

Programme Notes

Dante died seven hundred years ago. At precisely the same time, Ars Nova was born. Dante probably did not see any Ars Nova piece written but he certainly listened to the polyphony of his time, which was beginning to be composed in a new way. In the years around 1320, Philippe de Vitry and Johannes de Muris published their treatises on a new way of writing music that they called Ars Nova, which would go on to pave the way for a century of great musical creativity. The pieces that make up our program come from this century, the century of Ars Nova.

DanteNova therefore: an incandescent star of colours, fantasy, imagination—that of Dante and that of the Ars Nova masters.

Music accompanies Dante's otherworldly journey in the *Divina Commedia*. Our concert retraces many of the places where music resounds: from *Inferno*'s silences and laments to *Paradiso*'s angelic concerts.

Inferno is a silent place. The silence is broken only by the cries, the laments and, rarely, the words of the damned. Nobody can sing or play. However, even if to a lesser extent than for the other two canticles, we have decided to give a musical voice to some of *Inferno*'s significant figures, which are also found in Ars Nova pieces.

The first character of the *Commedia* to be translated into music is Pluto. Upon entering the fourth circle, where the avaricious are punished, Dante and Virgil come across this figure in which, as Cicero wrote, Pluto the son of Jason and Demeter, god of wealth, and Pluto the son of Saturn, lord of Averno, meet. Pluto speaks in an incomprehensible language and with a "voce chioccia" (harsh, raucous voice). **Deus Deorum Pluto**, a ballad by Zacara da Teramo speaks of Pluto, "god of the gods," in an equally "strange" language, rich in pseudo-biblical expressions such as Dante's famous "Pape Satan, Pape Satan Aleppe." The text of the ballad also invokes the names of demons.

We then leap to the famous Ulysses canto, the twenty-sixth, now in deep Hell. It opens with an invective in which Dante lashes out against Florence. In reality it is the conclusion of the previous canto, in which the protagonists were Florentine thieves. Dante's attack, which in the first two verses sounds like an ode to Florence, quotes an ancient inscription placed on the facade of the Palazzo del Podestà. The third verse, however, reveals its ironic meaning: "Godi, Fiorenza, poi che se' sì grande, / che per mare e per terra batti l'ali, / e per lo 'nferno tuo nome si spande!" (Rejoice, Florence, because you are so great, / that by sea and land you beat your wings, / and by hell your name is spread!). **Godi Firenze** by Paolo da Firenze opens with the same words. It is a rare case in which the composer shows that he knows Dante. The madrigal reproduces almost identically the first two lines of Dante's *terzina* "Godi, Firenze, poi che se' sì grande, / che per mare e per terra batti l'ali" (Rejoice, Florence, since you are so great / that by sea and land you beat your wings). But the third verse makes all the difference. Where Dante writes "and by hell your name is spread," Paolo instead celebrates the "terrible" glory of Florence "facendo ogni Toscan di te tremare" (making every Toscan

fear you). The madrigal, with its ferocity against Pisa, perfectly illustrates the atmosphere of tough political struggle between the Tuscan cities that pervades all of *Inferno* as well as Dante's life and thought.

The two poets then approach the well that surrounds the Cocito lake (Ninth Circle). Among the Giants they meet, there is one called Nembrot (the biblical king Nimrod). When he sees them, he begins to utter incomprehensible words with a heated voice, as did Pluto in Canto VII. Virgil explains that this is the one who tried madly to get to heaven with the Tower of Babel, the cause of so many different languages being used today. He then invites the angry giant to vent his anger by sounding the horn he holds over his shoulder. It is the only “musical moment” in Hell, if we can call it that—a prelude to the far more monstrous vision of Lucifer.

Having reached the lowest point of Hell, approaching the vision of Lucifer, Dante quotes “Vexilla regis prodeunt” while twisting the sense of a hymn by Venanzio Fortunato to evoke the greatness of evil: “Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni.” The essence of evil is translated musically by a magnificent motet by Guillaume de Machaut, a great musician and poet nearly as important to the French language as Dante is to ours. **Fons Totius Superbiae / O Livoris Feritas / Fera Pessima** gives an extraordinary musical description of the devil: the source of all pride, an angry and ferocious beast.

In *Purgatorio*, on the other hand, music is constantly present. Songs of praise and penance alternate with Stil Novo songs of love. Whereas the damned complained and were incapable of singing, the penitents pray and sing. Already in Canto II, these two musical “genres” are heard. Still outside *Purgatorio*, on the mountain beach, after meeting Cato, Dante and Virgil see a ship driven by the helmsman angel who ferries the souls of penitents. They sing **In exitu Israël de Aegypto**, a chant of passage and travel, as befits the place and time.

Later on in the same canto, Dante meets his musical friend Casella. This meeting, which ends with the musician singing Dante's song “Amor che nella mente mi ragiona” (Love that reasons in my mind), is the consecration of chant and music as *dulcedo*, a sweetness that captivates and carries upwards. Dante expresses this conviction clearly in the second chapter of the *Convivio*: “La musica [. . .] trae a sé gli spiriti umani, che sono vapori del cuore, sicché quasi cessano da ogni operazione, che l'anima intera quasi corre allo spirito sensibile che riceve il suono!” (Music [. . .] draws to itself human spirits, which are vapours of the heart, so that they almost cease from any operation, that the whole soul almost runs to the sensitive spirit that receives the sound!).

Unfortunately, this song by Casella on Dante's poem has not reached us. One of the songs that comes closest to this idea of love, closest to the Stil Novo in music, is **Che cos'è quest'amor?** by Francesco da Firenze, better known today as Francesco Landini.

With Canto VII, the “Cycle of sung prayers” begins. The troubadour Sordello, to whom no song is entrusted, accompanies Virgil and Dante to the valley of negligent princes—

that is, the sovereigns who preferred the delights of the senses to reason and their duties. When the three poets arrive, some of them, in this idyllic landscape, are singing a *Salve Regina*. Instead of this chant we will perform **Nostra Avocata**, a Marian lauda which is a *cantasi come* on “Deducto sei” (You touched such a low point), a satirical ballad by Zacara da Teramo. Purgatory is physically and metaphorically a reversal of Hell: what had fallen now ascends, and what was profane and low is now high and sacred.

After descending into the valley, the three poets hear a prayer sung by penitent souls at sunset: *Te Lucis ante terminum*. This hymn, attributed to Saint Ambrose, invokes the help of light against the temptations of the night. We translate it with the anonymous ballad **Lucente Stella**, from the oldest source of the Italian Ars Nova, the Rossi Codex.

The last chapter of this penitential triptych is a ritual representation in which Dante is the protagonist. To be able to cross the threshold of *Purgatorio* he must climb three steps and carry the seven P’s corresponding to the seven deadly sins engraved on his forehead by the guardian angel. But once the great door is opened, Dante hears a song, **Te Deum Laudamus**, “in voce mista al dolce suono” (singing and playing sweetly).

Higher in the ascent of the mountain, in Canto XVI, Dante and Virgil meet the angry ones. Wrapped in black smoke, they atone for their guilt by praying for peace and mercy to the Lamb of God who takes away sins. The motet **Ave Sancta Mundi Salus / Agnus Dei** by Matteo da Perugia, with its celebration of the host in the cantus and the Agnus Dei in the tenor, is their voice.

The last cycle of songs in Purgatory is that of the women, serving as a hinge with the beginning of Paradise. In Canto XXVII, as soon as he listens to the *Tant m’abellis* by the troubadour Arnaut Daniel, who is with Guido Guinizelli among the lustful ones, Dante, in order to continue to the top of the mountain, must cross a wall of fire. Purification must be literal. In this rite, Dante and Virgil are explicitly guided by singing. After passing the wall of fire and hearing the song *Venite, benedicti Patris mei*, darkness falls and Dante dreams again. And again he dreams of a woman. She is young and beautiful; she picks flowers and sings. It is Leah, the biblical symbol of fertility and active life, a prefiguration of the earthly Paradise that awaits them in the following canto. The three-part ballad **Questa Fanciulla Amor** by Landini, with its bucolic character, corresponds well to the dreamlike image of Leah. The young woman who collects flowers while singing and adorns herself with garlands is also an Ars Nova topos.

In this gallery of female figures that culminates with Beatrice, the penultimate is the mysterious “beautiful woman,” who will be called Matelda only at the conclusion of the Cantic. Protagonist of Canto XXVIII, Matelda sings continuously. Like Leah, but not in a dream, “the beautiful woman” approaches “singing and choosing flowers.” Canto XXIX begins with Matelda singing “as a woman in love” *Beati quorum tecta sunt peccata*. A little further on, Dante says that “a sweet melody runs through the luminous air.” Matelda recalls Leah, but she does not appear in a dream. She is Dante’s new guide,

when Virgil is about to leave him and Beatrice has not yet arrived. Therefore, like a “woman in love” she sings “Blessed are those whose sins were forgiven.” The **Agnus Dei** contrafactum of *Questa Fanciulla Amor*, Leah’s song, seems the piece best suited to her figure and her song.

In Canto XXX, Beatrice finally appears. One of the twenty-four elders begins to sing *Veni sponsa de Libano*, a verse of the Song of Songs addressed here to Beatrice. Many angels then take flight “alleluiando” while singing “Benedictus qui venis!” and throwing flowers. The woman appears inside a cloud of flowers: it is a rising sun. **Più chiar che’l sol** by Anthonello da Caserta, one of the most beautiful melodies of the Italian Ars Nova, translates into music the amazement at the apparition of the beloved woman: “Più che’l sol in lo mio cor lucia lizadra figura di vuy, madonna mia.”

Paradiso is the apotheosis of song and music. The heavenly visions are studded with sounds and voices: from Piccarda Donati to the souls of the blessed, the angelic hosts, the archangel Gabriel, and all of Heaven singing the Glory of the Trinity.

The first figure who sings is again a woman. Dante and Beatrice reach the first of the nine heavens, that of the Moon. Here Piccarda Donati, protagonist of the third canto, awaits him. Piccarda sings, but instead of singing at the beginning, at her first appearance, she sings when she vanishes “come per acqua cupa cosa grave” (as in dark water a heavy thing). She is the last of these women singers and intones Mary’s prayer, the figure to whom most of the songs of Paradiso are dedicated. The anonymous Marian sequence **Ave Stella Matutina**, datable to the end of the 13th century and coming from the *Servi di Maria* in Siena, is a wonderful melody written in the years when Dante lived in Florence. One can easily imagine that he listened to it.

The higher Dante and Beatrice go up in the skies, the more glorious the music becomes. In the Eighth Heaven, after having witnessed the triumph of Christ, the poet can finally contemplate Beatrice’s smile. However, she invites him not to stare only at her face but to turn his gaze to the spectacle of the Heaven of Fixed Stars, in which Mary and the Apostles are found. Dante then sees many lights in turn illuminated by a greater light, like the flowers of a meadow under the rays of the sun that filters through the clouds. **Le Ray au Soley** by Johannes Ciconia is a splendid canon at three different speeds that paints a ray of sunshine in music and dresses this vision with sounds.

Dante fixes his gaze on the most intense light of Mary and sees the archangel Gabriel descend from above in the form of a luminous crown that surrounds Mary and begins to rotate around her. Gabriele sings a very sweet melody, so sweet that even the most beautiful earthly music would seem, compared to that, the roar of thunder. While Gabriel sings his hymn, all the blessed chant the name of Mary.

Christ and Mary then ascend to the Empyrean and all the souls of the blessed reach out and sing the *Regina coeli* with such sweetness that the memory will never leave the

poet. The Gregorian chant **Ave Maris Stella** and its instrumental diminution seal this Marian apotheosis.

In Canto XXVII, still in the Heaven of Fixed Stars, Dante is elated by the sound of the whole paradise singing the Glory of the Trinity. We imagine it through a **Gloria** by Matteo da Perugia, who wrote some of the most inspired Ars Nova sacred music.

The last musical scene of the poem is the Contemplation of Mary. In the Tenth Heaven, the Empyrean, Saint Bernard exhorts Dante to look at the face of Mary, because only her splendour can help him to contemplate the figure of Christ: Dante sees above the Virgin a jubilation of angels, and recognizes in the beauty of Mary a spectacle superior to anything else he has ever seen. The poet then sees the angel Gabriel descend upon her singing *Ave, Maria, gratia plena* and the whole of Heaven continues the solemn song of the angel. **Mariam matrem Virginem**, a wonderful song dedicated to the Virgin, again taken from the Llibre Vermell de Montserrat, corresponds to this splendour.

Michele Pasotti