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Descent and the Underworld

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Music and the Underworld

He began looking at faces

Wondering if all of hell were without music.

He tried an old song but pain

Was screaming on the jukebox and the bright fire

Was pelting away the faces and he heard a voice saying,

“Orpheus!”

He was at the entrance again

And a little three-headed dog was barking at him.

Later he would remember all those dead voices

And call them Eurydice.

-Jack Spice, “Orpheus in Hell”

Orpheus is the first human in Greek Myth to descend to the Underworld. The archetype of Orpheus calls us to find a way through pain and darkness through music and memory and it has bequeathed to our world some of the most enduring works of transcendent beauty. With his lyre and song, “he beckoned the trees, the savage animals, and even rocks and streams, to follow him and do his bidding” (Ovid Book X ). While singing a lament for his dead wife,  “for the first time, the faces of the Furies were wet with tears, won over by his song: the king of the deep, and his royal bride, could not bear to refuse his prayer, and called for Eurydice” (Ovid Book X, 44-47). Even after he was attacked by the lusty and enraged maenads, his severed head continued to sing as it meandered down the river to the Island of Lesbos, “ and (a miracle!) floating in midstream, the lyre lamented mournfully; mournfully the lifeless tongue murmured; mournfully the banks echoed in

reply” (Book XI: 61). The myth implies that Music trumps all, and is larger than the forces of the grave. Music is the power that navigates the underworld realm, alters death and redeems life.

Asbo 2

In Jack Spice’s poem, Orpheus wonders “if all hell were without music” (Spice). He is not the first to ponder this question. Hildegard of Bingen, composing in a Rhineland abbey in the 12th century, also held this view. The musicologist Stefan Morent notes Hildegard’s conviction that “psalm singing softens a hardened heart, music encompasses both body and soul, and the very bodily reaction to music is a sign of the heavenly descendance of man”(Morent). In her proto-opera morality play *Ordo Virtutem*, all seventeen personified virtues are given songs of celestial radiance; the devil alone cannot sing and is instructed to merely speak his verses (Davidson 12). An argument could be made that Anima, the heroine of Ordo, is redeemed from Hell *because* of music- it is the songs of the Virtues that persuade her to turn away from the wily seducer (who has no song in response) and reclaim her cloak of purity.

Dante, writing approximately two hundred years later, took up the relationship between music and the underworld again in the *Divine Comedy.*  While Dante placed Orpheus in Limbo amongst the circle of virtuous pagans which included Aristotle, Ovid and Virgil, he gave him no song. The Inferno is a region both hot and cold, but none of the realms from Limbo to Malebolge to the ice encrusted lake of the Ninth Circle have music. The sound track for Hell is cacophonous screams, shrieking whirlwinds, angry shouts and uxorious pleading- but no melody. However, the arrival of Dante and Virgil on the Shores of Humility is greeted with the exultant Psalm 113 , “*In exitu Israel de Aegpyto*” (Dante 222). Each successive sphere the pilgrims traverse from Purgatory to Paradise will include its own, specific music: hymns, antiphons, psalms and canticles. Drawing on his education at the Dominican Santa Maria Novella (where Dante studied the seven liberal arts in his youth, the fourth of which is music) and the rich liturgical life that existed in the late Medieval period in Florence, Dante references music appropriate to a particular moral theme which also shed light on the larger psychological issues implied in each canto. The journey towards the Empyrean

Asbo 3

includes reference to thirty specific songs. It is significant that in Canto 26 of Purgatory, Dante meets with the troubadour Guido Guinicelli who helps teach him about the refining flames. The last figure Dante encounters before he himself enters the required fire that prepares souls for Eden is the songmaster Arnaut Daniel. The Provencal poet intones, “ I am Arnaut, who, going, weep and sing; with grief I see my former folly; with joy, I see the hoped-for day draw near” (Dante 340). Arnaut Daniel stands simultaneously as the best example of music and the last example of humanity striving for purification and perfection in the realm closest to Paradise. Teachers of music are teachers of love, Dante seems to say. They know the way from Hell to Heaven.

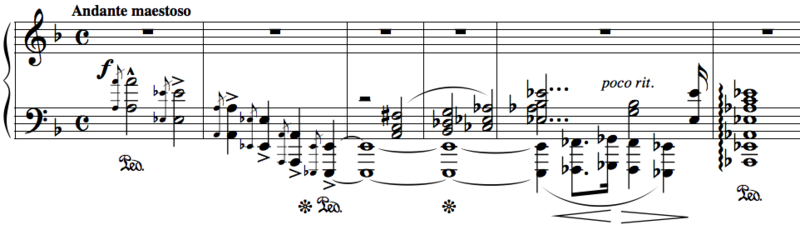
This is underscored by the choice of Dante’s final guide in Paradise- not his beloved Beatrice, but Bernard of Clairvaux,. While Bernard’ s adoration to the Virgin Mary is widely understood, what is not properly emphasized by most scholars is how *musical* a devotion he embodied. Under Bernard’s direction, the Cistercian Order returned to a stringent observation of the Rule of Saint Benedict, which requires that the life of a monk be ordered around a balance of work and prayer. Prayer, however, is a sung liturgy consisting of all 150 Psalms in the course of a given week, plus addition musical pieces. The prayer life is grouped into a cycle known as The Divine Office and typically occupies four hours a day. Many of the hymns used by the Cistercians were penned by Bernard himself. Legend credits him with composing the final stanza of the *Salve Regina* (featured in Purgatorio 7:83), after having heard the angels singing it to him on his way to mass.

Dante’s  *Paradise* is layered with the other Marian hymns used for Compline, the last liturgical office before sleep. During the Easter season, *Regina Caeli* (featured in Paradiso 23:128) would have been the last sounds a monk would have heard before entering into the Great Silence and the underworld of sleep and realm of Morpheus. The *Comedy* echoes Hildegard’s dictum that “ All music is from God” It is the bridge from hell to heaven, death to life, sin to virtue, despair to hope.

Asbo 3

Dante’s journey to the underworldbegins on the first day of the Tridium, Maundy Thursday. It is the evening in Holy Week which is set aside in Christian life to commemorate the Last Supper, the washing of the disciples’ feet, the weeping of blood in the garden of Gethsemene and Jesus’ arrest and torture. It is the perfect symbolic day for Dante the pilgrim to begin his own nekyia journey into the underworld. The traditional music ascribed for this day in the liturgy is suitably mournful and the centerpiece is the hymn- so poignantly set by J.S. Bach in his magnificent *St. Matthew Passion,* “ O Sacred Head Now Wounded” The text of this hymn (see appendix) was written by Bernard of Clairvaux who it seems knew rather much about descent and darkness[[1]](#footnote-1).

While he himself referenced no songs in the realm of the *Inferno*, Dante’e descriptions of hell have inspired powerful musical interpretations of his vision[[2]](#footnote-2). Franz Liszt was so profoundly moved by the *Divine Comedy* that he wrote both a piano work and a symphonic poem in homage. Below is the beginning of the one movement *Piano Sonata*, published in the *Annees de Pelerinage* (Years of Pilgrimage, 1856), entitled, “After a Reading on Dante”:



The grave descending octaves of this opening. marked *fort*e and with thunderous accents, are an effective way of evoking the journey into the darkness. Liszt paints a very visceral tone picture of

Asbo 5

abject terror in the moments that follow and he has conjured up for at least one listener [[3]](#footnote-3) the sense of being trapped in hell. Pounding passagework, roaring chromatic chords, gargantuan glissandi, frantic octaves and titanic tremolos strain the poor keyboard to the breaking point: the piece is both renowned and feared as one of the most fiendishly difficult works in the repertoire.

Dante’s second circle of hell contains the lustlocked and doomed lovers, Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini. Their carnal embrace is well known from the sculptures “*Fugit Amor*” and “*The Kiss*” by Auguste Rodin and Camille Claudel.[[4]](#footnote-4) What is less well known is the Orphic effect that this same story had on the underworld journey of Sergei Rachmaninoff. Rachmaninoff suffered terribly from depression following the brutal reception of his first symphony [[5]](#footnote-5)and the death of his mentor, Peter Tchaikovsky. After three years of a musical writer’s block, he entered into autosuggestive therapy with Nikolai Dahl. Under Dr. Dahl’s care, Rachmaninoff turned to the story of the doomed lovers from Canto V. Tchaikovsky’s own brother, Modest, crafted a libretto and under hypnosis, Rachmaninoff wrote the rivetingly emotional opera *Francesca da Rimini*, quickly followed by his most enduringly popular work, the *Piano Concerto No.2* (Griffiths). Dante’s *Inferno* poetically created a path out of Hell (and creative silence) for the brooding Russian composer and led to his most glorious success.

Asbo 6

Four centuries before Rachmaninoff, Dante’s underworld was a catalyst in the creation of opera. The Florentine Camerata sought to recapture the power and passion of the great tradition of Greek drama. Returning to the great musical theories of Pythagoras and reaching back to the classical plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripedes, the intellectuals gathered in the home of Count Bardi sought to find a way out of the ‘dead end’ they believed music had become. In 1582 , one of their members began an experimentation with song form. Vincenzo Galilei (Galileo’s father), was a mathematician, singer and lutenist of renown. His most influential musical composition is *Ugolino’s Lament,* which depicts the fearsome story from the ninth circle where Dante encounters the Italian count’s horrific tale of starvation and cannibalism.[[6]](#footnote-6) This work- renowned for its deep emotionalism and clear, direct melodies- paved the way for Baroque opera to follow [[7]](#footnote-7)

Mozart’s *Magic Flute,* Handel’s *Rinaldo* and Wagner’s oeuvre all have important parallels with the concept of a *nekyia* journey: threshold guardians, descent, encounter with the dark forces of one’s own nature, embrace of the feminine, and sacred union or *Hieros gamos* at the culmination of the *rubedo* stage. While the arc of an underworld journey can be easily embraced in a musical form that encompasses poetry and operatic lyrics, a visceral sense of descent in the very form and structure of musical composition itself is evoked in the purely instrumental work of Johannes Sebastian Bach (1685-1750).

In Johann Sebastian Bach’s magnificent *Passacaglia for organ in c minor*, the journey of downward motion is continually re-iterated in the left hand and foot pedals with a constant chromatic descent. The incomparable “Goldberg” Variations plunge the oft-unaware listener into a world of symmetry

Asbo 7

and sacred mathematical symbology which mirrors the Hero’s Journey: departure, ordeal (particularly the two variations in minor keys), return. Their Trinitarian, mathematical structure evokes a subtle psychic response that becomes astonishing when brought to consciousness. It is indeed an alchemical opus. The balance that Johan Sebastian Bach achieved in his music is truly Pythagorean, and mirrors that philosophy. Light and dark, major and minor, movement and stillness are held in profound equanimity. Bach himself was in many ways Orpheus. The piece which concludes the accompanying cd , the *Chaconne in d minor for Solo Violin*, was written in the aftermath of his first wife’s death. Bach had left to tour with his patron; when he returned, he found his dear Maria Barbara dead and buried. The musicologist Helga Thoene believes that this piece is an encoded musical epitaph, “ based upon the chorale quotations concealed in the pieces as well as on the symbolism of the numerical patterns, interpreted by means of gematria” (Morimur). These quotations of the chorales stitch together a picture which moves through grief and mourning and point to hope of a resurrected life. Their gorgeous and heart-rending 54 variations on a (sometimes imperceptible) ground base a sonic landscape are all contained within a structure that mirrors the Pythagorean dimensions of the golden mean. The music descends into darkness, moves into rage, lamentation and despair, and finds a resting place in hope before returning to the main theme. The cumulative effect of this extraordinary piece is of a true nekyia journey evoking the same sense of circularity that mirrors Nietzsche’s sense of eternal return or T.S. Eliot’s lines of “returning to the place we started and knowing it for the first time” (Eliot 64).

Orpheus may have been a mythic figure, but the archetype of the Thracian singer lamenting for his dead love found very real and human expression in the lives and works of Johann Sebastian Bach and Dante Alighieri. I imagine that many a Fury amongst us may still find themselves weeping in astonishment at the face of such grave and terrible beauty.

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1. While he created moments of stupendous beauty in music, architecture and poetry, the “mellifluous doctor” issued the call for the disastrous Third Crusade in Jerusalem and preached against the Albigensians, thus issuing in some of the most hellish experiences ever seen by the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dante’s first title was not *Comedia* but *Visione*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Me. Liszt is my least favorite composer. When forced to endure a performance of his piano concerto, I could only find consolation by drawing images of bleeding ears. I find it quite fitting that Liszt was moved to depict hell, as his music is filled with the same self indulgent and self aggrandizing egotism that defines that realm. Ironically, the composer himself followed a purgatorial journey, From a scandalous and dissolute youth of seducing other men’s wives, Liszt evolved to become a deeply spiritual man and philanthropist of the highest order. He ended his days as a Franciscan tertiary and exorcist. Having given away all of his wealth, he devoted his later musical career to conducting liturgical music in Rome, particularly championing the works of Palestrina and Bach. The Dante symphony comes from this period. I wonder at the influence of Dante on Liszt adopting the cloth, as well- Dante himself was a Franciscan tertiary and was buried in Ravenna in a simple brown cassock. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Camille was hired to sculpt the hands and feet of all Rodin’s statuary for The Gates of Hell. As he wrote several letters indicating that he did not make an artistic decision on this major commission without her advice, I believe it is fitting to credit her at least in part for their creation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It had been panned in print by the influential composer and critic Caesar Cui, who suggested that the only appreciative audience members would be found in a conservatory run by an insane asylum in hell. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Count Ugolino, a real historical figure, had been locked with his sons in a tower by his archenemy Ruggiero. His children starved to death, and the count ate them. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Of the earliest operas Jacopo Peri’s *Daphne* retold the maiden’s flight from Apollo while the next four depicted (with differing endings) Orpheus’ legendary journey to retrieve his beloved Eurydice. The most celebrated of these is rightly Claudio Monteverdi’s *Orfeo.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)