascination with Italy provides some contextual background for his *Dante Symphony*. From 1848–54, he composed *Années de Pèlerinage, Deuxième Année*, a set of piano pieces chronicling his travels in Italy. His interest in Italian culture found musical expression in many of these pieces, including *Tre sonetti del Petrarca*, *Il Penseroso* (based on Michelangelo’s statue of the same name), and *Sposalizio* (based on a painting by Raphael). As these titles suggest, Liszt found himself drawn to Italy’s canonical figures: not only Dante, but also Petrarch, Michelangelo, and Raphael. Moreover, Liszt was fascinated with Italian vernacular traditions: He incorporated melodies from Italian folk music in piano pieces such as *Venezia e Napoli*.

In addition to reflecting Liszt’s veneration of Italy, the *Dante Symphony* also embodies another of his central preoccupations: his obsession with Hell and its devils. In the same year as the *Dante Symphony*, 1857, he also completed the *Faust Symphony*, a work that focuses primarily on Faust’s bargain with the devil Mephistopheles.26 Perhaps Liszt’s fascination with diabolical forces stemmed in part from Romantic ideas about musical performance. During the nineteenth century, musical virtuosity was generally perceived as a demonic power.27 As a renowned piano virtuoso, Liszt was often viewed as a demonic figure, a superhuman performer who had “the gift of virtuosity traded in a Faustian pact.”28

By the time of the *Dante Symphony*, Liszt had largely retired from concertizing to devote himself to full-time composition, but his former identity as a diabolical virtuoso continued to influence the reception of his works.

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26 Throughout his long compositional career, Liszt wrote several other devil-themed works as well, including a series of Mephisto Waltzes.


28 Samson, *Virtuosity*, 78.
Liszt’s demonic obsessions were motivated not only by his virtuosic piano skills, but also by his Catholic faith and his attendant concern with the theology of good and evil. Liszt was a devout Catholic whose faith led him to take minor orders in 1865. His dual interests in God and the devil shaped his public image throughout much of his life. As Katharine Ellis points out, “presentations of Liszt as the embodiment of the sublime frequently emphasized a demonic character combined with an ecstatic religiosity.” In 1832, Liszt’s friend Caroline Boissier described him as “sublime . . . a musical demon.

Liszt’s fascination with sublimity and demons manifested itself early in his career. Almost twenty years before the Dante Symphony, Liszt drafted a piano sonata based on Dante’s Divina Commedia, signaling an early interest in the work. The sonata was eventually published in 1849 under the title Après une Lecture du Dante, derived from the title of a poem by Victor Hugo. At this point in his career, Liszt seems to have felt the need to channel his engagement with Dante through the contemporary figure of Victor Hugo, perhaps as a way of making his Dante-inspired sonata seem more culturally relevant to a contemporary audience. However, by the time he started working seriously on the Dante Symphony in 1855, he was ready to confront the challenges of engaging directly with Dante’s work itself.

Liszt’s compositional engagement with the Divina Commedia should be viewed in the context of his musical aesthetics. The Dante Symphony reflects Liszt’s commitment to “program music,” a term which he coined in a polemical essay published in 1855. He also coined the related term “symphonic poem,” a neologism that he used to refer to orchestral works whose form and content derive from a poetic idea. Symphonic poems aspire to the

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31 Quoted in ibid.
34 For more information about Liszt’s development of the symphonic poem, see Reeves Shulstad, “Liszt’s Symphonic Poems and Symphonies,” in The Cambridge Companion to Liszt, 206–222.
narrative status of a literary work, using music to depict specific emotions and events. The *Dante Symphony*, though not explicitly labeled as a symphonic poem on the title page, has strong affinities with this genre. Besides the *Dante Symphony*, Liszt’s other symphonic poems include the aforementioned *Faust Symphony*, *Hamlet*, *Prometheus*, and *Mazeppa* (a gruesome narrative of punishment, based on Victor Hugo’s poem of the same name).  

The genre of the symphonic poem sparked a flurry of controversy. Some music critics, such as Eduard Hanslick, were opposed to all forms of program music. Others, such as Wagner, defended Liszt’s conception of program music. In fact, as mentioned above, Liszt dedicated the *Dante Symphony* to Wagner, perhaps in part to indicate their shared commitment to extramusical narratives. As Carl Dahlhaus notes, “What Wagner praised in Liszt’s symphonic poems was the distinctness of their expression and their poetic attitude.”

Allying himself with Wagner’s operatic aesthetics, and battling against Hanslick’s formalist theories, Liszt positioned himself at the center of a raging debate as to whether music should be descriptive or absolute (the nineteenth-century term for non-programmatic music). It likely that he conceived of his *Dante Symphony* as a contribution to this debate.

Given Liszt’s commitment to the genre of program music, how are we to interpret the relative scarcity of textual references within the score of the *Dante Symphony*? Many of Liszt’s other symphonic poems include extensive quotations from their source texts, printed in the score as headings at the beginnings of sections. In the *Dante Symphony*, though, he offers minimal indications as to the narrative content of the music, with only a few textual clues, primarily in the form of the unsung words examined in this article.

As mentioned earlier, however, these ambiguous clues are fleshed out in a prefatory document: Richard Pohl’s expository essay, which elaborates on the brief phrases sprinkled throughout the score. Yet I would argue that Pohl’s essay, for all its insights, should nonetheless be interpreted as a mere supplement to the symphony. If it had formed an integral part of the composer’s artistic vision, Liszt would have penned it under his own name. By delegating the

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bulk of the descriptive work to Pohl, Liszt created a gulf between his symphonic composition and its narrative content.

The *Dante Symphony* thus hovers ambiguously between two genres: program music and absolute music. Its title, which signals a programmatic intention, points toward the former category. However, the scarcity of textual description within the score itself renders the music fairly abstract. Separating the programmatic essay from the musical composition, Liszt managed to situate the *Dante Symphony* in between the two sides of the raging debate about program music versus absolute music. The work performs a dialectical mediation between these extremes. It is as though the meta-physical scope of Dante’s text prompted Liszt to conceive of a work that was less overtly descriptive and more abstract.