

**NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
MUSICAL ADAPTATIONS OF DANTE'S 'COMMEDIA':  
'DANTE'S GREATEST HITS'**

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Composers through the centuries have tried to depict Dante's *Commedia* in music, using Dante's verses, characters, and design for Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, and their compositions. This paper looks at some of the trends in musical adaptations of the *Commedia* and also some of the "greatest hits"—in the author's opinion. Works by James Norton, Patric Standford, Jacob ter Veldhuis, David Denniston, Franz Liszt, Donald Martino, Tod Machover, Anita Saij, Allik and Mulder, and Theodore Wiprud are discussed.

Keywords: Dante, Music, James Norton, Patric Standford, Jacob ter Veldhuis, David Denniston, Franz Liszt, Donald Martino, Tod Machover

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I have heard that the gloomy idea has occurred to Donizetti to set a *canto* of Dante to music. This seems to me hubristic: at such an undertaking I don't believe that the eternal father could succeed, even if he were a composer of music.<sup>1</sup>

These comments were made by Rossini in the early nineteenth century about a small vocal piece by Donizetti. Ironically, Rossini himself ultimately composed two such adaptations. Yet his concerns about the appropriateness and the feasibility of adapting Dante's verses to music are not uncommon among the hundreds of composers who have tailored Dante's poem to music through the centuries. Italian composer Pacini, for example, several years after Rossini's comments, begged forgiveness from his colleagues for attempting so formidable a task in his *Sinfonia Dante* (1863).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, when twentieth-century English composer Patrick Standford composed his *Symphony No. 3: Toward Paradise* (1983), he

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<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Radiciotti, *Gioacchino Rossini: Vita documentata: opere ed influenza su l'arte* (Tivoli: Arti Grafiche Majella di A. Chicca, 1927), 321–322. English translation is my own.

<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Pacini, *Le Mie Memorie Artistiche (edite ed inedite)* (Firenze: Tip. dei successori Le Monnier, 1875), 126–127.

divorced himself from Dante's text so as not to be too "arrogant," thus freeing himself up to offer only an interpretation.<sup>3</sup>

Others acknowledged a certain *craziness* in the attempt to illustrate musically the world of Dante's *Commedia*. A music critic described American composer Donald Martino's *Paradiso Choruses* as "crazy in its ambitions to match in music what already is matchless in our civilization."<sup>4</sup> Martino himself acknowledged that his attempt was "crazy and presumptuous."<sup>5</sup>

Craziness notwithstanding, by my count, in the last six centuries, more than 300 musical adaptations of Dante's poem have been created.<sup>6</sup> Most of these represented musical illustrations of particular episodes in one of the three canticles. Episodes from *Paradiso* have become increasingly popular in recent years. Episodes from *Infèrno* have been consistently popular. *Purgatorio*, meanwhile, has received little attention from composers, adapted only in the last two centuries to several small pieces, symphonies, and a string quartet.

Generally, Dante's poem attracted nineteenth-century Romantic composers because of its nationalism, its dramatic stories that focused on the nightmarish and irrational, while it attracted twentieth-century composers because of the unusual nature of the music it contains. Yet there is something else that makes the poem particularly attractive to both nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers: namely, the universal appeal of its subject matter, life after death. Artists have always been interested in this topic, but the interest has grown significantly in the last two centuries. In the nineteenth century, Dante's *Commedia* appealed to Christians because it depicted a Christian afterworld. In the twentieth century, it appealed to a wider audience, as people of many different religions became more fascinated than ever with life after death.

Adapting any text to music, let alone a text as extraordinary as the *Commedia*, is quite a challenging task. The mechanics of blending words and music is difficult and so is the musical interpretation of the words. The musical piece must present the text filtered through the lens of the composers' interpretation. This interpretation, in turn, should be considered in light of two issues: the

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<sup>3</sup> Patric Standford, personal correspondence with author, June 12, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Dyer, "Martino Writes 'Some Kind of Masterpiece'," *The Boston Evening Globe* (May 8, 1975): 40.

<sup>5</sup> James Boros, "A Conversation with Donald Martino," *Perspectives of New Music* 29 (1991): 212, 237–239.

<sup>6</sup> For a list and description/analysis of these works, see Maria Ann Roglieri, *Dante and Music: Musical Adaptations of the Commedia from the Sixteenth Century to the Present* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

musical potential of the text and the relationship between any music in the text and music that is based on the text.

This first issue was addressed with specific reference to Dante in the late nineteenth century when two Italian musicologists, Carlo Arner and Arnaldo Bonaventura, debated the *musicality of the poem* versus the *musical potential of the poem*. They argued about whether Dante's lyrics or Dante's general themes and stories should be adapted to music and what musical form should be used for any adaptations. They agreed that the music should be in an elevated form and that the composer should be sensitive enough to understand and appreciate Dante's text, but lamented that few of their contemporary composers were worthy of such a task, being neither prepared to write symphonies nor interested in the musicality of great literature.<sup>7</sup>

Their contemporaries, of course, were Italian nineteenth-century composers who were well familiar with Dante's works through their own cultural heritage. What would Arner and Bonaventura think about the later works by non-Italian composers, most of whom became acquainted with Dante's work through circumstances such as encountering a translated passage in an anthology? Despite many later composers' relative unfamiliarity with Dante's poem, the resulting musical works were successful because of a fundamental change in musical direction with respect to earlier music. In the nineteenth century, the harmonic and chromatic language was so well established that any text set to music was simply molded to the particular musical forms popular at that time. For example, there were plenty of operas composed in the nineteenth century that focused on the story of one character (Francesca, Dante, Ugolino, Pia, Piccarda, Sordello, Schicchi, Manfredi, Minos, and Sordello), with no nod to the actual Dantean text. Beginning in the twentieth century and continuing in the twenty-first century, on the other hand, composers turned to the *actual text* for inspiration in terms of musical form.

Composers in the last two centuries did what they could, given the general impossibility of adapting Dante's entire text to music. Even though most of the compositions they wrote contain few or no words from the poem, they represent fairly complete adaptations of the poem in terms of structure. Some wordless genres

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<sup>7</sup> See Arnaldo Bonaventura, *Dante e la musica* (Livorno: Raffaello Giusti Editore, 1904). See also three articles that appeared in the same issue of the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* 49 (May-June 1894). Two were by Arner: "La musicalità nel Divino Poema" and "Ancora la musicalità del divino Poema," appearing on pages 330 and 376 respectively. The third article was by Bonaventura, "La musica nella *Divina Commedia*," appearing on page 347.

offered a venue for an intimate musical portrayal of Dante's fear, surprise and wonderment during his journey (small piano pieces) or a highlights approach (symphony because of its length and its multipart structure, which can easily be made to correspond to the *Commedia's* own structure). The later twentieth-century adaptations of the entire poem were more varied and included ballet, theater arts, string quartets, and electronic music, but still no text. Most of these were composed of three separate pieces, with each piece corresponding to one of the three canticles, performed individually or together in the same concert.

The second issue at hand when considering musical adaptations of Dante's verses is the relationship between any music in the text and music that is based on the text. The more than 300 compositions composed in the last six centuries generally reflect little if anything from Dante's theoretical ideas about music and less than we might expect from the music that Dante includes in his poem. Dante made music central to *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* and absent in *Inferno*. Composers recognized *Inferno* as the canticle with the most musical potential, with *Paradiso* next, and *Purgatorio* significantly less. Composers largely ignored the music of *Purgatorio*, because the featured sacred hymns lacked dramatic material. *Purgatorio* is not extraordinary, and it does not exceed the limits of human comprehension in terms of ugliness (the "anti-music" of *Inferno*, a term coined by Sanguineti)<sup>8</sup> or its beauty (the "extra-music" of *Paradiso*).

Although they did retain the instrumentation Dante describes in *Paradiso* of voice, harp, and lyre, composers had a difficult time with the heavenly music that Dante describes because of its ineffability. Faced with Dante's own stated limitations (his claim that the sweetest melody on earth would seem loud and coarse compared to the sound of the heavenly lyre (*Par.* 23.97–102), twentieth-century composers focused on *Paradiso* 33, where music *is not* mentioned and where Dante describes his vision of God.

Ironically, *Paradiso*, the canticle where music is ubiquitous, was not as popular among composers as *Inferno*, the canticle where music is "absent." *Inferno's* clear allure is easily explained by the fact that the action is more dramatic than *Paradiso*, and the intense portrayal of suffering as well as the dramatic stories lend themselves more easily to music.

In *Inferno* Dante describes the absence of music by noting a lack of harmony, order, sweetness, and words, yet he uses musical

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<sup>8</sup> Edoardo Sanguineti, "Infernal Acoustics: Sacred Song and Earthly Song," *Lectura Dantis* 6 (1990): 69–79.

instruments to describe the perversions of the sinners. Some composers have *created* music based on the same characteristics Dante uses to describe the absence of music in Hell, using the same instruments that Dante uses to musically describe the torments of Hell. In a striking contrast, while Dante featured dancing<sup>9</sup> in *Paradiso* partially to express pleasure and eternal beatitude, some twentieth-century composers featured dance in their works to describe the damned souls' state of eternal anguish and torment.

The notion of the absence of music and the existence instead of an “anti-music” presents a difficult paradox for composers: How can composers create music that is *not* music? Composers did not accept this challenge until the twentieth century, when they felt free to interpret Dante in their own way. Nineteenth-century composers tended to adapt text to music regardless of the presence of music within the text, while twentieth-century composers actually tried to incorporate Dante's music into their works and found imaginative ways to do so. The resulting multimedia pieces offer the most intriguing renditions of Dante's Hell, because they present new and exotic music that is clearly different from any earlier traditional music. It is for this reason that in the following list of “Dante's greatest hits” we present primarily twentieth- and twenty-first-century compositions.

“BEST OF” . . . *INFERNO*

The sounds in Dante's hell are composed of a crescendo-decrescendo of cries and lamentations (a perverted form of vocal music) and are sometimes even produced by body parts (Mastro Adamo, Barbariccia)—a perverted form of instrumental music). The radically new “anti-music” of Dante's Hell presents a most intriguing challenge for composers attempting to write *Inferno*-based pieces. The vast potential of this “anti-music,” however, was left virtually untouched in the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries and was treated often only beginning in the second half of the twentieth century with new musical techniques and musical forms (like those found in electronic music).

Nearly all of the resulting pieces lack a traditional order and sense of time, and they represent perversions of traditional vocal, instrumental and dance music. Composers accomplished these effects by using a variety of non-traditional media, such as electronic tapes, as well as new musical forms. In addition, many added a

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<sup>9</sup> e.g. *Par.* 6–7, *Par.* 10.64–81; and *Par.* 24.16–19.

dimension of audience participation that enhances the effect of the “anti- music,” since Dante himself was a participating audience.

One piece, *From Dante’s Inferno* (1984) by American composer James Norton, is an *a cappella* piece scored for two sopranos, two altos, two tenors, and two basses. It is a musical setting of the following passage where Dante describes the “dolenti note” of the tortured souls who swirl through the air, shrieking (*Inf.* 5.25–39). This passage employs frequent references to sound, many of which are made more elaborate in the English translation by Ciardi used by the composer. For example, while Dante describes the “dolenti note”—literally “notes of desperation”—of the souls, Ciardi translates this as a “choir of anguish.” The composer, relying solely on the translation, uses a choir as the medium for his piece and seeks to emphasize the sense of “anguish” of the souls.

The resulting piece is based on a twelve-note row and is dissonant and atonal. It does not use triadic harmony; but, rather, a harmony that is based on fourths. The singers wail the verses much in the same way Dante’s damned souls wail in agony. In order to further heighten the sense of anguish, the singers sing the verses at different times, often overlapping, with vacillating rhythms. This rhythm is designed to reflect, in Norton’s words, from a personal correspondence with the author on July 25, 1996, “the contrast between the out-of-control passions of human beings, and the glory and majesty of God.” Finally, rapid changes in dynamics mirror the changes in rhythms to effect vivid “word painting” of the word “anguish.” For example, in the first few measures of the piece, the singers begin in double piano on the word “anguish,” quickly rise to a “forte,” and then begin a rapid decrescendo.

Another piece, *A riveder le stelle* (“To See the Stars Again”) (1971–73) by Swedish composer Ingvar Lidholm, is a short, unaccompanied vocal piece that combines the musical sounds of the screams of the damned in Hell with the imagery of the hope of the penitents in Purgatory. Alternating words with musical episodes that depict the mood of the piece acoustically, it is similar to a traditional tone poem but much shorter in length (it lasts only thirteen minutes and thirty-three seconds). The piece sets to music some verses from the last *canto* of *Inferno* (34.133–39). The passage describes the journey of Dante and Virgil as they come to the last circle of Hell, follow the stream of Lethe upwards, climb out of Hell, and see the stars.

Although there is no musical imagery in this particular passage, it is an interesting passage to adapt to music since, in a larger context, it represents Dante’s “musical hinge” between Hell and

Purgatory. Virgil parodies a liturgical hymn traditionally sung during Holy Week in honor of the Cross in order to proclaim the presence of Satan (*Inf.* 34. 1). In his parody, he changes the beginning words of Venantius Fortunatus's famous hymn from "Vexilla regis prodeunt" ("the banners of the king advance") to "Vexilla regis prodeunt infemi" ("the banners of the king of Hell advance") in order to announce Satan's supreme epiphany and to contrast his power in Hell to God's in Heaven. The first sacred song in *Purgatorio*, meanwhile, is Psalm 114, "In exitu Israel de Aegypto," intoned as "tutti insieme ad una voce" (2.47) by the souls that are ferried to the shore. In the same *canto*, Casella sings Dante's earthly song, "Amor che nella mente mi ragiona." The music of *Inferno* 34 treats Satan and hate; the music of *Purgatorio* 2 treats God and love.<sup>10</sup>

Lidholm composed music that represents Dante's "musical hinge" between Hell and Purgatory. He presents a contrast between the two places as a general musical tension between harsh and pleasant vocal sounds. Furthermore, while he does not try to depict the actual singing of the songs that Dante hears in either place, he echoes Dante's perversion of these songs. Dante's musical hinge is characterized by a double perversion in the last *canto* of *Inferno*: The words of a sacred hymn are altered, and the themes of songs sung in *Purgatorio* are reversed. Lidholm shows this perversion through the perversion of melodic direction, represented in an alternation between upward and downward movement.<sup>11</sup>

*A riveder le stelle* is sung by male and female voices, in a homophonic and horizontal choral texture. The horizontal movement of the notes up the register alternates with a downward movement, creating a jarring effect that reflects the horrors of Hell. The vertical movement on the register, meanwhile, depicts Dante's own vertical movement as he climbs out of Hell and anticipates this same climbing movement up the mountain of Purgatory. For example, the first twenty-nine measures of the piece feature moaning sounds and chilling string glissandi. The piece shifts quickly in tone, however, becoming progressively more lighthearted as the singers sing progressively higher notes. This alternation in movement continues throughout the piece: Downward-sliding scales are sung at various times by the soloists, their voices haunting as they linger on shrill notes. The soprano solo ascends and descends the register and finally rests on chords of E flat major. Eventually the soloist reaches

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<sup>10</sup> James Norton, personal correspondence with author, July 25, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

to a climax, with a sixteen-part choir singing repeatedly high B flats to depict Dante finally seeing the stars.<sup>12</sup>

Like Dante, twentieth-century composers found dance to be a successful medium for expressing the suffering of the souls in Hell. Dante describes how the souls engage in unusual movements, which underscore their pain and the severity of their punishments. The choreographers illustrate these movements with imaginative motions set against dramatic backdrops. A number of composers, furthermore, added a narrative part to their pieces in order to fully complete the scene Dante describes, that is, to include the character of Virgil, Dante's guide, who explicates each scene as it unfolds.

*Acid Cirq* (1996) by Danish choreographer Anita Saij is a dance piece that combines narrative and movement against the backdrop of music to portray, very generally, the sense of being in Dante's Hell, and the sound and movements of Dante's "anti-music." The ballet features music written by two German composers, F.M. Einheit and N.U. Unruh, and text by Andreas Ammer. The music itself is unremarkable, but the narrative and the dance movements truly stand out. The narrative does not use actual Dantean text, but tells of Dante's journey through the nine circles of Hell. Its tone is often quirky, including comments such as, "You're listening to Radio *Inferno* . . . it's getting darker all the time . . . here the beatnik Burroughs has to read his own books for all time." The text, furthermore, is read in three different languages—German, English, and Italian—which serve to create a sense of chaos.

The narrative of *Acid Cirq* is continuously interrupted by the circus-like acts of the jugglers and trapeze artists who try to depict the distorted movement and agony among the damned souls.<sup>13</sup> The movements are by far the most unconventional ones yet used to portray the suffering of the souls in Dante's entire *Inferno*. Though in a literal sense they stray far from Dante's text, in a figurative sense, they are in keeping with Dante's descriptions of distorted movements through *Inferno*. For example, they recall the Dantean scene that depicts Dante's and Virgil's descent into the center of Hell. In the text, the two engage in a climb that would seem almost impossible according to the laws of physics. Virgil, with Dante on his back, clambers down Lucifer's body as if it were a ladder. When the two reach Lucifer's hip, Virgil, with great difficulty, reverses his position, turning his head to where his feet had been and climbs up so that Dante thinks they are returning to Hell.

<sup>12</sup> Sanguineti, "Infernal Acoustics," 72–73.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Riding, "Europe's Cultural Capital for '96 Takes a Longer View," *New York Times* (August 28, 1996): C11.

When their climb is ended, Dante looks for Lucifer but instead sees the legs of Lucifer pointing upward. Virgil explains to him that they have passed through the center of gravity of the earth and now, on the side of the Southern Hemisphere, they will climb upward. In Saij's work, the trapeze artists stretch the limits of movement as they depict the progress of the travelers. The trapeze allows them to turn upside-down, giving them the freedom to depict this climb that otherwise would not have been possible. The wheel-like motions of the trapeze artists and the jugglers, meanwhile, recalls the wheel-like motion of "i campion . . . nudi e unti" (*Inf.* 16.21).

An effective use of multimedia to portray Dante's "anti-music" is found in two pieces by American composer Kenneth Gaburo, *Dante's Joynte* (1968) and *Subito* (1974). In both pieces, the tapes create a tension and sense of disorder, while the unusual instrumentation truly imitates Dante's bizarre sounds, his use of body parts as instruments, and his powerful visual descriptions.

*Dante's Joynte* is a musical setting of a passage from *Inferno* 6 that describes Dante's encounter with the gluttonous, who are punished by being sunk in slime and mauled by the Cerberus. Dante vividly describes the grief, howls, and torments of these souls. Gaburo portrays this musically using six shouting voices, an overhead amber spot, film, and a two-channel sound tape. As in Dante's "anti-music," there is no singing and no traditional instrumentation; the souls shout, like Dante's souls do (c.f., e.g., *Inf.* 17.71-72), and the tape plays bizarre sounds. Each voice is given an ordered succession of text fragments to shout and each shout is accompanied by a dramatic gesture. Throughout the piece, the channel tape plays harmonics, percussion, electronics, voice squeaks, saxophone, high-pitched chorus, rock, and jazz. Because of the loudness and chaos of the tape, the performers must shout and exert enormous amounts of energy.

This forced exertion of energy is deliberate. In the score, Gaburo instructs the performers to display excessive energy in order to portray the excessive appetites of the gluttonous. The result is, according to the composer, a kind of energy that flows between the performers and the audience as the audience actively participates. The audience must, as Dante does, react to what they see; they may not just passively observe. Since they are standing around the performers (who are as little as four feet away), they must engage in one of many possible active responses, including running,

dodging, retaliating, and side-stepping. Gaburo's audience experiences Hell actively, in the same way that Dante protagonist does.<sup>14</sup>

The second piece by Gaburo, *Subito* (1974), depicts musically Dante's encounter with the souls of the usurers (*Inf.* 17) who sit on burning sand, brushing off flakes of fire that rain down on them constantly. Dante meets one particular soul, who converses briefly with him, asking him why he is here and if he is still alive. As a final gesture, the soul asks Dante to leave, and sticks out his tongue (*Inf.* 17.75). In Dante's description of his encounter with the usurers, there is almost no musical imagery, only the din of the shouting souls. There are, however, extraordinarily powerful visual images including the colors of the damned souls, Dante's inspection of them, the face of a lion, and the soul's tongue gesture.

Gaburo skillfully combines the visual images in Dante's text with the image of the musical din. He achieves this through a combination of music and theater in a piece for four instruments (voice, trumpet, viola, and double-bass) and multiple performers. The performers are directed to both play and act; they are provided musical notes, words written in the score describing the souls whom Dante encounters, and detailed instructions as to how to perform musically and theatrically. As a result, the performers employ dramatic, unusual gestures to illustrate how the damned souls of Hell suffer eternally, while using strange sounds such as hand swishes and whistles to portray the din they create as they suffer.

The multi-dimensional composition begins with the performers, instruments at their sides, quietly reading the text and gesturing as they read. The tension created by the performers' reading is gradually increased as they read the verses where the soul demands to know why Dante is in Hell. At this point, the performers are reading at the level of an audible whisper. Where the soul sticks out his tongue, the narration is taken over by a narrator who performs hand swishes as he reads, and the instrumentalists quickly raise their instruments and accompany him. The rest of the work musically describes the remainder of Canto 17 and emphasizes the musical din. The performers at different points speak, sing, whistle, shout, lisp, stutter, cough, hum, kiss, tap their shoes, flick their finger against their heel or thigh, and flick their fingernail against the back of their instrument.

This piece is undoubtedly one of the most faithful to Dante's sense of "anti-music." Any traditional sense of order to the piece is

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on this and about Gaburo's direct thoughts on this piece, see a series of articles by William Brooks and others, "Gaburo," *Perspectives in New Music* 18 (1979–80): 7–255.

completely undermined by the perverted vocal and instrumental sounds that are heard. Instead of regular singing, the vocalists make every other sound one could possibly imagine with their voices. The “instruments,” meanwhile, consist of a few traditional ones, but also body parts (heels, thighs, feet, and fingers). Gaburo is not only faithful to the general notion of “anti-music,” but also faithful to the specific sounds of this “anti-music” that Dante describes in this *canto* and throughout Hell. The shouting not only represents the shouting of the souls in *Inferno* 17.71–72 but also recalls the shouting of the devils in the gateway in lower hell (*Inf.* 9). The tapping of the shoes imitates the chattering of the souls’ teeth that Dante describes as the notes of the stork (*Inf.* 32.34–36). The flicking of the finger against the heel or thigh recalls the striking of Mastro Adamo’s stomach by another sinner, which makes a sound like a drum (*Inf.* 20.103). The singing and humming echoes the strange wailing of the souls that smites his ears (c.f., e.g., *Inf.* 29.43–45, where Dante covers his ears so that he will not hear the wailing). The lisping and stuttering might be intended to represent Dante’s fear, trembling and shivering in Canto 17, 85–87. Most strikingly, the sound of the nails flicked against the instruments suggests the flicking of the breast with the nails of the souls in Canto 9.

Worthy of brief mention are two pieces by American composers: *Moto Dante* (1994) by David Denniston and *Begin Again Again . . .* (1991) by Tod Machover. Both use unusual electronic instruments to create new sounds and to portray the idea or the sensation of being in Dante’s Hell, without focusing on or employing actual Dantean text.

Denniston’s *Moto Dante* is an entirely electronic piece based on *Inferno* 5 that represents Denniston’s immediate reaction to the *canto* (it was composed in one sitting just after the reading). The music portrays Dante’s “anti-music” in that it completely lacks order; it never lingers, but continues without a clear pattern. The sounds, furthermore, are like Dante’s “anti-music” sounds since they have never before been heard; according to a personal correspondence with David Denniston on November 15, 1998, they consist of only sampled piano and percussion sounds from a “pile of little black boxes.”

In Machover’s *Begin Again Again . . .*, meanwhile, the “Inferno” part of the *Hyperstring Trilogy* (a trilogy that loosely treats all three canticles), also lacks any kind of order. As its title suggests, it consists of a set of variations in which the same melodies and harmonies are recycled countless times, each time expanded and

elaborated in different ways. The melody, which is centered in the key of D, attempts repeatedly to ascend but is constantly weighted down to low pedal tones. It eventually frees itself from the repetition, but only after great struggle. The resulting music ranges, in the words of the composer, from “agitated, energetic, and dramatic” to “lyrical, calm, and introverted.”<sup>15</sup>

Even more effective than the lack of order in portraying Dante’s “anti-music” is this piece’s instrumentation. It is scored for solo “hypercello,” an electronic instrument that is unlike any traditional cello. While the performer plays the cello, information about how the performer is playing (i.e., the position of his fingers on the fingerboard or the angle of his bow-hand wrist forms, and where the bow is on the cello’s strings) is transmitted to a computer. The computer processes the information and generates a variety of musical responses such as an orchestral-like accompaniment or a reprocessing of the cello’s sounds. The performer controls the balance between his own music, created by the cello, and the computer’s music.

The intimate connection between the body and the instrument that Machover creates, as well the idea of an enhanced instrument that is louder or somehow better than a traditional one, recalls Dante’s use of instruments in two cantos. The idea that a body may act as an instrument or multiple instruments, and that the instrument may create unexpected sounds, is found in *Inferno* 30, where Mastro Adamo’s body appears in the form of a lute but, when sounded, makes a sound like a drum. The idea of an enhanced instrument, meanwhile, may be found in *Inferno* 31, where Nimrod’s horn is louder than a thunderclap and more ominous than Roland’s horn at Roncesvalles (*Inf.* 31.10–18).

Not bound by traditional rules of composing, Denniston and Machover have formulated a more spontaneous relationship with their musical creations that is in keeping with the more spontaneous nature of Dante’s “anti-music.” Neither piece is formally composed; Denniston’s represents a one-time playing session, while Machover’s represents an ever-changing blending of the performer’s playing and the computer’s reaction to his playing. Both pieces were clearly intended to represent directly the performer’s reaction to being in Dante’s Hell. In *Inferno*, similarly, the music created is not carefully considered and worked on over time;

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<sup>15</sup> Tod Machover’s program notes in Tod Machover, Matt Haimovitz, Kim Kashkashian, Ani Kavafian, Karol Bennett, Gil Rose, Rose Moss, and Boston Modern Orchestra Project. *Hyperstring Trilogy*, 2003.

instead, it represents the souls' instant reaction to their pain and suffering.

The adaptations of Dante's *Inferno* composed during the twentieth century are universally fascinating. Vocal pieces by Norton and Lidholm effectively create the eerie sounds of the wailing of the damned through the use of dissonance, atonality, vacillation of melodies and perversion of melodic direction. The dance pieces, meanwhile, add a complementary visual component to Dante's depiction of the writhing souls. Would Dante ever have imagined, however, that performers would be using a trapeze to demonstrate the bizarre movements of the damned?

The multimedia pieces, finally, offer the most exotic renditions of Dante's Hell. Not only do they create an experience full of novelty and heretofore non-existent dimensions, but they truly honor the perverted spirit of Dante's own music-making "instruments," namely, the distorted bodies of the damned souls. Machover's "hypercello," dependent on the performer's hand and wrist movements, like no other cello, is perfectly designed to reflect the anguished movements of the performer who is imagining himself as a damned soul and creating reactionary sounds. Gaburo's pieces even pay homage to the precise sounds Dante describes coming from the bodies of the damned, such as the chattering of their teeth. All in all, these twentieth-century vocal-, dance-, and multimedia-adaptations of *Inferno* are, perhaps, the kind of pieces one might envision Dante himself composing or describing if the means had been available to him in the fourteenth century.

#### "BEST OF" . . . PURGATORIO

Relatively speaking, there are very few musical adaptations of Dante's *Purgatorio* to choose from when considering "the best of." The few nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers who set particular passages to music paid little attention to Dante's use of music in any *canto*. Most composers have ignored not only the music Dante describes but also the central importance of song in Dante's text. Several have actually set to music a prayer, which is not sung but spoken, while others have adapted passages that had almost no music in them. Composers have generally focused on the fundamental activity of the canticle: the souls' spiritual and physical journey up the mountain. One of the best of these few adaptations is a piece by Kristi Allik and Robert Mulder: *Electronic Purgatory* (1991). It's an elaborate digital music theater composition for performers, interactive theater and electroacoustic music, which represents the process of the souls' metamorphosis as they journey. It

is based on Dante's tripartite structure but also on Stephen Hawking's idea of many worlds, or multiple realities in different dimensions.

The piece is not written for traditional instruments: It uses electroacoustic instruments and computer generated/controlled visuals. The performers are both performers and "creators" or "interactors" who manipulate interactive multicomputer networks to affect the visual and aural elements of the production in real time. They utilize independent "video worlds" (life-size video screens), channel sound generation capabilities, and complex multi-image projections, all controlled by a network of computers.

The instrumentation of the piece works together with the staging to create an extraordinary otherworldly quality. The floor and the backdrop, both black, absorb light so that the stage appears empty and dark. The interactors are confined to a relatively small stage area, which contains no set-like apparatus. Super impositions of two performers/interactors are seen electronically on video worlds that are placed on either side of the stage. While they perform, the interactors move slowly and deliberately, creating a wide array of aural and visual phenomena.

The interactors in the computers together offer a kind of "cybernetic choreography," which illustrates the souls' process of metamorphosis. At various points in the piece, the interactors themselves become "movement generators," as the video worlds display dynamic textures abstracted from their physical movements. At other times, the physical outline of the body of the performers is superimposed on the computer graphics like a shadow outline. Finally, there is an overlapping of video worlds: Objects or events that are either created or destroyed in one video world influence visual elements in another video world.

It is difficult to describe the loosely constructed four movements of *Electronic Purgatory* since they are so dependent on the performers that they vary in every performance. Generally the pieces are intended to portray the fundamental contradictions associated with the state of human awareness: in purgatory, the human spirit is separated from the body and tortured in a "Mindscape" limited by its own intellect, while the bodies are chained to a physical landscape. This imaginative piece captures the spirit of Dante's Purgatory quite effectively. The fact that each performance is different, dependent on the performers, is strikingly consistent with Dante's design; the experience of that passing through purgatory is different for each soul as he undergoes a personal metamorphosis. The shadows imitate Dante's physical reality of the shades. The

concept of the Mindscape interacting with the physical landscape is also central to Dante's schema: purgation is a spiritual, intellectual process, but the shades must climb a physical mountain. The slow physical movements of the performers illustrate the slow process of purgation and movement in Dante's Purgatory. The only aspect of the piece that is inconsistent with Dante's Purgatory is the darkness on the stage. This inconsistency is quite glaring, especially given that in Dante's *Commedia* darkness is confined almost exclusively to *Inferno*. In Purgatory, the souls travel by day and constantly look to the stars.

A more traditional piece is American composer Theodore Wiprud's *Refining Fire* (1989), a twelve-minute work for string quartet and dancers. This piece offers a fascinating visual and musical interpretation of the extremes of emotions that the souls experience as they pass through the wall of fire (*Purg.* 27). The melodies and the dance work well together to portray the terror as well as the ultimate inner peace of the souls. Furthermore, the composer's attention to Dante's text, in his patterning of musical phrases based on Dante's *terza rima* scheme and his incorporation of hymns Dante mentioned into his own melodies, is impressive.

The music begins with extremely fast, blurred harmonies featuring wild shrieking notes, macabre *pizzicato* tones and back of bow tappings in the violins. In a personal correspondence with the author, Wiprud explained that these harmonies represent the wall of flames and Dante's confusion and terror. After an intense *fortissimo*, these harmonies resolve into melodic lines, representing the characters Dante encounters and the conversations he has with them. Ultimately, the piece, like Dante's text, focuses on Dante protagonist's own spiritual purification. This purification is depicted musically with the emergence of a fifth melody, as the other musical material dwindles into silence. As the purification nears completion, only a beautiful melodic line in the viola and cello with tremolo accompaniment and harmonics in the violins is heard. By the end of the piece, the five melodies merge into a sixth melody as the simple and direct hymn of the angel is heard, while the evolution of the music culminates in the prolonged notes of the instruments, which close on a sustained open D.<sup>16</sup>

#### "BEST OF" . . . *PARADISO*

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Wagner advised Liszt that no human could possibly musically express the joys of Paradise.

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<sup>16</sup> Theodore Wiprud, personal correspondence with author, November 20, 1998.

Liszt heeded this advice: when composing his *Dante Symphony* (1856), he abandoned his already-composed “Paradiso” movement, composing instead a beautiful *Magnificat* for a solo female chorus, and appending it to the “Purgatorio” movement. It is one of listeners’ favorite representations of Paradise only because the music itself is so beautiful. It is the type of music one would like to hear in Paradise.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century composers ultimately demonstrated, however, that Wagner was wrong. Intrigued rather than intimidated by the challenge of portraying God’s heavenly music, a few focused on *Paradiso* passages where the extraordinary music is discussed. For example, American composer Theodore Wiprud depicted the hymns and dances of the souls in the Sphere of Mercury (*Refining Fire*, 1989). Yet most did not adapt passages where Dante specifically describes music but composed instead works that generally presented an overall conception of Paradise, or that specifically depicted Dante’s vision of God. The resulting compositions, in the form of songs, oratorios, symphonies, ballets, and theater are quite entertaining and varied.

One of the best *Paradiso*-based works is a wonderful contemporary adaptation of *Paradiso* by Jacob ter Veldhuis. A beautifully melodious seventy-five-minute video oratorio for soprano, tenor, sampler, female choir, and orchestra, it is the most comprehensive depiction of the entire *Paradiso* ever composed.

While other composers focused exclusively on Dante’s vision of God, Veldhuis concluded his piece with the vision just as Dante did. For the most part, Veldhuis followed Dante’s design of Paradise except that he omitted the heaven of Mercury, and the heaven of Jupiter. He also added a Garden of Eden from *Purgatorio* and represented Dante’s heaven of Venus as two heavens: the Heaven of Love and the Heaven of Lust. Since the character of Dante, meanwhile, in Veldhuis’ piece is not a consistent presence, the voyage is experienced more immediately by the viewer, who himself becomes the traveler. Finally, the Dantean text from *Paradiso* is not presented in order, and is often combined with passages from *Purgatorio* and non-Dantean text.

The more extensive digressions from the plot make for an imaginative, dramatic presentation. On their journey to paradise, Dante and Beatrice visit Earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden, the Heaven of Love and Sex, the Heaven of Religion and the Heaven of Drugs and Nirvana. Along the way they meet the Apollo astronauts, American television evangelists, and jazz trumpet player Chet Baker. The Heaven of Love and Sex is perhaps the most

shocking addition. Veldhuis uses explicit sexual imagery to depict the joys of Paradise. Yet surely Dante would be embarrassed to see this video where a naked Beatrice is bathed in surreal light as she abandons herself to mysterious physical pleasures, enjoying, as one might expect, the ultimate orgasm. As surprising as this is, this section may actually be intended to echo Dante's own story of Cunizza, married four times and the mistress of several other men, who explains to Dante that she feels no shame and that love, even if it is excessive and physical, can be part of God's plan (*Par.* 9.34–5).

Even the Heaven of Narcotics, which features Chet Baker on an extended drug trip, at first seems so far afield of what Dante had intended but may be a nod to Dante's own description of himself as drunk with sound and vision (*Par.* 27.1–6). Baker's comments—"Things like this don't happen," "every memory I'll keep," and "May this bliss never end"—reflect what Dante was probably thinking as he voyaged through Paradise.

One of the things that makes Veldhuis' piece so alluring is the unique video component. No other contemporary composer has incorporated such a strong and consistent visual presence in an adaptation of *Paradiso*. Veldhuis considers the video component to be equally as important as the musical component of the piece,<sup>17</sup> once again demonstrating his faithfulness to Dante, who completely intertwined the musical and visual aspects of *Paradiso*.

A number of video images are particularly noteworthy, including the shores of Purgatory, the Garden of Eden, and the moon. The shores of purgatory are breathtakingly beautiful; the images of the water lapping against the shore evoke a peaceful, happy place. The Garden of Eden is traditional but jazzed up, featuring supernatural colors and interesting 3-D graphics. Beatrice plays guitar and sings to a reclining Dante. The pair is sometimes nude and sometimes clothed. Echoes of mythological stories and biblical stories include images of the couple hunting and many animals. At the end of the scene, angels float upward in their dramatic lightning flashes accompanied by strong percussion sounds.

The last image, that of the moon exploration, is another surprise from Veldhuis that works quite well since both the astronauts and Dante explore unknown territory in space. Veldhuis highlights this parallel by juxtaposing video of the astronauts exploring the moon with an image of a fourteenth-century man (presumably

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<sup>17</sup> Jacob ter Veldhuis, Notes to DVD recording. *Paradiso: A Video Oratorio*, DVD, Jacob ter Veldhuis, 2001 (Colchester, Essex, England: Chandos, 2003).

Dante) looking at the moon. The bouncing motion of the astronauts as they try to walk on the moon, meanwhile, echoes the overall motion of Dante through the three regions of the afterworld.

Veldhuis' close attention to physical space is also demonstrated in the way he portrays the blessed souls. His frequent visual juxtaposition of the singers and the orchestra with the images of *Paradiso* come closer than any other *Paradiso*-based piece to portraying the singing souls in Paradise. At one point he even attempts to illustrate the relative position of the blessed souls within Paradise. In Dante's text the souls descend into each of the heavens not because that is their place of residence but in order to help Dante understand the exact degree of blessedness that they have been given. In Veldhuis' "Luce Divina" section, the angels dance in the clouds and are grouped in different places according to their state of blessedness.

Veldhuis is careful to pay heed to Dante's frequent combination of light, motion, and music. For example, he devotes a whole section to Dante's ladder in the heaven of Saturn (*Par.* 21-22). The ladder stretches across the video screen, lit by surreal yellow fireballs. The ladder is surrounded by spinning lights that represent the souls who eventually descend to the top of the screen as the orchestra plays furiously. Throughout the piece, he presents tri-color circles of singing lights such as the ones Dante describes many times.

Equally as beautiful as the video is the music itself. The music of the oratorio is truly what we would imagine we would hear in Paradise; it is peaceful, soothing, and joyous. Veldhuis not only consciously presents a unique kind of music, but he also overtly states this in the "Sound of Heaven" section, where the evangelist, like Dante, says that this music offers a sound that is different from any other sound. The crowning moment is when Dante is granted the vision of God. As he moves closer to God, the screen displays bursts of spectacular color and morphing shapes. The orchestra builds a dramatic crescendo until the soprano soloist strikes a surreal high and the orchestra holds it while the other singers join in. The male soloist takes over, reflecting Dante's ecstasy. The combination of the music and the colorful video enhances the music so that it is better than church music: It instills in the audience a tremendous and unique sense of peace, happiness, and calm. It creates the feeling that mankind has returned to its rightful place, returned to God. The Gate of Heaven opens and the audience hears the final measures of the Credo from Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's *Missa*

*Papae Marcelli*—in the words of Veldhuis, the “most beautiful Amen in the history of Western music,”<sup>18</sup>—accompanying Dante’s final verses (*Par.* 33.140–5). As Dante views God, the light of the shining sun becomes so intense that eventually the entire screen turns white as the music fades away.

Recall that in the early nineteenth century, Rossini suggested that setting Dante’s poem to music was a “gloomy,” “hubristic,” and generally “impossible task.” The number, scope, and breadth of the hundreds of musical adaptations of Dante’s poem composed through the ages, however, demonstrate that composers have not agreed with him. They have been inspired to represent Dante’s poem in a broad range of pieces, including virtually everything from small chamber works to large operas to electronic masterpieces. The exciting thing is that through the exploration of new types of instruments and new modes of music, composers will continue to produce even more adaptations of Dante’s work and perhaps come even closer to the extraordinary, beyond-human music that Dante attempted to describe.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*