

**MUSIC AND THE ACT OF SONG IN DANTE'S
'PURGATORIO' AND 'PARADISO'**

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The present paper explores the relation between the vernacular words used to designate the Act of Song, and the inscribed texts of the Sung Music itself, by considering a set of key cases first in *Purgatory* and then in *Paradise*. It focuses on important moments of structural and literary transition, at the same time as showing how sung sacred texts relate to each other (and to other kinds of passages) in important functional ways. I examine how song works in five key moments of the protagonist's journey: the exit from the final terrace of the Purgatorial mountain, and the opening of the vision of the Procession of the Books of the Bible, as well as Carlo Martello's famous citation of the first ode of the *Convivio*, which I link to the sacred "*Osanna*" sung by the souls of the third heaven. Finally, I analyze the (sung) relationship between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, both in their descent to the eighth heaven and then in their "eternal home" in the Empyrean.

Keywords: Music, *Commedia*, Dante, *Osanna*, *Cantare*, Song, Singing, Matelda

It is of course a well known critical fact that music plays an important role in Dante's *Commedia* starting in *Purgatorio* 2 and continuing to *Paradiso* 32. And this key role for music in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* is qualitatively different for each of these two *cantiche*. Since Mt. Purgatory is situated on the Earth, it is explicitly linked to earthly time, which is calculated musically, in the words of Ronald Martinez, in terms of "the canonical hours of the day, when liturgical offices are sung."¹ In Paradise, on the other hand, narrative time is not meant to be earthly, but celestial, and music thus functions very differently. In the words of Teodolinda Barolini, Dante the poet in *Paradiso* struggles

¹ Ronald L. Martinez, "'L' amoroso canto': Liturgy and Vernacular Lyric in Dante's *Purgatorio*," *Dante Studies* 127 (2009): 93.

“against the linearity of narrative that dramatizes the very temporality it can never evade.”²

In the present essay, I would like to explore the relation between the vernacular words used to designate the Act of Song, and the inscribed texts of the Sung Music itself, considering a set of key cases first in *Purgatory* and then in *Paradise*. I will focus on important moments of structural and literary transition, at the same time as showing how sung sacred texts relate to each other (and to other kinds of passages) in important functional ways. Let me state at the beginning that the *Commedia* uses verbal forms of *cantare* (“to sing”) sixty-one different times, and nominal forms of “song” or “singer” (including *canto*, *canzone*, *cantica*, and *cantor*) fifty-three different times. In addition, *note* (“notes”) occurs fifteen times; “melody” (*melodia*, *melode*), seven times; “hymn” (*inno*), six times; and “psalm” (*salmo/i*), four times.³ At the same time of course, the text repeatedly incorporates quotations from various sung sacred texts (from the Bible, the liturgy, the hymnal, the canon, etc.), which appear with frequency and regularity (c. forty times) in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*.

I begin with the seventh and final terrace of Mt. Purgatory, which constitutes the beginning of the key transition from the mountain proper to the Garden of Eden. Let me remark, first of all, that there is an extremely important emphasis on *singing as penitence* on this terrace, as Dante-protagonist is initially attracted by the singing of these penitents:

“*Summae Deus clementiae*” nel seno
al grande ardore allora udi’ cantando
che di volger mi fè caler non meno. (*Purg.* 25. 121–23)

This key Matins hymn, associated with Saturday night,⁴ is explicitly tied to the cleansing power of fire over lust (in the third stanza), while singing as such is stressed in the process (stanzas two

² Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 166. See Chapter 8, “Problems in Paradise: The Mimesis of Time and the Paradox of *Più e Meno*,” 166–193 for a full account.

³ See also, *sonare* (ten times), *sonar* (six times), *suon* (seventeen times), *suona* (eight times). This can sometimes mean (and is paired with) “sing.” Is this the meeting place of “sound” and “sing?”

⁴ For the Latin text and the English translation, etc., see Notes to *Purg.* 25, line 121, in Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Volume II: Purgatorio*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 435.

and four). In *Purg.* 25 this Holy Song on the seventh terrace is elaborately linked to the crying out of the three examples of the corrective virtue of Chastity, since it is sung all the way through in alternation with the speaking of the three examples.⁵ In this context the Song is twice referred to as a “hymn” (*inno*, vv. 127 and 129) and the verb *cantore* is twice employed (“sing”, vv. 122 and 133). It is important to note here that the Church Offices have been spoken by the penitent souls on terraces one, two, three and five (none exists on four); and sung only on terrace six,⁶ where “*Labia mēa, Domine*” (from the *Miserere*, Psalm 50:19 [51:15]) is heard as *piangere e cantar* (*Purg.* 23.10–11). Unlike the situation on the final terrace, there is no further elaboration of singing on the sixth terrace. When we move on to the opening of *Purg.* 27, which is my primary current emphasis, we see that the seventh purgatorial terrace is the only one that presents both the Church Office (of the lustful penitents) and the Beatitude (of the angel) as *sung*. The unique status of song in this context serves as yet another means to mark the final purgatorial terrace as a key transition.

In addition, the final exit from the seventh purgatorial terrace involves the only instance on Mt. Purgatory (as numerous commentators have remarked)⁷ in which active participation is required: both for the fully purged soul (i.e. Statius) and, of course, for Dante-protagonist. For the former, there is no problem, and his short final journey is a kind of honorary confirmation; but for the later, this exit involves a frightening passage through the wall of fire, whose difficulty is stressed repeatedly both by Dante himself and by Virgilio. This is also, of course, the seventh (and last) time that a Beatitude occurs. In terms of song, there are two angels associated here with the Beatitude for the only time on the seven Purgatorial terraces.⁸ On every other Terrace there has only been a single angel who speaks the Beatitude.

Let us consider terrace seven’s two angels in sequence. The first angel is outside the flames on the far side:

⁵ See Martinez, “L’amoroso canto” n. 3, 115.

⁶ For the song on the sixth terrace of Mt. Purgatory, see *ibid.*, 101–105.

⁷ See especially Robert Hollander, notes to *Purg.* 27, especially to lines 10–12 and 55–57 in Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio: A Verse Translation by Jean Hollander & Robert Hollander*, trans. Jean Hollander and Robert Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 566 and 569.

⁸ See During and Martinez, notes to *Purg.* 27, lines 12 and 55–60, 466–467; and Hollander, notes to *Purg.* 27, lines 55–57, 569.

Fuor de la fiamma stava in su la riva,
e cantava “*Beati mundo corde!*”
in voce assai più che la nostra viva. (*Purg.* 27.7–9)

This angel then speaks after he sings (*Purg.* 27.10–13), stating that the three pilgrims are required to pass through the wall of fire, and proclaiming that the singing of the second angel will guide them through it.

The second angel stands on the opposite side of the wall (near the mountain), and his singing leads the three pilgrims through the flames:

Guidavaci una voce che cantava
Di là; e noi, attenti pur a lei,
Venimmo fuor la ove si montava. (*Purg.* 27.55–57)

This second angel then speaks after singing, just like the first one had done:

“*Venite, benedicti Patris mei,*”⁹
sonò dentro a un lume che lì era,
tal che mi vinse e guarder nol potei.
“Lo sol sen va,” soggiunse, “e vien la sera;
non v’arrestate, ma studiate il passo,
mentre che l’occidente non si annera.” (*Purg.* 27.58–63)

The second angel thus imitates the first one, but with a set of important reversals: the first angel’s song is in Latin (the Beatitude), which is followed by spoken words (in Italian); the second angel’s song is identified as such but no words are given, while it serves as a guide through the wall of fire. This “song” is followed by a key angelic statement (in Latin), which seems to identify (in general terms) the successful end of the process of purgation. It is followed by the same angel’s spoken words (in Italian) that identify

⁹ This comes from Matt 25:34, which presents Christ’s words at the Last Judgement to the saved souls as they enter Heaven. The full passage reads: “*Venite benedicti Patris mei, possidete paratum vobis regnum a constitutione mundi*” [“Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared from you since the foundation of the world.”]. Thus this sentence here signals the end of the process of purgation as a whole. Durling and Martinez, as well as Hollander (in note to *Purg.* 27, line 58) remark that the mosaic of the Last Judgement in the Baptistery of Florence contains an angel speaking these words from behind a door that is opening.

the specific time of day (evening) and urge the pilgrims to speed on the final journey of ascent before the coming of night (thus anticipating sleep and the third and last purgatorial dream, that of Leah and Rachel, *Purg.* 27.73–108).

Having first focused on the final Purgatorial terrace's careful emphasis on the importance of singing, I would next like to consider the key role of song in another key transition: the opening presentation of Dante's vision of the holy procession in the Garden of Eden (*Purg.* 29.1–51). First, from my present point of view, the scene is set by the *canto's* initial word, which describes Matelda's actions:

Cantando come donna innamorata,
continüò col fin di sue parole:
“*Beati quorum tecta sunt peccata!*” (*Purg.* 29. 1–3)

This is of course an extremely important passage in terms of Matelda's complex identity, and Barolini and Martinez, as well as many other commentators, have analyzed it.¹⁰ Matelda's singing of Psalm 31:1 [32:1] links courtly-erotic love with Christian love in complex ways.¹¹ What I would like to focus on here, on the other hand, is simply that this opening passage's of *Purg.* 29 emphasizes the importance of Matelda's singing as such.¹² Followed by Dante and Statius, Matelda then begins to walk along the river, before she finally pauses, commanding Dante to initiate his experience of the phenomena that will become ultimately the procession: “Frate mio, guarda e ascolta” (*Purg.* 29.15). Two different senses (sight and sound) are explicitly identified here. The phe-

¹⁰ Particularly important are Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 132–142; 145–153; and Martinez, “L'amoroso canto,” 119–127. See also the commentaries of Hollander and Durling/Martinez in their editions, as well as the important article by Domenico De Robertis, “*Arcades ambo* (Osservazioni sulla pastorità di Dante e del suo primo amico),” *Filologia e critica* 10 (1985): 231–238.

¹¹ Line 7 of Cavalcanti's “in un boschetto” is linked with Holy Scripture, as Martinez observes.

¹² In this connection, see also Matelda's introduction in *Purg.* 28.40 as “singing” [*cantando*, 28.41]. Her unidentified song is explicitly identified as such by Dante-protagonist, who asks that she approach the river “tanto ch'io possa intender che tu canti” (28.48); emphasis my own. The rhyme word is of course particularly important here. While the protagonist will later understand the song's meaning, the reader never will (see *Purg.* 28.59–60: its “dolce suono / veniva a me [=Dante-protagonist] co' suoi intendimenti”). When Matelda first speaks, she cites “il salmo *Delectasti*” (*Purg.* 28.80) [Ps.91:5] as the key gloss to her happy, active behavior.

nomenon itself involves a progressive revelation, starting with the most general and moving to the most specific, with both a visual and an aural component, stressed by Dante-poet. The distortion caused by the physical distance between the stationary protagonist (who perceives) and the approaching object itself, necessarily makes the reader think of the Ship of Souls propelled by the angel, which approaches the protagonist in *Purg.* 2.16–48. A visual and an aural element are also at issue. And the protagonist ends by correctly perceiving the angel propelling the ship, while the newly saved one hundred purgatorial souls sing Psalm 113 of the Vulgate, the Psalm of the Exodus: *In exitu Israël de Aegypto* (*Purg.* 2.46), the very first song of the *Purgatorio*.¹³

In terms of the procession of *Purgatorio* 29, I am particularly concerned with the element of sound, of which there are three stages. First, we are aware only of the sound's melodious nature: "E una melodia dolce correva / per l'aere luminoso" (29.22–3), which Dante wishes he had enjoyed earlier and longer. Next, we (and the protagonist) learn that this melodious sound is a *song*: "e 'l dolce suon per canti era già inteso" (29.36). It is this key transformation of sound into song that leads directly to the second and final invocation of the *Purgatorio*, which follows immediately:

O sacrosante Vergini, se fami,
 freddi o vigilie mai per voi sofferi,
 cagion mi sprona ch'io mercé vi chiami.¹⁴
 Or convien che Elicona per me versi,
 e Uranie m'aiuti col suo coro
 forti cose a pensar mettere in versi. (*Purg.* 29.37–43)

Without my going into the complex details of this key invocation in the present context,¹⁵ I would like now simply to

¹³ For the importance of the pattern of the Exodus (and thus of this Psalm) for the *canto* (and for the *Commedia* as a whole), see Charles Singleton, "'In exitu Israel de Aegypto,'" *Annual Report of the Dante Society* 78 (1960): 1–24; John Freccero, "Manfred's Wounds and the Poetics of the *Purgatorio*" in *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 195–208; and Robert Hollander, "*Purgatorio* II: The New Song and the Old," *Lectura Dantis virginiana* 6 (1990): 28–45.

¹⁴ The word "mercé" used by Dante-poet here is both a theological and a courtly love term. It indicates reward or fulfillment in both of these (apparently contradictory) contexts.

make two points. First, the invocation is overtly generated by *song*. Second, it explicitly and elaborately emphasizes the mimetic status of the procession of the Books of the Bible that we are about to witness (as well as the appearance of Beatrice that will follow directly from it).

When finally the protagonist is close enough to perceive the full reality of the procession (without the sensory deceptions caused by distance, *Purg.* 29.46–49), the general song becomes quite specific: “E ne le voci del cantare, ‘*Osanna*’” (*Purg.* 29.51). I suggest that this key second use of *Osanna* in the *Commedia*, immediately following *cantare* (“song”), importantly picks up the first use of the same word, again in the rhyme position, following *cantando* (“singing”), in the vernacular expansion of the Lord’s Prayer that constitutes the Church Office spoken by the penitent souls of the first Purgatorial terrace. What is specifically articulated there is:

Come de suo voler li angeli tuoi
fan sacrificio a te, cantando *osanna*,
così facciano li uomini de’ suoi. (*Purg.* 11.10-12).

The connections between the *Commedia*’s first two instances of the word “*Osanna*” are quite significant. The Hebrew word itself is used as the greeting to Jesus as he enters Jerusalem for Holy Week (Matt 21:19: *Hosanna in altissimis*”; Mark 11:10: *Hosanna in excelsis*), and the word figures only two times in the *Purgatorio*.¹⁶ The first time (*Purg.* 11.11), the penitents on the terrace of pride speak of the angels singing *Osanna*, and the second time (*Purg.* 29.51), *Osanna* indicates the singing associated with the advancing procession, which is finally perceived with clarity by the protagonist.¹⁷

¹⁵ For the second invocation in *Purgatorio*, see Hollander, note to *Purg.* 29, lines 37–42; and Durling and Martinez, notes to *Purg.* 29, lines 37–42, 37–8, 40–1.

¹⁶ For the *Commedia*’s use of the Hebrew word *Hosanna*, see Hollander’s commentary on the two uses in *Purgatorio*, *Purg.* 11.11 and *Purg.* 29.47–51 (226 and 611). Then see his commentaries on the first three instances in Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso: A Verse Translation by Robert & Jean Hollander*, trans. Robert Hollander and Jean Hollander (New York: Doubleday, 2007): *Par.* 7.1, *Par.* 8.29, *Par.* 28.94 (168–169, 192, 699). There is no explicit commentary on *Paradiso*’s final two uses of *Hosanna*: *Par.* 28.118, *Par.* 32.135.

¹⁷ In the context of song in *Purg.* 29, it is also important to note that the the first human members of the Procession who are seen, the twenty-four elders who represent the books of the Old Testament, are presented as singing: “Tutti cantavan:

I would like now to turn to a series of key instances of singing at transitional moments in the *Paradiso*, beginning with the famous third auto-citation by Dante in *Par.* 8. Here, Carlo Martello speaks alone (but for all the souls of the third heaven), citing the 1st line of the *Convivio*'s 1st *canzone*, which, of course, he corrects, substituting Principalities for Thrones:

. . . “Tutti sem presti
al tuo piacer, perché di noi ti gioi.
Noi ci volgiam coi principi celesti
d'un giro e d'un girare e d'una sete,
ai quali tu del mondo già dicesti:
'Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete';
e sem sì pien d'amor, che, per piacerti,
non fia men dolce un poco di quiete.” (*Par.* 8.32–39)

Many scholarly interpretations of this important passage have been advanced, and I personally think that the most insightful and penetrating is that of Teodolinda Barolini, in *Dante's Poets*.¹⁸

In the present analysis, I would like simply to affirm that the *Commedia*'s “approval” of this first convivial *canzone* (as opposed to the work's “problematic treatment” of the second convivial ode as sung by Casella in *Purg.* 2.112) is directly linked to the former's positive relationship with the Holy Song of the souls of the Heaven of Venus, sung just four lines earlier. These souls have just arrived in the third heaven from the Empyrean:

. . . quei lumi divini
. . . lasciando il giro
pria cominciato in li alti Serafini;
e dentro a quei che più innanzi appariro
sonava “*Osanna*” sì, che unque poi
di riudir non fui senza disiro. (*Par.* 8.25–30)

The Holy Song of *Osanna* sung by the angels in *Par.* 8.29 thus blends with the explicitly cited first line of the *canzone* that opens

Benedicta tue / ne le figlie d'Adamo, e benedette / sieno in eterno le bellezze tue!” (*Purg.* 29.85–87). This suggestive mixture of Latin and Italian contains a key expansion of Gabriel's greeting to Mary given in *Par.* 32.95 as the prayer that opens the Annunciation. At the same time, the eternal condition of Mary in the Empyrean is evoked. Finally, this song points to the coming Virgin Birth of Christ, and thus to the unity of the entire Procession.

¹⁸ See Barolini, *Dante's Poets*, 57–84, “Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete”.

Convivio 2 in a way that provides the latter with a specifically “Paradisial” context. In miniature, Dante’s earlier work is thus read through the perspective of the composition of the *Commedia*’s final *cantica*.¹⁹

At the same time, this second employment of *Osanna* in the *Paradiso*, where it is sung by the angels of the third heaven, recalls and picks up on the first employment of *Osanna* in the final *cantica*, where (in the emphatic first position of the first line of the preceding *canto*), it introduced the words sung by Giustiniano:

“*Osanna, sanctus Deus sabaòth,
superillustrans claritate tua
fèlices ignes horum malacòth!*”
Così, volgendosi a la nota sua,
fu viso a me cantare essa sustanza (*Par.*7.1-6)

I next turn to the key transitional moment of *Paradiso* 23, the opening full *canto* of the eighth heaven, and the only pre-Empyrean locus where Christ and Mary descend and then ascend. In *Par.* 23.94–102, Dante-protagonist witnesses the angel Gabriel descending to the eighth heaven in order to crown the already descended Mary in a reenactment of the Annunciation characterized by song. Gabriel is figured as “a torch” who crowns the Virgin while he sings:

. . . una facella,
formata in cerchio a guisa di corona,
e cínsela e gírossi intorno ad ella.
Qualunque melodia più dolce suona
qua giù e più a sé l’anima tira,
parrebbe nube che squarciata tona,
comparata al sonar di quella lira²⁰
onde si coronava il bel zaffiro
del quale il ciel più chiaro s’inzaffira. (*Par.* 23.94–102)

The words of Gabriel’s joyous song to Mary are then presented explicitly, connecting the brief moment of descent from

¹⁹ See Rachel Jacoff, “The Post Palinodic Smile: *Paradiso* VIII and IX,” *Dante Studies* 98 (1980): 111–122.

²⁰ It is important to note that *suonare* here means the playing of an instrument.

the Empyrean in *Par. 23* with the eternal fact of the Annunciation:

“Io sono amore angelico, che giro
l’alta letizia che spira del ventre
che fu albergo del nostro disiro;
e girérommi, donna del ciel, mentre
che seguirai tuo figlio, e farai dia
più la spera suprema perché li entre.” (*Par. 23.103–8*)

As if to make sure we get the point, the voice of the descended Gabriel is again presented as *singing*, while the assembled souls in the eighth heaven chant the name of the Virgin mother:

Così la circolata melodia
si sigillava, e tutti li altri lumi
facean sonare il nome di Maria. (*Par. 23.109–111*)

What follows is the re-ascent to the Empyrean of Mary and Gabriel, with the souls of the eighth heaven collectively singing the celebratory Easter hymn, *Regina celi*. Dante-protagonist cannot see the re-ascent, but he is entranced by the music:

però non ebber li occhi miei potenza
di seguitar la coronata fiamma
che si levò appresso sua semenza....
Indi rimaser lì nel mio cospetto,
“*Regina celi*” cantando sì dolce
che mai da me non si partì ’l diletto. (*Par. 23.118–20; 127–9*)

In closing, I would like to turn my analysis to the Empyrean itself, when Dante-protagonist, in *Par. 32.94–99*, sees the Virgin Mary again. Importantly, she is again with the angel Gabriel, as the Annunciation is again recalled by means of Holy Song, which is repeated both in earthly and in eternal time:

e quello amor che primo lì discese,
cantando “*Ave, Maria, gratia plena,*”
dinanzi a lei le sue ali distese.
Rispuose a la divina cantilena
da tutte parti la beata corte,
sì ch’ogne vista sen fè più serena. (*Par. 32.94–99*)

On the one hand, this final mention of a holy song in the *Commedia* explicitly recalls the very first holy song of the *Paradiso*, sung by Piccarda as she disappears from the first heaven:

Così parlommi, e poi cominciò “*Ave,*
Maria” cantando, e cantando vanio
Come per acqua cupa cosa grave. (*Par.* 3.121–23)

This passage in *Paradiso* 3 emphasizes both the words *Ave* and *Maria* by means of a key enjambment, which stresses each of them, at the same time as its double repetition of *cantando* (in *Par.* 3.122) emphasizes the importance of the act of singing.

On the other hand, the fuller citation of this same Holy Song in *Par.* 32 thus involves an “expansion” on *Par.* 3, both semantically and verbally.

This process is further elaborated by the fact that this final citation of the *Ave Maria* simultaneously recalls the very first of the examples of virtue given on the terraces of Purgatory: the “speaking” sculpture of the Annunciation, figuring Gabriel and Mary, who recall the entire passage (Luke 1:26–38):

L’angel che venne in terra col decreto
de la . . . pace
dinanzi a noi pareva sì verace
quivi intagliato in un atto soave,
che non sembiava imagine che tace.
Giurato sì saria ch’el dicesse “*Ave!*”;
perché iv’ era imaginata quella
ch’ad aprir l’alto amor volse la chiave;
e avea in atto impressa esta favella
“*Ecce ancilla Dei,*” propriamente
come figura in cera si suggella. (*Purg.* 10.34–35, 37–45)

The complex staging (in Dante’s *Commedia*) of The Act of Singing and the Intercalation of Song thus reaches a culmination in *Paradiso* 32. Here eternal time explicitly functions to include earthy time—*Paradiso* to include *Purgatorio*—in the key Holy Song to the Virgin, which celebrates the Incarnation. This will very shortly, of course, be presented as the last of the three Christian mysteries that constitute Dante-protagonist’s language-less union with the Godhead at the end of *Paradiso* 33.

The issues of the *Commedia*'s poetic language (an Italian, which incorporates Latin and Hebrew) and its poetic genre (narrative and lyric) have also been carefully inscribed in this musical process over the final two *cantiche*—but all of this is developed in other contexts.