

**“TEMPRANDO COL DOLCE L’ACERBO:”
INSTRUMENTAL AND VOCAL POLYPHONY
IN THE ‘COMMEDIA’¹**

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This essay tracks the historical-musicological context of the lemma “organi” / “organo” as it appears in *Purg.* 9.144 and *Par.* 17.44. Drawing from medieval treatises and monks’ descriptions such as Raban Maur, Notkerus Balbulus, Baldric of Dol, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Wulstan, the author uses intertextual evidence to show that *Purg.* 9.144 (“quando a cantar con organi si stea”) evokes a great pipe organ as was found in some medieval churches. The essay also argues that *Par.* 17.43–44 (“come viene ad orecchia / dolce armonia da organo”) should be understood as a polyphonic *organum* that serves the two-fold purpose of lending authority to the *Commedia*’s longest prophecy and of musically representing the harmonious reconciliation of the highs and lows in human life.

Keywords: Dante, *Commedia*, Music, Purgatorio, Paradiso, Organo, Organa, Organum, Polyphony

The Italian word *organo* has several different meanings, and during the Middle Ages two of these meanings, deriving from the Latin *organum*, were used in regards to music. One meaning refers to the musical instrument with pipes, which could be large and complex or small and portative, and which could be operated by water or air. The other meaning refers to the practice of polyphonic singing: “cantare cum organo” was a standard indication to perform songs with discant, sometimes in an improvisatory manner, sometimes following a set of carefully notated *voces organales*, as happens for example in the *Magnus liber organi* (Biblioteca Laurenziana, MS.

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared, in Italian language and with a different title, in *Dante e l’arte*: Francesco Ciabattini, “Il dolce ruggito del tuono: per un’interpretazione di Purgatorio IX, 144 e Paradiso XVII, 44,” *Dante e l’arte* 2 (2015): 65–86.

² Commentaries to the *Commedia* are taken from *Dartmouth Dante Project* and *Dantelab*.

Pluteus 29.1), produced in France during the mid-thirteenth century.

This dual meaning of the term has caused some debate among Dante scholars who have tried to fathom its significance in the only two passages of the *Commedia* where *organi* (*Purg.* 9.144) or *organo* (*Par.* 17.44) has an obvious musical meaning. In this essay I examine these two Dantean passages that for centuries have engaged critics due to their ambiguous reading. When describing the performative modes of songs and sounds, Dante resorts to a variety of terms because, as coeval manuscript evidence shows, and as Giulio Cattin reminds us, “nel Duecento in Italia non era nota una denominazione univoca e comune a tutti per indicare l’esecuzione a più voci.”³ So, if Dante does not utilize a specialistic language to distinguish between monophony and polyphony, how are we to understand the two occurrences of the lemma *organi/organo* in *Purgatorio* 9.144 and *Par.* 17.44? Are they the pipe instrument or the vocal polyphony termed *organum* in Latin? I will provide evidence that “Quando a cantar con organi si stea” of *Purgatorio* 9 indicates the pipe instrument, and suggest that the “dolce armonia da organo” of *Par.* 17 is to be understood as vocal polyphony.

Let us begin with *Purgatorio* 9: At this juncture of the poem, the pilgrim and his guide set out to cross the threshold that separates Ante-Purgatory from the place of genuine spiritual purification, having obtained permission to proceed from the angel who watches the gates. Infernal cacophony echoes sinisterly in the screeching linchpins as the gates to penance are opened:

E quando fuor ne’ *cardini* distorti
 li spigoli di quella regge sacra,
 che di *metallo* son sonanti e forti,
 non *ruggiò* sì né si mostrò sì acra
 Tarpëa, come tolto le fu il buono
 Metello, per che poi rimase macra.
 Io mi rivolsi attento al primo *tuono*,
 e “Te Deum laudamus” mi pareo
 udire in voce mista al *dolce* suono.
 Tale imagine a punto mi rendea
 ciò ch’io udiva, qual prender si suole

³ Giulio Cattin, “‘Secundare’ e ‘Succinere’: polifonia a Padova e Pistoia nel Duecento,” *Musica e storia* 3 (1995): 44.

quando a *cantar con organi* si stea;
ch'or sì or no s'intendon le parole. (*Purg.* 9.133–145. Emphasis added)

Critics have been divided on the interpretation of *Purgatorio* 9.138–144: what is the “dolce suono” (9.141) evoked in this passage? It cannot be the roar of the opening gates, which is more likely to be associated with the words “primo tuono” (9.139), and why does Dante hear “Te Deum laudamus” as he focuses his attention on thundering sound? The interpretative difficulty was partially solved by Denise Heilbronn,⁴ who suggested that the roar of thunder and the screech of the hinges were not, in medieval culture, incompatible with the notion of sweetness, and should therefore be understood as two opposite aspects of the same acoustic phenomenon; that is, the tremendous sound of the door of Purgatory opening up for the pilgrim. More recently, Gino Casagrande has reposed an interpretation that combines a polyphonic song with the sound of the church organ, arguing for an alternatim performance of the *Te deum*.⁵

Not yet fully investigated is the fact that the words emphasized in italics above recur in several medieval texts relating to the sound of impressive church organs: the metallic sound, the thunder, the roar, and the reference to screeching hinges populate the rhetoric of such descriptions, often in conjunction with the sweetness oxymoronically superimposed on the blast of the pipes. The key to understanding this passage correctly must be sought in monastic descriptions of and Patristic literature on the pipe organ.

If we examine the evolution of pneumatic organ descriptions in Christian literature since the time of Saint Augustine, we find that, to early Christians, the term *organum* meant any musical instrument, from the lyre to the psaltery, and even the human voice. At the origin of this definition stands Augustine’s *Enarrationes in psalmos* (56:16), wherein we read that:

We call all musical instruments *organa*. Not only the great organ with wind pipes, but any tool that can produce a tune, has a body, and can

⁴ See Denise Heilbronn, “*Concentus musicus*: The Creaking Hinges of Dante’s Gate of Purgatory,” *Rivista di studi italiani* 2 (1984): 5.

⁵ See Gino Casagrande, “‘Quando a cantar con organi si stea’ (Purgatorio IX 144),” *Studi danteschi* 76 (2011): 165–178.

be used by a singer is called *organum*.⁶

Augustine was preoccupied with distinguishing different instruments, in particular the great though primitive pneumatic organs, from the human voice, because the Latin word could be used in both cases. Many later writers echoed Augustine, following the stylistic convention of learned treatises to recast *verbatim* formulations from previous authors: Isidore of Seville (“*Organum*, vocabulum est generale vasorum omnium musicorum;” *Etym.* III.21.2) and Bede (“generaliter omnia musicorum vasa organa possunt dici;” *De ortographia*, *PL* 90: 140C⁷). As we read in Du Cange and Markovits,⁸ two important theoretical texts from the eleventh century also follow the Augustinian formula: *Elementarium doctrinae rudimentum* by Papia Vocabulista and the anonymous *Vocabularium musicum* of Santa Maria dell’Albaneta in Monte Cassino.⁹ Psalm commentators were particularly concerned with explaining the line of the final psalm (“Laudate eum in tympano et choro, laudate eum in chordis et organo;” *Psalms* 150:4), which exhorts the devout to praise God with all sorts of musical instruments, a long-debated and potentially problematic practice for medieval Christianity, given its predilection for sobriety in religious celebrations. The ambiguity generated by the Latin term drove some Christian writers to advocate the banning of loud instruments during mass, interpreting “in chordis” metaphorically and attributing a vocal meaning to “et organo.” Conversely, those who were in favor of allowing the pipe organ during the celebration of mass took pains to specify that the Greek language has a different word with which to designate such an instrument—“ὕδραυλις,” which, as Markovits warns, could indicate not only hydraulic organs but wind pipe organs as well—

⁶ “Organa dicuntur omnia instrumenta musicorum. Non solum illud organum dicitur, quod grande est, et inflatur follibus; sed quidquid aptatur ad cantilenam, et corporeum est, quo instrumento utitur qui cantat, organum dicitur.” All translations my own unless otherwise noted.

⁷ In Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Latina* [*PL*] (Online database, Alexandria, VA, 1995) 90: 140C.

⁸ See Charles Du Fresne Du Cange, “Organum,” in *Glossarium mediæ et infimæ latinitatis* (Niort: L. Favre, 1883–1887, available here: <http://ducange.enc.sorbonne.fr/ORGANUM>); and Michael Markovits, *Die Orgel im Altertum* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 274.

⁹ See Alma Santosuosso, “The First Dictionary of Music: The *Vocabularium musicum* of ms. Monte Cassino 318,” in *Music in Medieval Europe: Studies in Honour of Bryan Gillingham*, ed. Terence Bailey and Alma Santosuosso (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 70.

while the Latin does not differentiate and applies the word *organum* to all types of musical instruments. Some authors claimed that, even though the term is polysemous, *organa* should be employed to indicate the pipe instrument: Among them, Amalar of Metz (ninth century) recast the Augustinian formula (*Enarrationes* Ps. 150:7), clarifying that because Latin, unlike Greek, lacks a different vocable to distinguish the organ from other instruments, “*organa proprie dicantur ea quae inflantur follibus*” [we should call *organa* all instruments with wind pipes; (*De ecclesiastico officio* III.3)].¹⁰ Thus, to these early Christian writers, *organa* are specifically wind pipe instruments, rather than all musical instruments.

However, this notion had begun to change already with Cassiodorus (490–585), who influenced several later writers: His insistence on the imposing size of the organ and the oxymoronic nature of its sound—at once disconcerting and sweet—makes us perceive the following passage as cognate to *Purgatorio* 9:

The organ is a *tower* constructed of divers pipes, which blown by the wind of the bellows, produces a *very full sound*; and that a proper modulation may render practicable, it is provided with certain wooden tongues internally which, when skillfully pressed by the fingers of the performer, produce a *very grand and melodious music*.¹¹

Unlike Isidore of Seville and others, Cassiodorus does not even entertain the possibility that *organum* could mean the human voice or another instrument: He describes it unambiguously as a towering machine operated by wind (*flatu*), whose bellows and keys (*follium* and *linguis*) require several skilled players (*magistorum*) to make a powerful but sweet sound.

A text by Notkerus Balbulus (c. 840–887) shows remarkable similarities with *Purgatorio* 9, to the point that we could suppose a direct knowledge by Dante: The Saint Gall monk describes, in *De gestis Caroli Magni imperatoris*, an impressive, almost legendary

¹⁰ In *PL* 105:1107.

¹¹ *Expositio in psalterium*, Ps 150, 9, in *PL* 70: 1052D–1053A: “Organum itaque est quasi turris diversis fistulis fabricata, quibus flatu follium vox copiosissima destinatur, et ut eam modulatio decora componat, linguis quibusdam ligneis ab interiore parte construitur, quas disciplinabiliter Magistorum digiti reprimentes *grandisonam* efficiunt et *suavissimam cantilenam*.” Emphasis added. Translation from George Ashdown Audsley, *The Art of Organ Building* (New York: Dover, 2009; reprint, New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1905), 19.

instrument, which the Byzantine delegation gave to Charlemagne in 812:

An outstanding organ of the musicians which, with vessels cast in bronze and bellows of bullhide blowing magnificently through the *bronze pipes*, matched the very *roar of the crash of thunder*, the chattering of the lyre, or the sweetness of bells.¹²

We observe not only the same words employed by Dante to describe the deafening roar of the opening gates—the roar, the thunder, the metallic echo of the pipes—but also the sweetness of bells and lyre resound in the “dolce suono” of line 141, reproducing a mingle of sweet and harsh tones, which is conventional in the descriptions of medieval organs and helps the poet of the *Commedia* to express the theological oxymoron of pleasure that is at the root of the poetics of *Purgatorio*.

The correspondence of the Dantean terms with those of Notker (*fistulas aereas*/cardini...metallo; *rugitum*/ruggiò; *tonitruum*/tuono; *dulcedinem*/dolce suono) is particularly evident in the above-cited passage. Such intertextual correspondences are the watermark of the formula Dante modeled this passage on through his utilization of building blocks from the language of monks’ descriptions. The majestic instrument described by the monk of Saint Gall was a gift from Byzantium to Charlemagne; brought to Aachen in 812, it must have been unique in its genre, a gift worthy of being described with emphatic terms that also fit the opening of the gates of purification in the *Commedia*.

These machines would appeal to the imagination of later writers because of their impressive body and their deafening sound. The English monk Wulstan (d. 963) speaks of one such apparatus in a quasi-mythical tone in the introduction of his life of Saint Swithun, attributing to the Winchester organ forty pipes and twenty-six bellows, requiring up to seventy stout men:

¹² Notkerus Balbulus, *De Gestis Caroli Magni, alias Monachi Sangallensis De rebus bellicis Caroli Magni* II.X, in *Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France*, ed. Martin Bouquet and Léopold Delisle (Paris: Victor Palmé, 1869), 124: “Organum praestantissimum, quod doliis ex aere conflatis follibusque taurinis per *fistulas aereas* mire perflantibus *rugitum* quidem *tonitruum* boatu, garrulitatem vero lyrae, vel cymbali *dulcedine*[m] coaequabat.” Emphasis added. Translation from Peter Williams, *The Organ in Western Culture, 750–1250* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 142–43.

The organ found here is the greatest ever
and is built on a twofold sound.
Two rows of six bellows are conjoined above,
And below lie four and ten,
Operated by seventy strong men;
They move their arms dripping with much sweat.
Each one vigorously urges his companions
To blow up the air with all their strength
The empty bladder thus filled *roars*
And supports a line of four hundred Muses
Which the organ player's hand skillfully controls...
Thus, the *metallic, thunder-like voice* strikes the ears
Which cannot hear any other sound except this,
This *crashing sound* reverberates here and there
And everyone must cover their ears with their open hands
Because they can't suffer the *roar*
Sent forth by various clashing sounds
And this melody of the Muses is heard through the entire city
And its fame flies around the entire country.¹³

We find, in this description, the loud metallic voice, the metaphors of the roar and the thunder, and even the verb *reddunt*, which leaves its trace in “rendeia” (*Purg.* 9.142), all recurring elements in the formula which, while born between the ninth and tenth centuries, would continue to appear in subsequent literature through the reproduction of the same wording and would resonate as well in the vernacular of Dante's *Purgatorio* 9.

Among treatise authors who dealt with the matter, the benedictine Raban Maur thus described the construction and acoustic effect of the organ, comparing it to the one in Jerusalem that the Hebrews heard from Mount Olivet:

¹³ Wulstan, *Vita Sancti Swithuni*, in *PL* 137: 110C–111A: “Talia et auxistis hic Organana, qualia nusquam / Cernuntur, gemino constabilita sono. / Bisseni supra sociantur ordine folles, / Inferiusque jacent quatuor atque decem, / Quas agitant validi septuaginta viri; / Brachia versantes, multo et sudore madentes / Certatimque suos suisque movet socios / Viribus ut totis impellant flamina sursum, / Et *rugiat* plena capsula referta sinu / Sola quadrigenta quae sustinet ordine Musas / Quas manus organici temperat ingenii... / Inque modum *tonitrus vox ferrea* verberat aures / Preter ut hunc solum nil capiant sonitum, / Concrepat in *tantum sonus* hinc illincque resultans, / Quisque manu patulas claudat ut auriculas, / Haudquaquam sufferre valens propiando *rugitum*, / Quem *reddunt* varii concrepitando soni, / Musarumque melos auditur ubique per urbem, / Et peragat totam fama volans patriam;” *Scriptorum de musica mediæ aevi nova series a Gerbertina altera*, ed. Edmond de Coussemaker (Paris: Durand, 1864–76; Reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1963), 208. Emphasis added.

First of all I will discuss the clamor of the organ (because it is greater in *sound and loudness* than all other instruments). It is made of two elephant skins joined to a shell and a very loud sound is blown by twelve smiths through twelve *bronze pipes*, singing like a *thunder*. Thus it can doubtlessly be heard from a mile away or more: this is how *the organ* of the Hebrews was heard from Jerusalem all the way to Mount Olivet.¹⁴

Raban, here departing from Isidore of Seville, whose *Etymologies* are otherwise a constant reference point for the *De universo*, instead follows *verbatim* the letter of Pseudo-Jerome to Dardan, prefect of Gaul (PL 30: 213B), insisting on the loudness of the bronze pipes through the repeated use of the metaphor of thunder (*in modum tonitru*).

Baldric, twelfth-century bishop of the Breton diocese of Dol, witnessed in a church of Fécamp (Fiscannum) a majestic organ, the description of which in his *Epistula ad Fiscannenses* includes elements that again resonate with those we find in Dante (the bronze pipes, the sweetness of the sound, the association with sacred songs). Baldric, however, leaves out the harshest qualities of the organ’s voice and stresses instead its tonal range and harmoniousness (*symphoniae sonoritatem*):

I saw a musical instrument made of *bronze pipes*, which, when blown by artificial bellows, *made a sweet sound*, mingling notes at the octave and in consonance, blending low, medium and high-pitch voices, such that *you would think of a choir of clerics* in which old men, young men, and boys sing together in jubilation: they call it an organ.¹⁵

In the following pages, Baldric takes a stance in favor of using the organ in churches, and thus passes over in silence its thundering sound—the thought of which would be unpleasant for the

¹⁴ Raban Maur, *De universo* XVIII.iv, in *PL* 111: 496: “Primo omnium ad organi (eo quod majus esse his omnibus generibus *in sonitu et fortitudine nimia* computatur) clamores veniam, quod de duabus elephantorum pellibus concavum conjungitur, et per duodecim fabrorum sufflatoria compulsatum per duodecim *cicutas aereas in sonitum nimium*, quem in modum *tonitru* concitat: ita ut per mille passus sine dubio sensibiliter seu utique amplius audiatur: sicut Hebraeorum *de organis*, quae ab Jerusalem usque ad montem Oliveti, et amplius sonanter audiuntur.” Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Baldric, *Epistula ad Fiscannenses*, in *PL* 166: 1177D: “Instrumentum vidi musicum, *fistulis aeneis* compactum, quod follibus excitum fabrilibus *suavem reddebat melodiam*, et per continuam diapason, et per symphoniae sonoritatem, graves, et medias, et acutas voces uniebat, ut quidam *concinnentium chorus putaretur clericorum*, in quo pueri, senes, juvenes, jubilantes convenirent et continerentur: organa illud vocabant.” Emphasis added.

readers—and stresses instead its melodiousness and ability to imitate the sweetness of human voices.

Of a contrary opinion, Aelred of Rievaulx (twelfth century), in his *Speculum charitatis*, proposes the metaphor of thunder in a rhetorical question in order to disqualify the sound of what he views as an unfit instrument for liturgical offices:

Leaving aside typology and allegory, whence all these organs and instruments? What is the use, I ask, of that terrible sound of bellows, more *similar to the roar of thunder* than expressing the *sweetness* of the human voice?¹⁶

The fact that Aelred explicitly states his intention to leave aside allegorical and figural constructions indicates that, by the twelfth century, the roar and sweetness of the organ's sound had been loaded with symbolical value. We also notice that Aelred highlights the roar of thunder (*tonitruī fragorem*) and minimizes the sweetness of the voice. However, he must reference all of these aspects, because, by this time, they have become integral parts of the critical debate among scholars. Aelred's position is opposite to Baldric's and against using instruments in liturgy. Aelred goes on to disparage the singing style of the clerics who, lacking the necessary sobriety, sing now effeminately, now sounding like neighing horses, banging their heads in a manner that is more fit for a theatrical show than a religious office¹⁷. What truly matters in terms of our argument is that Aelred simultaneously needs to address and deny the dignity and *suavitas* of the organ's sound, because these qualities had become normative attributes in organological treatises.

As to the direct knowledge of church organs that Dante might have had, the first such large instrument was installed in

¹⁶ Aelred of Rievaulx, *Speculum charitatis* II.23, in *PL* 195: 571: “Unde, quaeso, cessantibus iam typis et figuris, unde in Ecclesia tot organa, tot cymbala? Ad quid, rogo, terribilis ille follium flatus, *tonitruī potius fragorem*, quam vocis exprimens *suavitatem*.” Emphasis added.

¹⁷ “Nunc vos stringitur, nunc frangitur, nunc impingitur, nunc diffusiori sonitu dilatatur. Aliquando, quod pudet dicere, in equinos hinnitus cogitur; aliquando virili vigore deposito, in femineae vocis gracilitates acuitur, nonnunquam artificiosa quadam circumvolutione torquetur et retorquetur. Videas aliquando hominem aperto ore quasi intercluso halitu exspirare, non cantare, ac ridiculosa quadam vocis interceptione quasi minitari silentium; nunc agones morientium, vel exstasim patientium imitari. Interim histrionicis quibusdam gestibus totum corpus agitur, torquentur labia, rotant, ludunt humeri.” *PL* 195: 571.

Florence in the basilica of SS. Annunziata in 1299.¹⁸ During the fourteenth century we find abundant news of large church organs existing in Siena, Padua, and Venice. Among them, some instruments were of exceptional size, with metal pipes, built for the sake of grandiosity both visual and acoustic. Kimberly Marshall quotes two treatises from the eleventh century (attributed to an anonymous writer from Bern and a certain monk named Teophilus) titled *De diversis artibus*,¹⁹ according to which organ pipes were made of copper wrought in thin sheets. These were then wrapped around hollow iron cylinders which were soldered together. Iconography from illuminated manuscripts can help to illustrate the physical characteristics of these large instruments: for example, the Harding Bible (Dijon, Bibliothèque Municipale, 14 vol. 3, fol. 13v, dated 1109), the Cambridge Psalter (St. John College, B18(40), fol. 1r), and the Psalter of Santa Elisabetta (Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Cividale del Friuli, MS. CXXXVII, fol. 149r, early thirteenth century, Figure 1).²⁰ More large organs, though hydraulic, are depicted in the Utrecht Psalter (Utrecht, University Library, Script. eccl. 484, fol. 83r) and the Eadwine Psalter (Cambridge, Trinity College, R. 17. 1, fol. 261v, mid-thirteenth century).



Figure 1. *Salterio di Santa Elisabetta*, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Cividale del Friuli, MS. 137, fol. 149r (Permission Granted by Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali, Polo museale del Friuli Venezia-Giulia. No other reproduction allowed).

¹⁸ See Corrado Moretti, *L’organo italiano* (Milan: Casa musicale Eco, 1973), 51–52; Antonio Maria Vicentini, “Memorie di musicisti dell’Ordine dei Servi di Maria,” *Note di Archivio* 8 (1931): 35.

¹⁹ See Kimberly Marshall, “Organ,” in *A Performer’s Guide to Medieval Music*, ed. Ross W. Duffin (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 414–15.

²⁰ See Marshall, “Organ,” 415.

However, whether Dante had direct familiarity with such impressive instruments or not, it makes sense that he would consult literature specifically dedicated to this technical genre in order to emphasize a topical episode: The organ that resounds so magnificently at the gates of Purgatory strikes a certain amount of fear in the heart of pilgrim and reader alike. The literary convention of depicting organs in a majestic fashion must have survived and superimposed itself upon the actual reality of small portative organs employed in liturgy, giving birth to what became a literary category, if often “the portrayal of numerous and varied instruments was founded upon psychological, not practical, considerations.”²¹

In reading *Purgatorio* 9.139, we are meant to understand that “primo tuono” and “dolce suono” both refer to the creaking hinges, while the “Te Deum” performed by many voices implies an overlapping song. Thunder and sweetness might seem irreconcilable attributes for the same sound, but the deafening roar of the moving door paradoxically contains a seed of musical sweetness, because it opens the way to purification through penance. This oxymoronic quality of music is the key signature of *Purgatorio*, since spiritual healing is acquired through both pain and singing. Roaring and thunder were not outside the range of musical sounds, as proven by Isidore of Seville, Cassiodorus, and Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* (““Quid hic?” inquam, ‘quis est, qui complet aures, tantus et tam dulcis sonus?’”). Dante himself, in describing through the words of Peter Damian the outrage of the celestial cohort at the opulent corruption of the prelates, has the blessed souls intone—thus resuming the “sweet symphony of Paradise”—a cry so loud that it resembles thunder and yet is certainly not without musical qualities:

Dintorno a questa vennero e fermarsi,
e fero un grido di sì alto suono,
che non potrebbe qui assomigliarsi;
né io lo 'ntesi, sì mi vinse il tuono (*Par.* 21.139–142)

The oxymoron of catharsis through pain, and thus of attaining sweetness by experiencing harshness, is emblematic of Purgatory, to the point that Forese Donati finds “dolce [l’] assenzio d’i martiri” (*Purg.* 23.86), because it will earn him Paradise. Forese accepts pain with joy (“io dico pena e dovria dir sollazzo;” *Purg.*

²¹ Edmund A. Bowles, “Were Musical Instruments Used in the Liturgical Service During the Middle Ages?” *The Galpin Society Journal* 10 (1957): 44.

23.72), embracing his transitory destiny of penance in order to reach a greater and everlasting enjoyment in Heaven. It is the same promise of which Virgil speaks, though with cool detachment, at the inception of the pilgrim’s otherworldly journey:

E vederai color che son contenti
nel foco, perché speran di venire,
quando che sia, a le beate genti. (*Inf.* 1.118–120)

If the penitent souls gladly accept their punishments, then it is not inconceivable that a loud, harsh sound would be perceived as paradoxically sweet: The screeching of the hinges paves the way both to suffering and hope, as the text of “Te Deum” also proclaims: “Aperuisti credentibus regna caelorum” [You opened the kingdom of heaven for those who believe].²²

Evidence exists of a practice in which the human voice overlapped the organ, in use during the time of Dante: one need only to think of the passage by Aelred quoted above, in which the monk disapproves of the practice of singing over “organa et cymbala.” But closer to Dante’s home, in Siena, it was common to sing hymns, namely “Hosanna,” to the accompaniment of the organ, a custom authorized by the very psalms mentioned above, as we read in the *Ordo officiorum Ecclesiae Senensis* (1215):

And note that in this song of the angels, sometimes we use organs and musical instruments, a practice that David established, by commanding that hymns be sounded as sacrifices to God with organs and musical instruments; let every group, every sex and social class sing out loud with all their heart and breath “Hosanna Regi Altissimo.”²³

Both Edmund A. Bowles²⁴ and Gotthold Frotscher²⁵ provide further evidence of this practice: the Easter office at the basilica of San

²² *Encyclopædia Britannica* online, Entry “Te Deum laudamus” <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Te-Deum-laudamus> (checked on October 15, 2018)

²³ Giovanni Crisostomo Trombelli and Josè Maria Fonseca de Evora, eds., *Ordo officiorum ecclesiae Senensis ab Oderico ejusdem ecclesiae canonico* (Bologna: Longhi, 1766), 466: “Et nota quod in hoc angelorum concentu, quandoque Organis, et Musicis utimur instrumentis, quod David instituit, scilicet Hymnos in Dei Sacrificiis cum Organis, et instrumentis Musicis jubens concrepari, omnis etas, omnis ordo, omnis sexus, et conditio Hosanna Regi Altissimo, voce, et corde clamet inexcelsis.”

²⁴ See Bowles, “Musical Instruments,” 50.

²⁵ See Gotthold Frotscher, *Geschichte des Orgelspiel und der Orgelkomposition*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Hesse, 1935) 1: 48.

Salvatore in Turin (demolished in 1490 to make room for the new cathedral of San Giovanni), a line in Wace's 1155 *Roman de Brut* ("Moult oissies orgues sonner / Et clercs chanter et orguener," l.1115) and a document of 1365 stating that in the Abbey of Saint Stephen in Vienna the liturgy of the hours of feast days was to be performed with the accompaniment of the organ. Still in Vienna in 1377, during a reception in honor of emperor Charles IV, the "Te Deum" was performed with organ accompaniment. Bowles goes so far as to state that "even when the organ was substituted for the voices, the text was recited *sotto voce*." This would certainly make it difficult to understand the lyrics of the song, which would only be discernible "or sì, or no."

Finally, as Giacalone appropriately points out, Dante himself admits in the *De vulgari eloquentia* (2, 8, 5–6) the possibility of singing over the base of the organ: "Nullus enim tibicen, vel organista, vel citharedus melodiam suam cantionem vocat, nisi in quantum nupta est alicui cantioni" [For no player of a wind or keyboard or stringed instrument ever calls his melody a canzone, except when it is wedded to a true song]. The content of the hymn that Dante chooses to associate with this uncanny organ melody is particularly appropriate, by virtue of its meaning and history, to the transitional episode into the realm of purification. The "Te Deum," traditionally performed to celebrate the sanctification of a member of the church or the ordination of a priest, mentions explicitly the very threshold that the pilgrim is about to cross at the end of canto 9: "aperuisti credentibus regna caelorum."

In the *Commedia*, and in the entire Dantean corpus, there is only one other occurrence, beyond that in *Purgatorio* 9.144, of the word "organo" with a musical meaning. It appears in Cacciaguida's evocation of a soundtrack underscoring his momentous prophecy in *Paradiso* 17:

Da indi sì come viene ad orecchia
dolce armonia da organo mi viene
a vista il tempo che ti s'apparecchia (*Par.* 17.43–45)

There has been some hermeneutic debate over *Paradiso* 17.44 as well: Some scholars, such as Sapegno, Singleton, and Porena, do not take a stance on the meaning of the lemma, while others (Jacopo della Lana, Ottimo, Benvenuto da Imola, Buti, Landino, and among modern scholars Mandelbaum, Mattalia, and Del Lungo)

read it as the musical instrument. Finally, Chiavacci Leonardi, Fallani, Chiappo, and Fosca are inclined to see, in the sweet harmony evoked by Cacciaguida, a polyphonic *organum*. I will present here further elements to support this latter reading, arguing that vocal polyphony underscores the solemnity of the prophecy declared by Dante’s ancestor as well as the promise of the poet’s redemption.

Shortly before the pilgrim’s ascent from the heaven of Mars to that of Jupiter, Dante’s crusader ancestor regales his descendant with an explanation, accompanied by music, of his future vicissitudes. One difference immediately leaps to the eye, when comparing this passage with *Purgatorio* 9: while there the words are made unclear (“or sì or no s’intendon le parole”) by the overlapping sound of the opening gate thundering like an organ, in *Paradiso* 17 Cacciaguida answers Dante’s doubts “per chiare parole e con preciso / latin” (*Par.* 17.34–35). This represents a very intelligible utterance concerning a musical simile—a rare event in the musical context of the *Paradiso*. Another important difference is that in the *Purgatorio* the lemma appears in the plural (“organi”), while in the *Paradiso* it is in the singular. Medieval treatises, including the quoted passages by Raban Maur, Wulstan, Anonymous IV and Aelred of Rievaulx (but not Notker), employ the Latin word in the plural when speaking of the instrument, while the singular usually indicates vocal polyphony (Monterosso 1970–1978, 194; and Von Fischer 1961, 168–169). In both Dantean passages, the lemma does not appear in rhyme: The choice of using the plural in *Purgatorio* 9 and the singular in *Paradiso* 17 is entirely free from metrical or stylistic exigencies and therefore all the more significant. With this important caveat in mind, Dante’s text can be connected to coeval theoretical sources. Anonymous IV, the English monk who commented on the practice of polyphony in the cathedral of Notre Dame, underscored the equivocality of the word *organum*, explaining that Psalm 150 should be associated with the musical instrument, while “organum purum” is to be understood as a polyphonic song:

Organum is an equivocal word. Sometimes we use *organum* to refer to a *duplum* such as “Iudea et Ierusalem,” “Descendit de caelis” or “Gaude Maria” etc. With a different meaning we use *instrumentum*

organorum to mean the musical instrument, as the prophecy says “in cordis et organo”.²⁶

Anonymous IV here paves the way for his treatment of polyphonic *organum* by first making a necessary distinction: When we read *organum* in the psalms, we should understand the word to mean the pipe instrument (and note how this thirteenth-century author corrects with the plural *organorum* the lemma that the biblical text presents in the singular). This term is entirely different from the polyphonic *organum* that his treatise will discuss at length. Another text, the *Tractatus de consonantiis musicalibus*—alternatively attributed to Jacques de Lièges or Anonymous I²⁷—thus describes musical consonances in vocal polyphony:

A consonance between two sounds is a harmony of different or multiple notes in agreement, played *at the same time*, which *reaches the ear evenly and sweetly*.²⁸

No direct evidence exists that the *Tractatus*, written between the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries and likely of Belgian origins, was known to Dante. However, we can appreciate the textual correspondences. This passage falls in conjunction with the discussion of consonant and dissonant intervals, a notion that Cacciaguیدا’s prophecy transfers from the musical to the historical and theological realms. The *Tractatus* discusses the sweetness of polyphony with language surprisingly close to the wording of *Paradiso* 17.44: “*viene ad orecchia / dolce armonia da organo*” (*harmonia uniformiter suaviterque veniens ad auditum*) and mentions explicitly the polyphonic *organum* at paragraphs 44 and 46. The author

²⁶ Anonymous IV, *Der Musiktraktat des Anonymus 4*, ed. Fritz Reckow, 2 vols. (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1967), 1: 70: “*Organum* verbum aequivocum est. Quandoque dicitur *organum* purum ut in Iudea et Ierusalem *in duplo* vel Descendit de caelis vel Gaude Maria et cetera. Alio modo dicitur organum ut in *instrumento organorum*, sicut prophetia dicit in cordis et organo.” Emphasis added.

²⁷ For a discussion of the attribution see Christian Meyer, “Le Tractatus de consonantiis musicalibus (CS I Anonyme I/Jacobus Leodiensis, alias de Montibus): Une reportatio?” *Revue Belge de Musicologie* 49 (1995): 5–25.

²⁸ Jacques de Lièges, *Tractatus de consonantiis musicalibus, Tractatus de intonatione tonorum. Compendium de musica*, ed. Joseph Smits van Waesberghe, Eddie Vetter, and Erik Visser (Buren: Knuf, 1988), 23; Anonymous I, *Tractatus de consonantiis musicalibus*, in *Scriptorum de musica medii aevi*, ed. Edmond de Coussemaker, 4 vols. (Paris: Durand, 1864), 1: 279: “Est enim concordia duorum sonorum, diversorum vel plurium *in eodem tempore* prolatorum se compatientium *harmonia* uniformiter *suaviterque veniens ad auditum*.”

of the *Tractatus* insists on the simultaneity of different sounds (*in eodem tempore*), which is the requisite of polyphony, and the notion of simultaneity is key in the Dantean passage as well: What Cacciaguida knows about the future he knows because he has the privilege of seeing in God “il punto / a cui tutti *li tempi son presenti*” (*Par.* 17.17–18).

But even if we leave aside these textual correspondences, Dante’s text itself should settle the matter: Cacciaguida is called “tra i *cantor del cielo artista*” (*Par.* 18.51). He is a singer, which begs the interpretation of “dolce armonia da organo” as vocal music, and since it is an *organo*, it is polyphonic music. Cacciaguida’s prophecy is unique among all the prophecies in the *Commedia*, because it is the longest and the only one that has musical accompaniment. To better understand this association, we should consider that polyphony intrinsically expresses the reconciliation of dissonances and consonances through a development of time (*tempo*) that is both synchronic and diachronic: As the ninth and last prediction that the pilgrim hears about his personal story, Cacciaguida’s foretelling extends for a number of lines that more or less equals the sum of all previous prophecies. Placed exactly at the mid-point of the *Paradiso* (in the fifth of nine spheres and seventeenth of thirty-three cantos), this revelation represents “the most important prognostication of Dante’s personal involvement in the political affairs of his world.”²⁹

How, then, to reconcile the paradisiac sweetness of the musical simile with the dramatic content of the revelation? In her commentary, Chiavacci Leonardi proposes that we consider Cacciaguida’s message in its entirety: Its conclusion predicts Dante’s poetical triumph over his enemies and adversities, which makes him “tetragono ai colpi di ventura” (*Par.* 17.24). Indeed, however bitter the pilgrim’s travails may be, Cacciaguida knows that his misfortunes will be reconciled in concord as history unfolds. The hardships of earthly life will be solved and tempered in musical harmony.³⁰ The reference to the harmony of *organum* functions as a way to temper the bitterness of history with some sweetness. For this reason, the prophecy occurs at the turn from the belligerent

²⁹ Robert Hollander, translation and commentary in Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 470.

³⁰ See Leopoldo Chiappo, “La música y los contrastes de la vida,” *Lienzo* 14 (1994): 146.

heaven of Mars to the mysteriously just heaven of Jupiter. Giacalone notes that sweetness concerns precisely this concept of harmony: It is only by combining (ἀρμόττω) all parts of history that one can make sense of it as a whole. Renowned music historian Franco Alberto Gallo has emphasized the link between cosmic harmony and polyphony, a connection that elucidates Dante's reference to the "dolce armonia da organo:"

It was stressed that the simultaneous performance of various melodic lines produced at different times sounds that were consonant, so that the result was not a 'uniformi canore,' but rather a combination of contrasting elements which merged into a 'centu concorditer dissono' [*Musica enchiriadis*]. This phrase reflected the idea, common to both classical and Christian cultures, of a universal order in which individual contrasts merge; polyphony is thus the audible image of 'World harmony.'³¹

Cacciaguیدا, reading within God the complete course of history, already possesses this sense and therefore conceives the *organum* of history as sweet music: He knows it *sub specie eternitatis*, while Dante will perceive it as bitter because he will know it first *sub specie temporis*. Then again, the metaphor of history as a book ("La contingenza, che fuor del quaderno / de la vostra matera non si stende, / tutta è dipinta nel cospetto eterno;" *Par.* 17.37–39), immediately preceding the passage about the *organum*, is in itself a "harmonic" metaphor, and not only in the etymological sense (the sense of a bound volume that can only be comprehended thanks to its correct pagination); such a metaphor is in keeping with the more famous example, occurring at the climax of the divine vision, wherein the universe is compared to "un volume" whose pages, "per l'universo si squadernano," are finally legible (*Par.* 33.85–87). Without the cosmic (i.e. whole) vision and the reconciliation of contingency with necessity, which only resides in God, it would be impossible to comprehend the meaning of history. Thus, if at the end of the poem the cosmos becomes legible to the pilgrim as a fascicle ("quaderno") in a bound volume, one of its most important pages is the one in which Cacciaguیدا predicts Dante's future vicissitudes, "temprando col dolce l'acerbo" (*Par.* 18.3), a phrase in which we see Dante's favorite descriptive for vocal

³¹ F. Alberto Gallo, *Music of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2.

polyphony (“temprare”), a musical accompaniment that sanctions the prophecy, warranting its sacredness and truthfulness.

The twofold occurrence of the lemma “temprare” (*Par.* 18.3, 68)³² is in line with the musical ambience of polyphony in this *canto*, thus unriddling the dissonances of history through a mixture of harmony and allegory. Although in *Conv.* 2.13.25 the temperament of the heaven of Jupiter is of a thermic nature, the musical overtones of the lemma should not be ignored: Jupiter, the heaven of justice in which bitter mixes with sweet, is the “temprata stella” (*Par.* 18.68) and the “dolce stella” (*Par.* 18.115), because “justice is defined musically as consonance of the human with the divine will,”³³ as Heilbronn aptly reminds us in her explication of Dante’s musical definition of Justice in *Paradiso* 19.88: “Cotanto è giusto quanto a lei consuona.” Scholars have recently considered the lemma “tempra” as a keyword for polyphony,³⁴ and earlier Leo Spitzer, in speaking of *Purgatorio* 30, pointed to its harmonic valence and “the polyphonic richness of the text.”³⁵

Thus it is the role of polyphony to mix the bitter and sweet aspects of the poet’s future vicissitudes, a function which the pipe instrument evoked in *Purgatorio* 9 simply could not accomplish with its thunderous clash of sounds. To conclude, I wish to suggest that expressing the authenticity and solemnity of prophecy through music has a long tradition in biblical literature. Isidoro del Lungo, though disagreeing on the meaning of “organo,” argues that “organo e rivelazione hanno del sacro ambedue: anche se dolce armonia e amarezza di predizioni ripugnano fra loro.”³⁶ To this I will add that in the Scriptures the production of prophecies is often performed through song or accompanied by an instrument, which lends it authority and gravity. As Jonathan L. Friedmann recently stated:

³² See Denise Heilbronn, “Paradiso XVIII,” in *Dante’s Divine Comedy: Introductory Readings, III: Paradiso*, ed. Tibor Wlassics, *Lectura Dantis Virginiana*, no. 16–17, Special Issue, *Lectura Dantis Virginiana* 3 (1995): 267.

³³ Heilbronn, “Paradiso XVIII,” 268.

³⁴ See Chiara Cappuccio, “Strutture musicali del cielo del Sole: Dante e Beatrice al centro della danza dei beati,” *Tenzone. Revista de la Asociación Complutense de Dantología* 9 (2008): 159; Francesco Ciabattoni, *Dante’s Journey to Polyphony* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 150.

³⁵ Leo Spitzer, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word “Stimmung”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), 93.

³⁶ Isidoro Del Lungo, *La Divina Commedia commentata da Isidoro del Lungo* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1926), commentary on *Par.* 17.43–45.

The Bible records numerous instances of prophets using music to receive and/or deliver heavenly messages. In some cases, musical performances helped stimulate or maintain a prophetic state, as with the procession of instrument-playing prophets in 1 Samuel 10:5. Other times, prophets sang their proclamations in poetic verses, employing musical tones to convey the emotional content of their divine encounters. Singing prophets included Isaiah, known for his songs of hope and praise (e.g., Isa. 12:1–6; 35:1–10; 40:1–31), and Ezekiel, a sweet singer and skilled player (Ezek. 33:32). As a general rule, the early prophets employed music as an accompaniment to divining and wonderworking, while the Latter (or “Literary”) prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets—voiced poetic prophecies in a type of sung speech.³⁷

Friedmann shows, on the basis of a previous work by Eric Werner and Isaiah Sonne, that the association of music and prophecy has a long-standing tradition in sacred texts and that the musical element makes true prophecies stand out from other verbal utterances. Music, and namely the *organum* evoked by Cacciaguیدا, stresses the transcendental aspect of prophecy, exhibiting a radical distinction between “the word” of simple linguistic communication and the prophetic “verbo” (*Par.* 18.3), a harbinger of the truth of future events. Music, therefore, imbues the prophecy with truth by lending an aura of sacredness to the verbal utterance.

³⁷ Jonathan L. Friedmann, *Music in Biblical Life: The Roles of Song in Ancient Israel* (Jefferson, NC: Mc Farland & Co, 2013), 123.