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THE CESSATION OF MUSIC IN THE 'PARADISO'

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This article explores Dante's narrative use of music in the *Paradiso* as it leads to his ultimate vision of God. Unlike the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, the *Paradiso* seems to be suffused with continuous music, one that is inherent in the unending motions of the heavens. In the *Paradiso*, however, there is also much mention of the absence of sound. There are at least fifteen instances that describe a person or a group suddenly falling into silence, either as a natural conclusion of a speech, or unexpectedly as a momentary interruption of music. This article contends that the purpose of these sudden and unexpected cessations of music is that they are types of the greatest antitype of the poem, the silence of God—the only entity transcending the two fundamental conditions of any music: time and motion.

Keywords: *Paradiso*, Cessation, Music, Dante

La gloria di Colui che tutto move
per l'universo penetra e risplende
in una parte più e meno altrove.

The glory of Him who moves all
things
penetrates through the universe and
shines
forth in one place more and less else-
where. (*Par.* 1.1-3)¹

Thus Dante begins the *Paradiso* with reference to the source of all motion and light, the vision of whom will be the final goal of his journey through the heavens. Dante states that this journey will be the “subject of my song.” The music of Dante’s “song” as it leads to his ultimate vision of God is the subject of my paper. Although there are many topical references to music, my focus will be on the music that actually occurs in the narrative.²

In Dante’s time, singing is a natural concomitant of poetry: the lyric poetry of Dante’s predecessors, such as Arnaut Daniel, is

¹ Quotations in English are from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, vol. 3, *Paradiso*, trans. Robert M. Durling with Ronald L. Martinez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² I have dealt with this topic in general: “Dante’s Musical Progress in the *Commedia*,” in *The Echo of Music: Essays in Honor of Marie Louise Göllner*, ed. Blair Sullivan (Warren: Harmonie Park Press, 2004), 63-73.

transmitted with music, and in several places Dante refers to his own activity first of all as cantos and then as cantiche. In such a poem as this on a sacred subject, the liturgy is an apt point of comparison, since the norm at that time was that everything spoken aloud in the liturgy was sung.

Music is a prominent feature of the *Paradiso*; but Dante treats it in all three *cantiche* very differently. Hell is a region characterized by noise: its proper sound is “shrieks, moans, and lamentation” (*Inf.* 5. 25–26). A few musical instruments make only blasts and thumps, not music; there are mentions of music from outside of Hell, but there is only one actual point of singing in Hell, and that is by Dante himself. He recounts, “And while I sang these notes to him (*Inf.* 19.118),” he accused Constantine of avarice. Even when the parody of the hymn *Vexilla regis prodeunt* is cited in reference to Satan, a topical reference rich with associations, Dante is yet careful to avoid any mention of singing (*Inf.* 34.1).

Purgatorio is characterized by the occurrence of recognizable music, sung in the course of the journey; several pieces are common liturgical texts, which call to mind their proper liturgical melodies. For example, the souls crossing in a boat approaching the shores of Purgatory sing with one voice “In exitu Israel de Ægypto, with the rest of the text as it is written,” in Dante’s words.³ Or the hymn *Te lucis ante terminum*, which calls up the context of the office of Compline, with references to its lesson, psalm, and the concluding prayer (*Purg.* 8).

Another kind of music in the *Purgatorio* is seen in the passing of pilgrims from one terrace of the mountain to another. Toward the top, Angels sing one of the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount at each terrace, but they do not cite specific texts of the liturgy, rather they are sung “in a voice far more living than ours” (*Purg.* 27.8).

The higher Purgatory includes a number of texts with familiar liturgical use, but which do not recall any specific melody, since in the liturgy they occur with numerous different melodies: Osanna, Gloria, Agnus Dei. This is a step that transcends the particular, and intimates a progress toward the transcendence that will

³ *Purg.* 2.46–48; Reinhold Hammerstein, “Die Musik in Dante’s Divina Commedia,” *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch* 41–42 (1964): 59–125, here on p. 84, identifies this psalm as one sung at interment; this would be significant, but it seems to be a confusion of *In exitu Israel* (Ps 113 in the Vulgate, 114 in the Masoretic text) with *Dilexi* (Ps 114 in the Vulgate), which begins the Office of the Dead, *Liber Usualis* (Tournai: Desclée, 1956), 1772. *In exitu Israel* is sung as the last psalm of Vespers for Sundays and many holy days; it would thus be familiar to a cultivated listener of Dante’s time.

be seen in the *Paradiso*. At the end of the *Purgatorio*, the procession with the gryphon is accompanied by transcendent music:

I did not understand, nor is it sung back
here, the hymn those people sang then, nor did
I endure all its melody (*Purg.* 30.61-63)⁴

While the music in the *Purgatorio* is intermittent, the *Paradiso* seems to be suffused with continuous music, a music that is inherent in the continuous motions of the heavens. The traditional notion of the music of the spheres of the philosophers might suggest a monotonous grind of a constant chord, but here the sounding music in the heavens of the planets is produced by the souls who inhabit the turning wheels, singing and dancing. Dance is prominent: “those carols differently dancing, allowed me to judge their richness, being fast and slow” (*Par.* 24.16-17). A carol is a round dance, perfectly suited to the “wheels” being depicted.

A few concrete liturgical chants are cited, but in general, the music is unlike anything heard on Earth. The sounds of Heaven are described as “with harmony and sweetness that cannot be known except there, where rejoicing forever itself” (*Par.* 10.146-148). The singing of Angels is also prominent: the Sanctus of the Mass has always been understood as Angelic music, since it is first cited in Isaiah sung by two Seraphim in alternation before the throne of God. Dante “heard them hosanna from choir to choir” (*Par.* 28.94).

The *Paradiso* is suffused with a transcendent background of harmonious sonorities. These are not merely humanly audible harmonies (*musica instrumentalis*); rather, they are increasingly a direct apprehension by the soul (*musica humana*) of the harmonious order of the cosmos (*musica mundana*),⁵ and this perception increases only as the soul’s capability of grasping it increases; this is suggested when Dante asks, “Why in this wheel the sweet symphony of Paradise is silent, which below through the others so devoutly sounds”? And the answer comes, “You have the hearing as the sight of mortals” (*Par.* 31.58-61). Dante is not yet capable of hearing it.

Music in the *Commedia* is not only deployed throughout the journey, but some of its occurrences relate to one another, in the manner of types and antitypes. A type is a person or event that

⁴ See also *Purg.* 32. 89-90: “the others are going back up, following the gryphon, with a sweeter and a deeper song.”

⁵ The three kinds of music were made commonplace by Boethius, *De institutione musica*, I, 2; cf. *Fundamentals of Music*, ed. Calvin M. Bower (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 9-10.

pre-figures something to come; an antitype is that which then fulfills the type; the type foreshadows the greater reality. For example, St. Paul cites Adam as a type and Christ as the antitype (Romans 5:14). This relates to the four-fold method of interpreting the Scripture, which is described in the *Letter to Cangrande*, where the literal sense is the type and one of the figurative senses the antitype. In the *Commedia*, exceptional types prefigure normal ones. Dante's singing in Hell is exceptional, but for the rest of the poem, his singing is normal. The exceptional citation of the parody of a metrical Latin hymn *Vexilla regis* in Hell foreshadows the singing of the metrical hymn *Te lucis ante terminum* in Purgatory. Here *Te lucis* is described as being sung facing East, the traditional direction of facing God, and thus it projects a sense of moving toward the goal. This hymn in turn becomes a type for the hymn *Summe Deus clementiae*, sung at the beginning of the seventh terrace (*Purg.* 25.121). There the souls face a purgation of fire, and sing the hymn together. *Te lucis* is a simple, devout hymn, appropriate at the beginning of Purgatory; *Summe Deus* is a more complex piece, speaking of the purgation of sins. It was proper to sing *Summe Deus* in the office of Matins of Saturday, thus at the beginning of the seventh day, which is parallel to the seventh terrace. While *Te lucis* would have been commonly heard by a learned listener of Dante's time, *Summe Deus* would have been rarely heard by the laity, thus its choice may be for thematic reasons.

The Angel songs at the terraces of Purgatory are a kind of intervention by Angels in a place where they do not belong; they anticipate their Angelic singing in Heaven as a type, where they do belong.

At the first terrace of the mountain, Dante encounters a white marble carving of the Annunciation and sees a synthesis of the visual and the aural, for at the image of Gabriel making his annunciation, Dante implicitly hears "Ave" (*Purg.* 10.31–45). This finds a quite natural antitype in the song of Piccarda at the beginning of the *Paradiso*, where she sings *Ave Maria*, characterizing her, in spite of her failures, as a devout woman (*Par.* 3.122). But hers and the previous "Ave" become types of the praise of Mary toward the end of the ascent through Heaven, where Gabriel, who had first sung *Ave Maria, gratia plena*, spreads his wings before her, and "and on every side, the blessed court answered the divine cantilena" (*Par.* 32.97–98).

One of the most striking types in the *Paradiso*, and the point of my discussion, is a paradoxical one—silence. Aristotle might have called silence a privation of sound, but it is something far more

positive. Who has not observed in hearing a great work in concert, especially a sacred work, that upon the completion of the work, for an instant, there is an almost stunned silence among the audience, an absolute quiet, which comes from having perceived for the first time the entire work in a glance and realizing its greatness? No one wants to break this silence just for a moment, until someone dares to begin the applause. I have observed such a silence after having sung a melismatic Gregorian chant, a gradual or alleluia. There is an absolute cessation of any motion in the congregation, just for a few instants, that indicates that the chants have elicited a kind of recollection that excludes any distraction or motion for the moment. In the liturgy, this is a recollection of what has been heard, but also an anticipation of what is about to come.

There is much mention in the *Paradiso* of silence; this makes sense, since in Hell, there is pervasive noise, and in Purgatory, music seems to be only intermittent. But in Heaven, what is intermittent is silence. There are at least fifteen instances that describe a person or a group suddenly falling into silence, either as a natural conclusion of a speech, or unexpectedly as a momentary interruption of music.

In some cases, it is the silence of the person that still assumes the background of music. At one point after having spoken, Dante says:

When I fell silent, a most sweet singing
resounded through the heavens, and my lady was
singing with the others, Holy, Holy, Holy [*Santo, Santo, Santo*, in
Italian] (*Par.* 26. 67).

In other cases, a speaker falls silent, and there is for a moment no description of continuing music, nor is there a denial of it. Cunizza speaks, and Dante describes her conclusion: “Here she fell silent, and it seemed to me she turned to something else, taking her place in the wheel where she had been before” (*Par.* 9.64-66). Or “A good will . . . imposed silence on that sweet lyre and quieted the holy strings that the right hand of Heaven loosens and tightens” (*Par.* 15.1-6). And “After each had returned to the point of the circle where he had been before, each stopped, like a candle on a chandelier” (*Par.* 11.13-15). In Canto 10: “When, singing thus, those burning suns had revolved about us three times, like stars near the fixed poles, they seemed to me like ladies not freed from the dance, but pausing silently, listening until they have gathered the new notes” (*Par.* 10.76-81).

I would contend that for these to be types of the kind of silence I am speaking of, they do not have to represent a complete cessation of silence, but only a remarkable silence on the part of one person.

Nevertheless, there are several instances of the cessation of music that seem to be sudden and more complete:

In Canto 12: “the dance and all the great festival of both song and flames, light with light, gladsome and benign, stopped together at one instant and with one consent” (*Par.* 12.22-27).

In Canto 25: “At these words the flaming circle fell silent, together with the sweet mingling made within the sound of the trinal breath, even as, to avoid fatigue or danger, oars till then struck through the water, stop all at once at the sound of a whistle” (*Par.* 15.130-35).

What is the purpose of these sudden and unexpected cessations of music? I propose that they are types of the greatest antitype of the poem, the silence of God. Dante progresses closer and closer to God, and as he does it, there is no more mention of music; now it is all of light. The most intense light yet seen in the *Paradiso*. He comes ultimately to the ineffable vision of God, and while he cannot fully describe it in earthly poetic words, it is an Eternal Light emanating from its unmoving point. Now the instances of silence are seen to have prefigured the paradigm—from the point of the unmoved there is no longer talk of music, but only light, and the remembrance of the ineffable music whose motion leads to the unmoved source of motion and thus of music.⁶

But why the cessation of *music*? Music is the result of motion, and this motion takes place in time. Johannes de Muris, in his *Notitiae artis musicae*, part 2, *Practica musica* (1319-1321) gives a concise definition:

Sound [*vox*] is generated by motion, which occurs in succession... Succession cannot occur without motion. Time is inseparable from motion. Therefore sound of necessity must be measured by time. So time is the measure of motion.⁷

He thus concludes with Aristotle’s definition, “time is the measure of motion.”⁸ The measuring of time was a principal concern at the

⁶ Beginning with line 50 of Canto 33, Dante has no more commerce with others, nor is there any more mention of music, but in what Robert Durling calls “the matchlessly eloquent climax of the poem,” the focus is upward, the phenomenon is light, the sense is all vision, and music and all others remain behind; *Paradiso*, ed. Durling, 672.

⁷ Johannis de Muris, *Notitia artis musicae*, ed. Ulrich Michels (n.p.: American Institute of Musicology, 1972), 65.

⁸ Aristotle, *Physics*, IV, 219b-221a.

beginning of the fourteenth century, when mensural notation was beginning to be developed, and note-shapes being devised to indicate different specific durations.

God is the ultimate source of all motion but is himself unmoved. Dante, in his *Credo* in Canto 24, says as much: “I believe in one God, sole and eternal, who moves all the heavens, unmoved, with love and with desire” (*Par.* 24.130–32).

The notion of God as unmoved mover goes back at least as far as Aristotle, who discusses it in the *Metaphysics*.⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas (who plays an important role in the *Commedia*) includes the argument from motion as the first of his five proofs for the existence of God. In brief, anything that is moved has a mover, but there cannot be an infinite regress of moved and movers; there must be a prime mover, an unmoved mover, and Thomas says that this is God.

God’s relation to time is also the subject of traditional discussion, especially St. Augustine in the *City of God*. The ancient philosophers had considered it possible that the world was eternal, that it had always existed. Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas acknowledged that this was possible philosophically, but held that it had been ruled out by the Book of Genesis, which recounts God’s creation of the world in six days. St. Augustine asked what God was doing before he created the world, and his answer was that it was the wrong question. Before God created the world, there was no time, no before; time itself was included at the creation. Thus, God exists in an eternal present, and is outside of time.¹⁰

Since God is outside of time, and music inside of time, music is not an attribute of God. It is inconceivable that God should have sung in the *Commedia*. To be sure, God is seen as creator of motion, and thus of music, but he is himself unmoved and beyond music. So as Dante approaches the vision of God, there is no more talk of music. There is still a plethora of singing and dancing behind him, but as he faces God, the talk is exclusively of the ineffable light, which can be comprehended only in part. The unmoved mover, the source of all motion and music, transcends all that came before and stands brilliant but motionless in perfect silence, streaming light and “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars” (*Par.* 33.145).

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 1072a.

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *City of God*, XI, 5; cf. Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum: Theories in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 279-80.