

**“CANZONE... T’HO ALLEVATO
PER FIGLIUOLA D’AMORE:”
THREE SONGS OF LOVE IN DANTE’S ‘VITA NUOVA’**

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This paper examines the poetics and musicality of three *canzoni* of Dante’s *Vita Nuova* and explores how four fundamental musical elements produce specific meanings while evoking a desired emotion in the reader. “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore,” the first *canzone* of the *Vita Nuova*, initiates Dante’s poetry of praise as it contributes to the elation of the first third of the work. The two later *canzoni*, “Donna pietosa” and “Li occhi dolenti,” however, transition the *Vita Nuova* to a more somber and finally grief-stricken piece. Analysis of the musical elements of these three poems demonstrates how Dante effectively communicates his emotions through his poetry and creates fundamental links between himself and his reader.

Keywords: *Vita Nuova*, Troubadour, Canzone, Dante Alighieri, Congedo, Musicality, Rhythm, Timbre

In the early Middle Ages the troubadours produced love poetry that expressed an urgency on the part of the lover. Troubadours such as Arnaut Daniel, Jaufrè Rudel, and Bernart de Ventadorn, through the *canzo*, underscore the fundamental bond between the sentiment of love and the musicality of its vocal expression.¹ In his *canzo* “Non es meravelha s’eu chan,” Bernart de Ventadorn draws an essential link between love and song:

Non es meravelha s’eu chan
mels de nul autre chantador,
que plus me tra.l cors vas amor
e melhs sui faihz a so coman.
cor e cors e saber e sen
e fors e poder i ai mes.
Si.m tira vas amor lo fres
que vas outra part no.m aten. (“Non es meravelha” 1-8)²

¹ See Judith A. Peraino, *Giving Voice to Love: Song and Self-Expression from the Troubadours to Guillaume de Machaut* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² “It is no marvel if I sing / better than any other singer, / for my heart draws me towards love / and I am more obedient to its command. / I have given up heart and body and wisdom and wits / and strength and power to love / the bridle draws me

Love for Bernart is a total body experience, which manifests itself through his song and causes him (at least he believes) to be the best love poet of all. These early love poets and their verses, for the medieval Italian poets, served as inspirations and models, whose echo reverberates in the poetry of Guido Guinizelli, Guido Cavalcanti, and Dante Alighieri. Writing their own *canzoni*, these masters of the *dolce stil nuovo* create the same type of link between love and music that had been established by the poets of the *langue d’oc*.

This essay explores which musical elements each *canzone* contains, and how these elements are manifested in the poem. How do the poetics of the individual *canzoni* contribute to the musicality of the poems? How does the musicality of the poems differ from the first through the final *canzoni*?

While the songs of the troubadours and French musical traditions in general are very well studied and documented, the musical traditions of the late *Duecento* and the early *Trecento* are much less understood. It is well known that during this period music was used to accompany sacred ceremonies, as well as courtly activities such as dancing and celebrations. According to Michael Scott Cuthbert, madrigals and *ballatas* were the two most often used poetic forms that were set to music in the *Trecento*.³ Dante, as well as other poets and writers of this period, would have been very familiar with the madrigal, although none of Dante’s works mention this musical genre. The *ballata*, however, appears in several of the poet’s early works, and in the second book of *De vulgari eloquentia*, Dante discusses the form and nobility between the *canzone* and the *ballata*, finding the *canzone* the more noble of the two.

Preterea: illa videntur nobiliora esse que conditori suo magis honoris afferunt: sed cantiones magis deferunt suis conditoribus quam ballate; igitur nobiliores sunt, et per consequens modus earum nobilissimus aliorum. (*DVE* 2.3.5)

Thus the use of the *canzone* in the *Vita Nuova* and *Il Convivio* underscores Dante’s preference for this poetic form.

In his essay “The Musicality of Poetry,” Harold Cook identifies four fundamental musical elements that are shared and

towards it / that I care not a whit for any other thing.” See Barbara Smythe, *Troubadour Poets* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966), 48.

³ See Michael Scott Cuthbert, “Music,” in *Dante in Context*, eds. Zygmunt G. Baranski and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 453.

employed in poetry. These are pitch (or melody), rhythm, harmony, and timbre. Cook states, “Most poems or musical compositions are a delicate balance of all four of the elements common to the two media of expression.”⁴ As I demonstrate, Dante’s use of these four elements creates a specific sentiment that the poet intends to elicit from his reader, such as wonderment and awe in “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore,” pity and foreboding in “Donna pietosa,” or profound grief as in “Li occhi dolenti.”

The first *canzone* of the *Vita Nuova*, “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore,” calls upon a group of noble ladies to help the poet sing Beatrice’s praises. The poet establishes the *coro delle donne* as his new interlocutors, whom he finds worthy to discuss the praise of his beloved. They are the first to experience Dante’s new poetic style, and they, as courtly ladies, are the most worthy members of the *civitas* to whom the marvels of Beatrice are made known. This early poem of Dante is instrumental in establishing his *stilo de la loda* in which the praise of the beloved is fundamental. The *canzone* is composed of five stanzas with fourteen lines each, which are all written in hendecasyllables. From the very incipit of the poem it is clear that this structure greatly contributes to the musicality of the poem:

Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore,
i’ vo’ con voi de la mia donna dire,
non perch’io creda sua laude finire,
ma ragionar per isfogar la mente. (VN 19.4, 1-4)⁵

The poet’s use of the ABBA rhyme scheme, which is the opening quatrain of a sonnet, emphasizes the musical elements of rhythm and timbre, establishing the poem’s musical lilt. In a musical composition, the rhythm is defined by the length and pattern of notes, or sometimes referred to as the beat. The ABBA rhyme scheme sets the beat pattern at the incipit of Dante’s *canzone*. The timbre of a musical piece refers to the tone of the work. It can be lush or bright, or it can be dull or dark. In the first *canzone* of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante’s use of the terms *intelletto*, *laude*, and *ragionar* gives the poem a bright tone of praise. This structure becomes essential to the progression of the *canzone* as it moves toward its climax, and

⁴ Harold Cook, “The Musicality of Poetry,” *Bucknell Review* 9 (1961): 303-317.

⁵ “Ladies who have understanding of love, / I wish to speak with you of my lady, / not that I believe I may exhaust her praise, / but to converse to ease my mind.” All quotes from the *Vita Nuova*, in both English and Italian, come from Dino S. Cervigni and Edward Vasta, *Vita Nuova* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

the *coro delle donne* is the fundamental element of the first movement of Dante's orchestration.

Dante implores these noble ladies to join him in praising his beloved, employing terms of sweet speech, or as Barolini describes them, "a lexicon that insists on the act of speaking."⁶

Io dico che pensando il suo valore,
Amor sì dolce mi si fa sentire,
che s'io allora non perdessi ardire,

farei parlando innamorar la gente.
E io non vo' parlar sì altamente,
ch'io divenisse per temenza vile. (VN 19.5-6, 5-10)⁷

The phrases "Io dico", "farei parlando," and "non vo' parlar" all serve to underscore the interaction between the poet and the *coro delle donne*, who, while their voices may be silent, are certainly essential members of the chorus of this first movement.

Analogous to the *coro delle donne*, the reader also plays a fundamental role in this *act of speaking*, for there exists a dialectic between the poet and his reader, which establishes a reciprocal relationship between the two. Adam Zachary Newton argues that the poet must be cognizant of the reciprocity that binds him to his reader.⁸ Just as the composer and listener interact through the musical composition, so too does the reader become the interlocutor of the poet, as both the act of writing poetry and the act of reading poetry are inextricably linked.

The second stanza provides a crescendo, as Dante transitions from verbs of sweet speech to verbs of excitement. This, however, is a celestial exuberance, for in this stanza we hear the angels and saints clamor and cry out for God to grace heaven with the marvel that is Beatrice:

Angelo clama in divino intelletto
e dice: "Sire, nel mondo si vede
maraviglia ne l'atto che procede
d'un anima che 'nfin qua su risplende."
Lo cielo, che non have altro difetto

⁶ See Teodolinda Barolini, Richard H. Lansing, Andrew Frisardi, *Dante's Lyric Poetry: Poems of Youth and of the Vita Nuova* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 180.

⁷ "I say that as I think of her worth, / Love so sweet in me makes himself felt, / such that if I then were not to lose heart, / I would through speaking enamor the people. / And I do not wish to speak so loftily / as to become through daring inept."

⁸ See Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11.

che d'aver lei, al suo signor la chiede,
e ciascun santo ne grida merzede. (VN 19.7, 15-21)⁹

Just as the *allegro* movement of a symphony opens with a burst of sound, this second stanza opens with images of light and excitement. Dante's choice of nouns gives the stanza pitch and harmony. "Divino intelletto" and "maraviglia" create a sense of wonderment and give the stanza a feeling of expansion. "Lo cielo", and "merzede" fill the stanza with brightness as they complete the action of the verb "resplende." Dante's verbs "clama," "chiede," and "grida" augment the volume of the stanza, as they are juxtaposed to the earlier terms of "io dico" and "non vo' parlar." The reader senses the crescendo as the angels clamor, and the saints cry out in supplication. This crescendo then builds to a *fortissimo* in the next section of the stanza as the voice of God is heard:

Sola Pietà nostra parte difende,
ché parla Dio, che di madonna intende:
"Diletti miei, or sofferite in pace
che vostra spene sia quanto me piace
là 'v' è alcun che perder lei s'attende,
che dirà ne lo inferno: O mal nati
io vidi la speranza de' beati." (VN 19.8, 23-28)¹⁰

Reminiscent of Guinizelli's sonnet "Al cor gentile," God speaks, and his voice is simultaneously disquieting and comforting. He commands that the heavenly hosts must suffer, and that He will decide how long their suffering shall last. The poet juxtaposes the word *pietà* with *sofferite*, reinforcing God's mercy, while recalling that all creatures are subject to His divine will. Thus Dante creates a tension in the stanza, heightening the crescendo, and moving the stanza toward its conclusion. Finally, Dante brings the stanza to a close, contrasting the *mal nati* with the *beati*, as God ends his discourse with the climatic words, "io vidi la speranza de' beati." Musically the pitch and harmony work together to intensify the aural excitement of the stanza, while the rhythm also contributes to the crescendo of the stanza, as Dante plays with the rhyme scheme for

⁹ "An angel entreats with the divine mind, / and says: "Lord, in the world is seen / a marvel in the act that come forth / from a soul that to this very height shines." / Heaven, which has no other defect / but to have her, asks her of its Lord, / and every saint cries out for this grace."

¹⁰ "Pity alone our cause defends, / so that God speaks, having my lady in mind: / "My beloved, suffer now in peace, / that your hope may be as long as I please / there where one is who expects to lose her, / and will say in hell: O evil born, / I beheld the hope of the blessed."

an intensified dramatic effect. The last word of the first line, "intelletto," is not rhymed again until the end of the fifth line with "difetto." The rhymes of lines two, three, and four give the quatrain a quicker pace with the words "vede," "procede," and "resplende," creating the crescendo. Dante then repeats this rhyme scheme in the next quatrain, transitioning to a tercet, and dramatically ending with a couplet rhyming "nati" with "beati." Cook reminds us that, "Listener and creator alike in both music and poetry have in their subconscious minds many connections through rhythm with the external world. These are usually heightened considerably by the suggestion of the narrative element in poetry."¹¹ Applying Cook's statement to Dante's rhyme scheme in the second stanza of "Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore," we find that the poet connects to his reader through actions that create a rhythm in daily life. The verbs "dice," "vede," "procede," "chiede," "intende," and "piace" all express common actions which give a certain motion to quotidian life. As these actions are performed on a daily basis, they naturally contribute to the daily rhythm, which in turn creates a link between the poet and the reader.

If the second stanza of the *canzone* is analogous to the *allegro* movement of a symphony, then the final stanza of the poem serves as the *rondo* movement. This *congedo* is addressed to the *canzone* itself, sending it forth into the world to bring the praise of his lady to all those of courtly ways. The poem's *rondo* effect comes from the poet's repetitious instructions regarding to whom the *canzone* must present itself. The first part of the *rondo* focuses on courtly ladies, while the second part is concerned with the concepts of love and praise:

Canzone, io so che tu girai parlando
a donne assai, quand'io t'avrò avanzata.
Or t'ammonisco, perch'io t'ho allevata
per figliuola d'Amor giovane e piana (VN19.13, 1-4)¹²

As Dante instructs his poem to speak to many ladies, the term "donne" is the focus of the quatrain, which the poet later reinforces in line four with "figliuola," "giovane," and "piana." While these words do not refer to the "donne," they mirror the type of lady with whom the poem will communicate. The *canzone* then continues:

¹¹ Cook, "The Musicality of Poetry," 305.

¹² "Canzone, I know that you will go forth speaking / to many ladies, after I have released you. / I now admonish you, since I have nurtured you / as a daughter of Love young and forthright."

che là 've giugni tu dichì pregando:
"Insegnatemi gir, ch'io son mandata
a quella di cui laude so' adornata."
E se non vuoi andar sì come vana,
non restar ove sia gente villana:
ingegnati, se puoi, d'esser palese
solo con donne o con omo cortese
che ti merranno là per via tostana. (VN 19.14, 5-12)¹³

As in a *rondo*, the melodic and harmonic phrases are repeated, the "amore" concept from line four is linked to "laude" in line seven, creating a sense of elation. More powerfully, however, the "donne" from line two is repeated in line eleven, recalling the *coro delle donne* from the first line of the poem, as the *rondo* is brought to its close.

If the first *canzone* of the *Vita Nuova* is symphonic, the second is elegiac. "Donna pietosa," the second *canzone* of the *Vita Nuova*, written in six stanzas, muses on the inevitable death of Beatrice, as well as the impact it will have on Dante and the entire *civitas*. In this *canzone*, Dante uses a form of the word death nine times, as he describes his own condition, as well as how he imagines the death of his lady. Guglielmo Gorni notes that the poem is centered around two rhyme words, *morte* and *morta*, and are "pressoché identiche, e affini a *mora* e *Morra'ti* . . . anzi . . . *morte* con la sua area semantica è presente in ciascuna delle sei stanze."¹⁴

The first stanza initiates the mournful aspect of the *canzone* with strong images of death and sadness. The speaker—in this case a very ill Dante—calls upon Death as he cries in his sleep, causing his relative ("la donna pietosa") to become extremely distressed:

Donna pietosa e di novella etate,
adorna assai di gentilezza umane,
ch'era là 'v'io chiamava spesso Morte,
veggendo li occhi miei pien di pietate,
e ascoltando le parole vane,
si mosse con paura a pianger forte.
E altre donne, che si fuoro accorte
di me per quella che meco piangia,

¹³ "that where you arrive you say, beseeching: / 'Teach me the way, for I am sent / to her with whose praise I am adorned.' / And if you wish not to go like a useless thing, / do not remain where folk are villainous: / strive, if you can, to open yourself / only to ladies or to men of courtly ways, / who will guide you there by the speedier way."

¹⁴ See Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, ed. Guglielmo Gorni (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 132.

fecer lei partir via (VN 23.17-18, 1-9)¹⁵

As “occhi pien di pietate,” “parole vane,” “pianger forte,” contribute to the woeful atmosphere of the poem, the rhyme scheme, beginning with two poetic feet of ABC, augments the mournful theme by slowing down the rhythm of the two tercets. By placing emphasis on the final words in lines three and four, Dante intentionally forces the reader to decelerate, contributing to the somber rhythm of the poem. He repeats this technique throughout the *canzone*, consistently placing emphasis on the words referring to death, and thus creating the elegiac feel of the poem.

The reader is drawn into this morose atmosphere as the poet contemplates not only his own death, but also the inevitable death of his beloved:

Ben converrà che la mia donna mora.
 Io presi tanto smarrimento allora,
 Ch’io chiusi li occhi vilmente gravati,
 E furon sì smagati
 Li spiriti miei, che ciascun giva errand;
 O poscia imaginando,
 Di caunoscenza e di verità fora,
 Visi di donne m’apparver crucciati,
 Che mi dicean pur:—Morra’ti, morra’ti.—(VN 23.22, 34-42)¹⁶

The poet augments the sense of despair in the stanza with the phrases “smarrimento,” “vilmente gravati,” and “smagati,” creating a space in which the reader experiences and shares Dante’s dismay. The timbre of the *canzone* functions to underscore the sense of death and desolation, as the poet closes the third stanza with the words “morra’ti, morra’ti.”

As in an *adagio* movement of a *concerto*, in which the pitch, harmony, and timbre are changed while they continue to support the theme of the composition, so does Dante’s poetic tone change in the final stanza of “Donna pietosa.” Continuing the theme of death, the poet abandons the despair of the preceding stanzas, employing a softer, more gentle tone:

¹⁵ “A lady compassionate and young, / richly adorned with human perfections, / who was there, where often I called on Death, / seeing my eyes filled with pain, / and hearing my empty words, / was moved by fear to bitter weeping. / And other ladies, who became aware / of me through her who with me wept, / made her go away.”

¹⁶ “The time must come when my lady dies. / I took on such dismay, then, / that I closed my vilely burdened eyes, / and so confounded were / my spirits that each wandered off; / and afterward, imagining, / to all knowledge and truth lost, / I seemed to see faces of women disconsolate, / who told me over and over again:— You will die, you will die.—”

Morte, assai dolce ti tengo;
Tu dei omai essere cosa gentile,
Poi che tu se' ne la mia donna stata,
E dei aver pietate e non disdegno.
Vedi che sì desideroso vegno
D'esser de' tuoi, che io ti somiglio in fede. (VN23.27, 73-78)¹⁷

Desolation and confusion are replaced by the understanding that through the virtue of the beloved, death is noble and compassionate, qualities with which the poet himself identifies. The terms “smarrimento,” “vilmente,” and “smagati” are converted in this final stanza to “dolce,” “gentile,” and “pietate” guiding the *canzone* toward a quieter and more tranquil conclusion.

The third *canzone* I will examine is “Li occhi dolenti,” which is a response to Beatrice’s death and treats the poet’s grief. The theme of loss is prevalent throughout the poem, and Dante himself refers to the work as “pietosa mia canzone” (my rueful canzone). The first stanza is replete with images of pain and grief (which I italicize in the following passage for emphasis):

Li occhi *dolenti* per pietà del core
hanno di *lagrimar sofferta pena*,
sì che per vinti son remasi omai.
Ora, s’i’ voglio sfogar lo *dolore*
che a poco a poco a la *morte* mi mena,
convenemi parlar traendo *guai*. (VN31.8, 1-6)¹⁸

Immediately immersed in the poet’s pain, the reader is confronted with the images of the painful eyes, which are exhausted from weeping and in fact are overwhelmed. In Richard Lansing’s translation of this *canzone*, the eyes “have borne the suffering that weeping brings, / so that, exhausted, they concede defeat.”¹⁹

As in “Donna pietosa,” the rhyme scheme of the first six lines of the *canzone* is two feet of ABC. This structure contributes to the grief-stricken sense of the poem. The poet creates a link between the last words of each line of the scheme, so that “core” is linked to “dolore,” “pena” to “mena,” and “omai” to “guai.” Such a pattern focuses the reader’s attention on Dante’s suffering and

¹⁷ “Death, in great sweetness I hold you; / you must hereafter be a noble thing, / because you have been in my lady, and you must have compassion and not disdain. / See how desirous I come / to be one of yours, for I resemble you truly.”

¹⁸ “The eyes grieving for the heart’s pity / have from weeping suffered pain, / so that overwhelmed they desist in the end. / Now, if I wish to relieve my grief, / which little by little leads me toward death, / I must speak, dragging up woes.”

¹⁹ See Barolini, Lansing, Frisardi, *Dante’s Lyric Poetry*, 252.

creates a woeful sentiment for the remainder of the poem. This specific structure creates a monotonous rhythm analogous to a dirge, giving the poem its mournful feel. This is evident in each of the stanzas, for example stanza four:

Dannomi angoscia li sospiri forte,
quando ‘l pensiero ne la mente grave
mi reca quella che m’ha ‘l cor diviso:
e spesse fiata pensando a la morte,
venemente un disio tanto soave,
che mi tramuta lo color nel viso. (VN 31.13, 43-48)²⁰

and finally in the fifth stanza:

Pianger di doglia e sospirar d’angoscia
mi strugge ‘l cor ovunque sol mi trovo,
sì che ne ‘ncrescerebbe a chi m’audesse:
e quale è stata la mia vita, poscia
che la mia donna andò nel secol novo,
lingua non è che dicer lo sapesse: (VN 31.15, 57-63)²¹

As Gorni reminds us, many commentators have underscored the parallels between “Donne ch’avete intelletto” and “Li occhi dolenti,” using Dante’s words when referring to the former as “figliuola d’Amore,” and the latter as “figliuola di Tristizia.” Similar to “Donne ch’avete,” this third *canzone* is written in five stanzas, but has a distinct *congedo*, a poetic technique used to end or close a poem, most often used by the medieval Italian poets in their *canzoni*. Dante’s use of the *congedo* in this poem gives it a finality, or a true feeling of conclusion, reminiscent of the grief one experiences at the death of a loved one. Catherine Keen notes that “[T]he *congedo* to an Italian *canzone* is the closing stanza . . . the Italian term highlights the idea of closure or departure, as the words take leave of their author.”²² In the *congedo* of “Li occhi dolenti,” Dante sends his *canzone* away, as one would bid farewell at the funeral of a loved one:

Pietosa mia canzone, or va piangendo;

²⁰ “My sighs give me great anguish, / when thought in the oppressed mind / brings before me her who has divided my heart: / and many times thinking of death, / there comes to me a desire so sweet / that it alters the color of my face.”

²¹ “To weep in pain and sigh in anguish / destroys my heart wherever I find myself alone, / so that it would pain whoever heard me: / and what my life has been, since / my lady went to the new world, / there is not a tongue that knows how to tell it:.”

²² Catherine Keen, “‘Va’, mia canzone’: Textual Transmissions and the Congedo in Medieval Exile Lyrics,” *Italian Studies* 64, no.2 (2009): 183-197.

e ritruova le donne e le donzelle
a cui le tre sorelle
erano usate di portar letizia;
e tu, che se' figliuola di tristizia,
vatten disconsolata a star con elle. (VN31.17, 71-76)²³

With the six lines of his *congedo*, Dante reintroduces the *coro delle donne*, who, in “Donne ch’avete intelletto,” contributed to the elation of the *canzone* but are now part of the mournful. “Letizia” is converted into “tristizia,” as the poet brings his song to a quiet conclusion: “vatten disconsolata a star con elle.”

Stefano Carrai writes, “Interessante, inoltre, è osservare come, all’interno della gamma delle canzoni, si registri una parabola che va dall’euforia (*Donne ch’avete*) all’elegia con prefigurazione di Beatrice (*Donna pietosa*) al compianto funebre vero e proprio (*Li occhi dolenti*).”²⁴ Carrai’s statement confirms the trajectory of Dante’s three *canzoni* from the happiness of praise of his lady to the sadness of grief at her loss, ultimately transforming the timbre of the three poems from the brightness of *laude* to the darkness of *dolore*. That which Dante began as poetry of praise he concludes as poetry of sorrow.

Inspired by the *cansos*, the poets of the *stilnovismo* echo the troubadours in their own medieval love songs, the *canzoni*. As we have seen, Dante used this poetic form to evoke specific sentiments, whether euphoric praise, elegiac foreboding, or mournful grieving. Through the poet’s use of pitch, harmony, rhythm, and timbre these three *canzoni* of the *Vita Nuova* communicate Dante’s emotions to his reader, who shares his joy, fears, and grief through the musical poetics of his poems.

²³ “My rueful canzone, now go, weeping; / and find again the ladies and the maidens / to whom your sisters / were accustomed to offering delight: / and you, who are a child of sadness, / go disconsolate to stay with them.”

²⁴ Stefano Carrai, *Dante elegiaco: una chiave di lettura per la Vita nova* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2006), 91.