



The 'Dante vivo' Project, Florence, Italy

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Dante, Luca Signorelli, Orvieto

Modern education is left-hemisphere dominant, serious, colourless, silent, detached. Medieval education balanced the two hemispheres, could be playful as a learning strategy, was sensual and involved its audiences of readers and hearers intensely. For the problems in our education concerning this aspect see Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 2019. When I first visited Florence to read medieval manuscripts in its libraries, in particular in connection with Dante's teacher, Brunetto Latino, and the encyclopedic education Dante received from him, I was often told by Italian intellectuals that they hated Dante, while the *contadini*, the country people, I found, loved him, reciting him by heart musically. I came to realize this was because, formally, Dante was taught badly, boringly, with the left hemisphere only. For Italian intellectuals, he is as grim as the Risorgimento statue of him at Santa Croce, ultra-serious and, paradoxically, one dimensional, not comic, not polysemous.



Wikipedia Commons

I experimented. For two years every Thursday Florentines and foreigners would meet in our library, the Mediatheca 'Fioretta Mazzei,' and we read all of the *Commedia* twice and the *Vita nova* once, in turns around the table, forbidding the initial traditional 'Lectura Dantis' commentary, and only discussing the texts by consulting medieval manuscript illuminations, after the readings. Following that I worked on the project I called 'Dante vivo,' using the title of the book Giovanni Papini published in Florence in 1933, in which he called for a more lively pedagogy of Dante's writings. Our project uses hypertext .html files on the Web at <http://www.florin.ms/Dantevivo.html>, presenting the entire text of the *Commedia*, that can be read simultaneously with listening to each canto read by Carlo Poli, the actor son of *contadini* from the Mugello, who reads the text as poetry, as *cantastorie*, or one can choose the other readings made 50 years ago by the Società Dantesca Italiana, where academicians read him condescendingly as boring prose – in the mode of the Santa Croce statue! Alongside the cantos on the www.florin.ms website are miniatures from medieval manuscripts, especially the magnificent British Library Yates Thompson 36, the backdrops to the page files given from the appropriate Botticelli drawings, and also Blake's sketches. The medieval miniaturists, Botticelli and Blake are all excellent kinesthetic visualizers of the poetry. Because my own two published books in relation to Dante are on pilgrimage and on Dante's teacher, Brunetto Latino, I place for the first a Compostela cockle shell, for the second, Brunetto's notarial signature, as reference to the notes below the text. I also place a miniature Vittorio Alinari photograph which clicks through to his sepia photographs of the real Italian places Dante mentions in the midst of

his dream landscape. We plan to ask Italian children next to supply us with colour photographs of these places near their schools to put alongside those of Vittorio Alinari.

It is of great value to teach school children and university students how to hypertext (not .pdf or .doc only as these are too static). Download for free the Mozilla Seamonkey browser that comes with an easy composer derived from the former Netscape project. Go to 'edit page' from 'file,' then from 'new' to 'composer page.' Type in your title and your text. Choose the font, size and colour. The hypertext links are entered at 'link,' for instance, to music files in 'mp3'; and the .jpps' at 'image,' I use the typography of medieval manuscripts, of alternating red and blue capitals as these were a memory system for the 'Dante vivo' cantos. The use of colour for letters and images on the Web is free, which it never was in printed books. We can help students return to the experience of the medieval book through our new technology, which is intensely right-brained in its use of the senses: sight and sound, image and music. I believe in letting students be the Revolution of seizing the printing press/computer, in giving them these keys of the kingdom. Thus, they become, in turn, web masters with this mastery, with skills learned that are transportable and useful elsewhere. In fact, one sees Dante Alighieri learning how to construct a book with miniatures from his master Brunetto Latino who in turn learned how to do so from Alfonso X el Sabio when on embassy to Seville before the Battle of Montaperti and his exile. The creating of a book or a website is 'logotherapy.' As it was for Dante writing during the bitterness of his exile from Florence, turning the *Libro del Chiodo*, in which he was condemned to exile and death three times, into the laughter of the *Commedia*.

(See also <http://www.florin.ms/LibrodelChiodo.html>,
<http://www.florin.ms/Lapididantesche.html>)

I next suggested to Federico Bardazzi of the Ensemble San Felice that perhaps we could perform the music Dante mentions in the *Commedia*, deriving it from the manuscripts of the period. At first there was resistance, then enormous enthusiasm, as we found Dante had created a coherent body of music, liturgical music from the Offices of Prayer and from the Eucharistic Mass, offset by secular pieces sung by others of Dante's own *dolce stil nuovo* lyrics, which are like those of the Beatles and Bob Marley about love. Dante plays games, too, with this musical layer, this dimension to his text, shockingly juxtaposing sacred and profane melodies as motets seven times in his text, before reconciling them with St Bernard, who should sing Latin Gregorian chant, singing instead Dante's own composition, here humbly and anonymously, the very beautiful Franciscan Lauda in Florentine Italian, 'Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio.' All the liturgical music survives in written form. That for Dante's lyrics is not written, but can be retrieved using *contrafactum*, using a tune that fits the metre and which is from the same space/time ambience. I had already guessed that Dante's use of Psalm 113, 'In exitu Israel de Aegypto' and his own rudely interrupted 'Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona' sung by Casella of *Purgatorio* II were a motet. It was only through performing all the *Commedia*'s music as scholarly research that one could come to see seven such motets, which I list below in an appendix.

We first performed the liturgical music in Orsanmichele in Florence, the large granary church built by the people to feed even the enemy in time of famine in expiation for Florence's

war crime of starving Pisa which caused Ugolino's starvation and cannibalism, and we could see the great coherence of this body of music, going from Florence to Ravenna, from the ancient Hebrew music of the *tonus peregrinus* of Psalm 113 to the latest *ars nova* polyphony, forbidden by Pythagoras, Boethius and the Papacy, a history and geography of European music. We next combined both sacred and profane pieces in concerts given in Cologne, Graz and Avila. Then in 2015, with European Union funding for the pedagogical international musical project, we performed the entire two hours' concerts with images in Ravenna's San Francesco where Dante is buried and in Florence's Duomo by the Baptistery where he was baptized. We have created a DVD which is on the Web of all this music together with the images from miniatures, mosaics and sculpture at

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJJChgOGCbAUljXZOv2TH32IGeYfBwYTq>

We hope next to video the production as a musical, as an opera, perhaps in the Florence's Baptistery, perhaps in Ravenna's San Vitale, for pedagogic use in schools, in which Dante as Author is garbed in red ermined robes as the one who teaches, while within the action, as in the manuscript illuminations, Dante as Pilgrim is garbed in blue, the one who is learning from the red and ermine-clad Virgil – Virgil was thought in the Middle Ages to be a magician. Thus, Dante in the poem functions as the Sorcerer's Apprentice and as a sort of Pinocchio who sins each of the Seven Deadly Sins himself in each Circle in Hell – and we with him – then he and we are purged of these on each Terrace on Purgatory's Mountain. In Neuroscience, it is now known that where the reader is mirrored in the figure of the book's author, the first-person narrative, there is more right-hemisphere identification and involvement. Dante's son, Pietro

Alighieri, in his fine Commentary in Latin explained that Dante's *Commedia* is based on Terence's *Comedies* and on their perception of the Roman theatre as circular, that Dante has created a theatre in his poem where he and Virgil or Beatrice forever meet with a Third. I have had my students at Princeton, following five rehearsals with a Benedictine Chant Master, sing the *Officium Peregrinorum* in Gregorian Latin Chant, where the two disciples, Cleophas and, in the Middle Ages, the wise author Luke of that Gospel (Luke 24), both become the fools who do not at first recognize the Third who meets with them as Christ. In the *Officium Peregrinorum* manuscript at Orléans the voice of Luke is sung by a boy oblate schoolboy. We had our Dante Apprentice likewise sung by a treble, by a young woman from Mexico:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ej0t2br5P2o&list=PLJJChgOGCbAUIjXZOv2TH32IGeYfBwYTq&index=4>.

It is my hope that this project be 'Open Access.' I invite comments that can be included in the files – though these will always come after, not before, Dante's magnificent text. It is his multi-layered hyper-textual poem that can best teach us how to perform him. It is my hope, too, that this project will enable students to realize that they, too, can be Dantes, through a similar intense creating of therapeutic soul-healing music, poetry and theatre.



British Library, Yates Thompson 36, Beatrice and Dante in Paradise

Appendix: The *Commedia*'s Seven Polyphonic Motets

1. *Purgatorio* II.46-48,112, Psalm CXIII, '*In exitu Israel de Aegypto*,' 'tonus peregrinus'/'

Casella/Dante, 'Amor, che ne la mente mi ragiona' (*Convivio* III, *De vulgari eloquentia*

II,VI,6, contrafactum, 'Mariam Matrem Virginem,' *Llibre Vermeil de Montserrat*, XIV

C.

2. *Purgatorio* XIX.7-36,73, ‘Io son dolce Sirena’, contrafactum, ‘Co’ la Madre del Beato,’
Laudario Fiorentino, BNCF, BR 18/ Psalm CXIX, ‘*Adhesit pavimento anima mea*’
3. *Purgatorio* XXIII.10, XXIV.51, Psalm L, ‘*Labia mea Domine*’/ Bonagiunta Orbiciani/Dante
‘Donne che avete intelletto d’amore’ *Vita Nova* XIX, contrafactum ‘Imperauritz del
ciutat joyosa,’ *Llibre Vermeil de Monserrat*, XIV C.
4. *Purgatorio* XXV.121, XXVI.140-147, *Summae Deus clementiae*/ Arnaut Daniel/Dante, ‘*Tan
m’abellis vostre cortes deman*’, contrafactum, Thibaut de Navarre, ‘Dex est ausi comme
li pelicans.’
5. *Purgatorio* XXVII.58,100-108, *Venite, benedicti patris mei*/ ‘Sappia qualunque mio nome
dimanda’, contrafactum, Alfonso el Sabio, ‘Maravillosos miragres,’ *Cantiga de Santa
Maria* 272, BNCF BR 14.
6. *Purgatorio* XXX.11,19,21,83-84, *Veni de Libano, sponsa mea*, contrafactum, ‘Peccatrice
nominato Magdalena da Dio amata,’ *Laudario Fiorentino*, BNCF BR 18/ *Benedictus qui
venis/ Manibus o data plena liliis/In te, Domine, speravi*, contrafactum, ‘Ortorium
virentium/Virga Yesse/Victime paschali laudes,’ *Laudario Fiorentino*, BNCF BR 18,
Psalm XXXI
7. *Paradiso* VIII.29/37, *Agios, O Theos*/ ‘Voi che’ntendo il terzo ciel movete’ (*Convivio* II,
contrafactum, Marchetto da Padova, *Ave regina/Mater innocentiae*)

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<https://once-and-future-classroom.org/the-dante-vivo-project-florence-italy/>

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