

PRESS KIT

The Palazzetto Bru Zane presents

# DANTE

BY BENJAMIN GODARD

**B**  
**PALAZZETTO  
BRU ZANE**  
CENTRE  
DE MUSIQUE  
ROMANTIQUE  
FRANÇAISE

SUNDAY JANUARY 31, 2016 - 19.00  
PRINZREGENTHEATER  
MUNICH (GERMANY)

TUESDAY FEBRUARY 2, 2016 - 20.00  
OPÉRA ROYAL DE VERSAILLES  
VERSAILLES (FRANCE)



Gustave Doré - Dante - Minos, judge of the damned

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Gustave Doré - *Dante* - *De même la mauvaise semence d'Adam se jette, âme par âme, dans cette barque*

# THE OPERA IN A FEW WORDS...

Opera in four acts, to a libretto by Édouard Blau,  
first performed at the Opéra-Comique (Paris) on May 7, 1890.

Concert version

Born in Florence in 1265, Dante Alighieri was both a poet and a significant political figure who worked actively to maintain the independence of his city in the face of papal ambitions. But he continues to be known mainly for his *Divine Comedy*, which narrates, by way of a long poetic passage, his journey into the three realms beyond the tomb. Godard's opera, composed in 1890, skilfully juxtaposes political developments – crowd scenes in Florence and the feud between Guelphs and Ghibellines – and the expression of medieval courtly love. In the opera *Gemma*, a young girl married to the protagonist out of duty and then abandoned, becomes the close friend of the beloved woman, Beatrice, of whom she is also the secret rival. The most remarkable aspect of this opera, though, is the insertion of a 'Vision', a kind of synthesis of the *Divine Comedy* set to music. Act three thus ranges between an imaginary Hell and Paradise, with sections bearing titles such as *Apparition de Virgile*, *Chœur des Damnés*, *Tourbillon infernal*, *Divine Clarté* and *Apothéose de Béatrice*. Godard here appears at the peak of his melodic inspiration and his overall compositional mastery, in a style that swings between Gounod and Massenet. The vocal quintet called for in the opera perfectly captures all the heroic and expressive potential of singers well-versed in Wagner and Verdi.

The Palazzetto Bru Zane is presenting Dante in the form of a concert, thereby highlighting its division into sharply contrasted tableaux and a series of dramatic shifts that at times resemble the oratorio form. For this occasion, the Centre de Musique Romantique Française team has created the first modern edition of the orchestral score, working from Godard's original manuscript.

SUNDAY JANUARY 31 – 19.00

Prinzregentheater  
Munich (Germany)

TUESDAY FEBRUARY 2 – 20.00

Opéra royal de Versailles  
Versailles (France)

MUNICH RADIO ORCHESTRA  
BAVARIAN RADIO CHORUS  
Ulf Schirmer *conductor*

*Dante* Edgaras Montvidas  
*Béatrice* Véronique Gens  
*Gemma* Rachel Frenkel  
*Bardi* Jean-François Lapointe  
*L'Ombre de Virgile* Andrew  
Foster-Williams  
*L'Écolier* Sarah Laulan  
*La Voix du Hérault* Topi Lethi Meyer

*Production* Palazzetto Bru Zane

*Recording by the*  
Palazzetto Bru Zane  
*for the "Opéra français" series*

*In partnership with the*  
Münchener Rundfunkorchester

*First modern edition of the*  
*partition made from the manuscript*  
*autographed by the Palazzetto Bru Zane*

*The concert on 31 January 2016*  
*will be broadcast live on BR-Klassik*



Ary Scheffer, *The Shades of Francesco da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta appear to Dante and Virgil* (1855)

# GODARD'S DANTE

by Gérard Condé

Born into a wealthy business family in Paris in 1849, Benjamin Godard initially played the violin and began composing long before he undertook solid studies of harmony and counterpoint at the Paris Conservatoire in the class of Napoléon-Henri Reber. Despite superior gifts, he twice failed to win the Prix de Rome; subsequently, once his father's failing fortunes made it necessary for him to earn a living from his music, his output accelerated at an increasingly frantic rate, giving his contemporaries the image of a talented musician who dilapidated his resources, swept along by a prolixity he had no compunction about indulging. The immediate appeal of his works contrasts with the portrait Alfred Bruneau sketched, after the composer's premature death, of an artist standing apart from the dominant trends:

This sort of voluntary exile, this refusal to participate in any intellectual communion had made him terribly melancholic. Always dressed in a long, sad black frock coat, he walked past in the street, his tall figure stiff, his head held high, staring around him, like certain anguished, tortured young priests. His automatic gait, his jerky movements, his lean silhouette, his bony, ravaged, sparsely bearded face, his thick hair escaping from under his hat, made passers-by turn round in their tracks, at once intrigued and disturbed by this singular, sombre man. (*Gil Blas*, 11 January 1895)

Benjamin Godard boasted that he had never opened a score by 'ce bon monsieur Wagner', to use his own expression as reported by Alfred Bruneau. His masters were Beethoven, Schumann and Mendelssohn; he wished for no others. In the 1880s and 1890s, when Wagnerism was setting the Parisian intelligentsia afire, his aesthetic orientation appeared scandalously reactionary.

His fecundity, and hence his compositional facility (which remains to be demonstrated), have been taken as implying a lack of high artistic standards, at least as conceived by the disciples of Wagner or César Franck: why make things simple when you can make them complicated? In fact, the principal quality of the music of Benjamin Godard, in his numerous vocal works, his études for piano, his chamber music, his concertos and symphonies, is to offer the listener attractive melodies with well-defined rhythms, harmonised without ostentatious sophistication (though more subtly than is generally thought), within formal structures that are easily intelligible and generally (but not wholly) predictable. A Mozartian ideal, in the end, of the kind preached by Gounod at the time in the desert of the Wagnerian salons. Godard is a composer of the 'limpid line', like Massenet, who, in *Mes souvenirs*, did not shrink from evoking 'that dear and great musician, who was a true poet from childhood onwards, from the first bars he wrote! Who does not recall that masterpiece *Le Tasse* [Tasso]?' That *symphonie dramatique*, awarded a Prix de la Ville de Paris, had established Godard's reputation in 1878. The resurrection of the work, generally thought considered the finest he wrote, is still to be programmed, but has now been made possible by the recent rediscovery in the United States of the full score, long assumed lost. Such is not the case with Dante, his opera in four acts inspired by the life of another Italian poet and given its first performance on the stage of the Opéra-Comique (then located on the place du Châtelet) on 13 May 1890.

The generally favourable public reaction contrasted with the almost unanimous severity of the press; we must therefore weigh up the pros and cons for ourselves. According to Arthur Pougin in *Le Ménestrel* dated 18 May, Cécile Simonnet (the radiant creator of the role of Rozenn in *Le Roi d'Ys*) struggled with the tessitura of Beatrice, rather too high for her, and was consequently too often drowned by 'the fury of an undisciplined orchestra'; the tenor Étienne Gilbert, who possessed a powerful top register, tended to shout rather than articulate; while the baritone Paul Lhérie acted like 'a traitor in a melodrama with exaggerated body movements, eye-rolling and excessive gestures'. And all this was surpassed in its turn by the ludicrous staging . . .

The dedication of the score 'au Maître Ambroise Thomas' is a deferential homage to *Françoise de Rimini*, the final dramatic production of the composer of *Mignon*, performed to a lukewarm reception in April 1882. Whereas the libretto set by his illustrious predecessor showed, in flashback, the most moving episode of the *Divine Comedy*, introduced by a prologue set in Hell (where Dante and Virgil meet the lovers Francesca and Paolo) and followed by an epilogue in which Beatrice brings the promise of divine pardon, that of *Dante* is based on romanced episodes of the poet's life borrowed

from Boccaccio and the *Vita Nuova*. Allusion to the *Divine Comedy* (reduced to two sections, Hell and Paradise) is limited to 'Dante's Dream', which occupies the last part of Act Three. Camille Bellaigue, in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, was unparing in his criticism of a work whose music — despite what he saw as the excessive use of harps, 'faux angelic' flutes, and percussion — might have seemed appropriate enough under the title of *Ernest et Joséphine* or *Jenny, l'ouvrière* (Jenny the factory girl) but, with Dante and the *Comedia* as its subject, was singularly lacking in grandeur: 'a rash and pointless work; a work produced hastily and carelessly; unworthy, first of all and above all, of the formidable name it bears'.

These misguided accusations derive from a simplistic conception of the poet's works and personality that is summed up in what French writers all too often mean by 'dantesque'. For all its unfathomable profundity of thought and its giddy overall conception, the *Divine Comedy* is rich in familiar details and remains a masterpiece on a human scale. The pride of the author, chosen to traverse Hell, where none has descended since Christ, and then, without any precedent, to climb the mountain of Purgatory right up to the highest sphere of Heaven, where he will leave the reader on the margins of a vision that defies all description, would be unbearable if this fiction did not contain an extremely touching strain of conscious naïveté and a delightful, playful complicity. To be sure, the libretto by Édouard Blau (assisted by his regular collaborator Simone Arnaud) takes liberties with historical reality, but Dante himself set the example in that respect, and one may content oneself with appreciating its legitimacy from the sole viewpoint of musico-dramatic pertinence.



Gustave Doré - Dante - Paolo and Francesca (1861)

### **An overview of the score**

Introduced by a brief chromatic progression, the opening chorus, 'straightforward, very lively and with agreeable dialogue' (according to Reyer), 'very dashing, full of movement and warmth' (Pougin), 'full of energy and accent' (Joncières), plunges the listener into the midst of the struggles in Florence between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines – although, for Bellaigue, 'their dispute has little significance'. Though based on Boccaccio, the recitative that marks the entrance of Dante is equally inspired by the conflicts that had divided France since 1870 ('La Patrie est en deuil', The fatherland is in mourning): 'There are striking analogies between the public life of Florence in the Middle Ages and our own public life', observed the critic of *Le Figaro* with an allusion to General Boulanger. The poet's speech to his fellow citizens ('Le ciel est si bleu sur Florence') in the form of a cantilena in 9/8 accompanied on the harp, with a luminous, tranquil character contrasting with what has gone before, suddenly grows impassioned then regains its calm, as often happens in the *Comedia*. One realises that the role has been allotted to a light, fairly penetrating tenor voice, which on reflection is better suited to the character than the more predictable sage baritone that Joncières would have preferred:

If he is given a different appearance from the one we are used to seeing in pictures, with his austere physiognomy, his clean-shaven face, his hood and his long robe, he is no longer Dante.

The people and the leaders of the parties are no less divided when they enter the Palazzo della Signoria to elect the new Prior. The dialogue between Dante and Simeone Bardi, Beatrice's fiancé, might have come from *Werther*, so similar are the situation and the characters. Is this sheer coincidence, given that Massenet's opera, finished in 1887, was still unpublished and unperformed? Not quite, since Blau had worked on both librettos. The words of Bardi's arioso ('On ne saurait quelles choses lui comparer') are inspired by Sonnet XV of the *Vita Nuova*. The baritone at once admits that 'to portray her accurately, O poet, would require your language' ('Pour la bien dépeindre, ô poète, c'est ton langage qu'il faudrait'). Here is a fluid, expressive inspiration, shorn of all superfluity, whose long concluding high G flat (on 's'envoler') guarantees its performer his ovation. The dialogue continues (Pougin rather excessively declared it 'interminable') and, after a pathetic *a parte* from Dante, Bardi departs, accompanied by the same biting, metronomic motif with which he made his entrance and which characterises him so well.

Now alone, Dante gives free rein to his despair. When one is twenty-three years old, what weight does future glory carry in the face of losing one's beloved? The aria is in two sections: the first, introverted, obsessional, perpetually hovering around the immutable A in the bass, 'lacks neither pathos nor breadth' (Bellaigue), while the second, more agitated, more vehement in its vocal writing, expresses his decision to reconquer the beautiful Beatrice. One wonders why Pougin classified this aria among the 'failures' of the work; it is quite the opposite. Dante has only just left the piazza when Beatrice and her confidante Gemma (the poet's future wife) emerge from the chapel. A pastoral colour ('The accompaniment is exquisite with its intermittent rhythm, which suggests the beating of two doves' wings', wrote Joncières) and a naive musical inspiration give their dialogue a tone that Bellaigue deemed 'precious, reminiscent of sentimental operetta': Beatrice confesses that she would prefer to cross this threshold in a shroud because she must renounce Dante, the gentle companion of her childhood games. All of this sorts ill with the portrait that Dante has left us of Beatrice; but given that he barely spoke a word to her in his lifetime, did he not take greater liberties by beatifying her in his works and inventing abundant dialogues with his protectress? It is not enough to adduce the laws of courtly love to explain this.

The *coup de théâtre* that closes the first act goes still further in its ramifications: Dante, elected by his fellow citizens despite not being a candidate, invokes his dreamy nature — to which his high-flown vocal line attests — in an attempt to refuse, and the increasingly vehement supplications of the crowd and the patriotic urging of Bardi 'Pour être aimé, fais ton devoir!' (To become great, do your duty!) only make him admit his weakness. The appearance of Beatrice and her arguments, progressing from enveloping tenderness to ardent firmness ('To be loved, do your duty!'), make up his mind for him, while simultaneously opening the eyes — as in *Werther* — of Gemma-Sophie and Bardi-Albert, who exclaim 'Il l'aime encore!' (He still loves her). This wholly imaginary scene nonetheless derives a certain justification from the initiatory (not to say preachy) role that Dante assigns to Beatrice in the other world. 'Nothing could be more vulgar than Dante's patriotic song accepting power', deplored Bellaigue, not too unfairly. The Florentines, easily swayed, swear to be 'for ever joined in fraternal embrace', a passage that prompted Reyer to write: 'Thus ends the first act, with a vigorously rhythmic accompaniment of trumpets, drums and cymbals'; later on he praises 'the rich sound produced by the orchestral accompaniment and the voices'. These contradictory judgments obviously whet our curiosity today.

When the curtain rises on the second act, the sombre motif of Bardi (on which the prelude is based) has already installed a sinister atmosphere: 'How the sky has darkened!' exclaims Simeone, before confessing: 'It is not only above our heads that all is dark: ah, it is within me!' The false friend counts on the arrival of Charles of Valois in Florence to chase Dante from the city, but does not know where he stands with Beatrice; he recalls, note for note, the words she had sung earlier ('Va sans regret . . .' — Go without regrets), which now obsess him. A simple recitative would not have carried sufficient weight to convey the fact that this scene contains all the seeds of the drama to come. Hence a recurrent element, more memorable to the ear ('Qu'on ouvre à l'étranger les portes de Florence' — If the gates of Florence are opened to the foreigner), justifies the indication 'Air' in the score. Bellaigue's allusion to an operetta-like chorus of conspirators (between the prelude and the aria) suggests that this must have been cut subsequently. We will find a reminiscence of it later on.

The duet between Bardi and Gemma (who has come to persuade him to restore Beatrice's freedom of choice, just as she herself agrees to renounce Dante) was 'favourably received at the premiere', notes Pougin, who attributes its success solely to the talent of the mezzo, Jeanne-Eugénie Nardi. Reyer, on the contrary, did his best to excuse Godard: 'I do not see here one of those situations capable of rousing a composer's imagination.' Yet this duet, very extended and with admirably vehement accents, presents a successful progression rising to the paradoxical interweaving of the protagonists'

vocal lines as each insists on his or her positions. They finally have the happy idea of leaving the stage, making way for Beatrice who has heard everything . . . In her desperation, she seeks comfort in a *romance*. A *romance* in 1890 (or indeed, if you will, in 1288)? A subtler choice than it might seem, intended to make the listener sense a link between a retrospective musical inspiration and the yearning evocation of what should have been but never will. It is worth noting that, aside from its flowing character and its 6/8 pulse, 'Comme un doux nid', with its discreet expressive refinements, has nothing in common with the prototype of the non-modulating *romance* in identical strophes closed by the obligatory *sanglot* or sob. Reyer records that Mlle Simonnet preferred to sing another number (written by Godard for the baritone Faure) 'which is far from possessing . . . the grace and the agreeable sentiment' of the one in the score.

'The languishing, but very passionate duet' (Reyer) in which Beatrice yields without much resistance to Dante's egocentric arguments ('C'est me prendre mon génie que me ravir ton amour!' – To deprive me of your love is to rob me of my genius!) moves forward without *longueurs*, then soars into a breathless lyrical peroration whose quality was underlined by both Pougin and Bellaigue. The contrast is all the more striking with the beginning of the finale, which Joncières thought 'a complete failure' whereas Reyer admired its 'appearance of fine comedy and the details of the orchestra'. It is true that things start to go downhill with the entrance of Bardi, still accompanied by his motif and whose words are punctuated (as was already the case in his duet with Gemma) by noisy bass figures (dotted rhythms and octave triplets). But it is above all the ensemble in 6/8 time ('C'en est fait' – It is done), suspending the action, which has a formulaic feel to it; Godard apparently shortened it after the dress rehearsal. Dante's renewed outburst, the return of the chorus's mockeries, the announcement of the poet's banishment, his vain attempt to make Beatrice go back on the promise that has been forced from her, sets the action moving again before the curtain falls. When all is said and done, given skilful handling, this number would not be an unworthy conclusion to the act.

Clearly, the high-spirited (danced) Tarentelle that opens the third act ('well modulated and prettily orchestrated', conceded the ferocious Adolphe Jullien in the *Moniteur universel* of 19 May, while Reyer heard in it a reminiscence of the opening of *Les Troyens*) is intended to clear the spectators' heads and divert them from the drama they have just witnessed, the better to immerse them in another one. The noble singing of the Old Man introduces the patriarchal note that prepares the arrival of the schoolboys come to honour Virgil's tomb with the sound of flutes and harps (an agreeable number cut after the dress rehearsal). Thus, as the musical style rises by degrees, the worshippers of the Latin poet will make way for one more illustrious than they: Dante, 'clad in his historical costume', addresses a fervent prayer to his master to provide him with the inspiration for the masterpiece he dreams of. The Invocation, which 'lacks neither ardour nor power' (Bellaigue), 'neither ardour nor breadth' (Pougin) is not, vocally, very remarkable. It is, rather, the sobriety of the declamation, the orchestral and harmonic colour, and still more, perhaps, the grim beauty of the sombre recitative in which it is cast that explain its impact. And that was indeed Godard's intention.

Then, like Rinaldo in the gardens of Armida, Dante falls asleep, and sees in his dreams what he has exhausted himself trying to imagine. The music grows simpler and darker, then swells to a triple *forte*: Virgil emerges from his tomb, a device that, with the appropriate lighting, ought to show the spectator that the most hackneyed operatic conventions are by no means the least effective. It was difficult, though, to have Virgil speak in the 'voice weakened by a long silence' that Dante attributes to him; Godard opted for the patriarchal (?) regularity of a slow waltz that Bellaigue found 'dull and gloomy', an impression for which one may think that the merely 'adequate' talent of the baritone Émile-Alexandre Taskin was alone responsible.

What follows was rejected all the more unanimously because, the technical resources being insufficient, the scenes from the *Inferno*, which had already been substantially pruned of episodes that might perhaps have rested the ear, were performed with the curtain lowered. Perusal of the piano reduction does not suffice to give an idea of the effect, but suggests considerable ambitions. According to Joncières, 'amid the din of the orchestra – more discordant than terrifying – we hear the howls of the damned. I confess that these *chromatic scales*, these chords of the *diminished seventh*, these clashing dissonances, these deafening sounds from the brass and percussion instruments fatigued me more than they moved me'. Reyer describes a 'searing symphony, with strident, brassy chords and sombre chromatic scales, which gives so frightening, so terrible an idea of the torments of Hell'. More elliptically, Le Monsieur de l'Orchestre in *Le Figaro* harps on the refrain 'Oh! ma tête, ma tête!' Ugolino the famished cannibal, and then the hapless lovers Paolo and Francesca, conjure up music appropriate to their situation. Then Heaven is illuminated. All things there must be in such perfect order that a note in the score enjoins chorusmaster and conductor to prevent the performers from hurrying the semiquavers that follow the triplets in an unchanging rhythmic figure marked *crescendo/diminuendo*. The idea is a fine one, but 'the persistence of the rather heavy rhythm that accompanies the heavenly choir, interrupted by the vision of Beatrice, gives this number a character that much odder than it is religious' (Reyer), for these 'chords in a breathless



Gustave Doré - Dante - Ugolino gnawing on the brains of the Archbishop Ruggieri (1861)

rhythm' seem to Bellaigue 'as contrary as can be to any illusion of beatitude and serenity'. But the problem very probably came more from performers lacking in subtlety than from the music itself, which is well conceived. Joncières describes the ensuing scene: 'Beatrice appears in the midst of the clouds: she murmurs an indecisive melody, accompanied by a violin motif to which M. Godard has attached I know not what significance, for it will recur with singular insistence at the young woman's death in the fourth act. This sliding motif, on the violin's E string, is like a sort of plaintive mewling, of which the effect is really not felicitous.'

The prelude to the fourth act takes up the solo violin motif associated with Beatrice. The first tableau, which featured Dante's awakening, the entrance of Bardi stricken with remorse and resolved to restore Beatrice to him (!) and their decision to hasten to Naples and rejoin her at the convent to which she has retired, lacks neither freshness (at the start) nor power (later on), but it was omitted at the Opéra-Comique, so that the act opened directly with 'the poor recluse in a low-cut white dress, bare-armed, her hair flowing loose, as is appropriate for an operatic heroine who is about to die' (Joncières). But before hearing her we must first of all witness the procession of nuns to the sound of a gentle march in triple time and listen to Gemma's moving solo, cast in the form of a *romance*, 'Au milieu de vous, dans ce monastère'. Jullien thought the latter was 'obviously written with an eye to the salons', but it adopts rather the tone of the old *complaintes* (laments), in which the simplicity of the vocal line paradoxically enhances the pathetic nature of the subject. After this, the two women sing an airy duet revealing the tender rapport between them and gradually mounting in tension. The aria for Beatrice, now alone on stage, is so predictable, so conventional in expression, that the composer did his best to use it to show off the singer's resources, an approach that, by the 1890s, ran counter to current convictions. Nevertheless, he succeeds in his aim, and the result is a number that is easier to appreciate nowadays than it was at the time. What follows elicited greater approval from the critics: as Adolphe Jullien conceded, 'there are graceful details in the scene where Gemma announces to Beatrice that two strangers have arrived'. The quartet combining the protagonists is interesting for the religious character of its idiom. Left alone, the lovers launch into a duet that was encored, a sure sign that it is well placed. The final scene, in which Beatrice expires, sees the return of the three-note motif and a reminiscence of the accompaniment to the Heavenly Chorus.

Having come to the end of this survey of the score, one feels that the almost unanimous rejection – or at any rate often contradictory attitude – on the part of the critics is explained less by the absence of qualities in the work than by its contemporary context, with which those qualities were out of step. Eugène de Solenière (*Notules et impressions musicales*, 1902) probably gives us the key to the enigma:

Godard was, above all else, not of his own time . . . he was a dreamer, a belated Romantic, a man of introverted emotions with expressive naïvetés and what one might call modesties of style; he had the sincerity of simple feelings, the candour of a clear line of thought amid the anxieties of his nervous pessimism.

# SYNOPSIS

## ACT ONE

*A public square in Florence.*

The city is torn apart by a war between Guelfs and Ghibellines. As the College of the People prepares to appoint a Prior to calm the political tensions, Simeone Bardi reveals to his friend, the poet Dante – who has just returned to the city – that he is soon to marry the woman he has loved in secret: the beautiful Beatrice. At these words, Dante – also in love with the young woman – must restrain his emotions. After the two men have left, Beatrice enters, followed by her confidante Gemma, to whom she confesses her tender feelings for Dante, though she believes she will never see him again. The crowd emerges from the palazzo. It is announced that the College of the People has named Dante supreme leader of the city. Beatrice trembles at the name, while Dante, who now reappears, is on the point of refusing this honour. Then the young woman comes forward and instils confidence in him: ‘To be loved, do your duty!’ This ambiguous declaration worries Bardi, while the people acclaim its hero.

## ACT TWO

*A room in the Palazzo della Signoria in Florence.*

Bardi thunders forth his rage against Dante. Enter Gemma, who asks him to give up Beatrice’s hand. When he tries to dismiss her, saying that she does not know what jealousy is, she confesses that she too is consumed by unreciprocated love: she has lost her heart to Dante, but he loves Beatrice. After they leave, Beatrice appears; concealed behind a tapestry, she has heard everything. Bardi’s words of hate and Gemma’s avowal of love have convinced her that she must renounce Dante. At this point the young man himself enters. When Beatrice rejects him, he declares his passion once more. Overcome with emotion, she ends up yielding to him. Then a group of Ghibellines and Guelfs appears, followed by Bardi. Charles of Valois has entered Florence and proclaims Dante’s banishment, while Bardi condemns Beatrice to end her days in a convent.

## ACT THREE

*Mount Posillipo. To the left, a tomb carved into the rock, shaded by oleanders.*

While groups of countryfolk dance to the sound of rustic instruments, an old man points out Virgil’s tomb to a group of schoolboys come from the city. They all adorn it with palm leaves and garlands while singing a hymn to the poet’s glory. As they depart, dusk falls slowly. Dante appears, laboriously climbing the mountain, exhausted and broken-hearted. He makes a final plea to Virgil: that the Roman poet may grant him the inspiration to regain his glory, by dictating the ideal poem to him. Dante hopes thereby to recover Beatrice’s esteem. His eyes close from weariness, and as he falls asleep the tomb slowly opens; Virgil emerges from it, crowned with laurels. In a vision at once sublime and terrible he shows Dante Hell, where the lost souls of Ugolino and of Francesca and Paolo appear, and then Paradise. A final celestial vision reveals Beatrice surrounded by angels: she promises that, if Dante completes his work, the two lovers will be reunited.

## ACT FOUR

### First tableau

*The same setting as the previous act.*

Dante is awakened by the songs of shepherds. Intoxicated by his dream, he resolves to find Beatrice. At this point, having been directed to the place by Gemma, Bardi arrives and declares he has repented: jealousy has given way to remorse. He offers to lead Dante to the convent in Naples where Beatrice is cloistered. Dante forgives the man who now wishes to restore his happiness. They leave together.

### Second tableau

*Naples: the garden of a convent.*

Beatrice is seen among the procession of nuns, pale and barely able to walk. She tells Gemma, who has come to see her, that her death seems imminent. But she rallies somewhat when her friend announces that two men have come to visit, for she hopes to see Dante again. He duly appears, followed by Bardi. The two young people exchange ecstatic words of love as in Florence. But suffering has fatally weakened Beatrice’s health, and she suddenly faints. Though Gemma and Dante hasten to her aid, her eyes close for the last time after gazing heavenwards. She dies, repeating the same words Dante heard in his dream. Through his despair, he nevertheless hears the consoling words of Gemma and rises as if illuminated: ‘Yes, I must live on; I must sing for her! God made her mortal; I will make her immortal!’

# GODARD BIOGRAPHY



Portrait of Benjamin Godard  
(1878)

## Benjamin Godard (1849-1895)

A child prodigy on the violin and a pupil of Richard Hammer and Henri Vieuxtemps, Benjamin Godard entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied composition with Henri Reber. Despite twice failing the Prix de Rome competition, he was a prominent figure in French musical life in the early years of the Third Republic: Godard performed both as a violinist and as a pianist, although he was highly valued as a violist in the various quartets with which he played, and his piano pieces were extremely well received in the salons. In his role as conductor, he founded the Société des Concerts Modernes in 1884 with the musicians from the Concerts Populaires, the orchestra formed by Jules Padeloup (who had just retired). From 1887, he taught the instrumental ensemble class at the Paris Conservatoire. His catalogue, which numbers about 150 works, includes examples of every genre: six operas, including *Jocelyn* (1888), famous for its “Berceuse”, and *La Vivandière*, which enjoyed considerable success after his death; various orchestral pieces, including several programme symphonies (*Symphonie orientale*, *Symphonie légendaire* with chorus, or *Le Tasse*, a dramatic symphony with soloists and chorus, for which he received the Prix de la Ville de Paris in 1878); several concertos, assorted chamber works and a prolific output of songs and piano music. Initially regarded as a highly original, idiosyncratic composer, a major representative of the modern French school, Godard’s style did not reflect the stylistic musical changes that occurred in France in the 1880s. Alarmed by the influence of Wagner on his generation, Godard remained true to his own musical language, which stemmed from a romanticism inspired by Chopin, Mendelssohn and Schumann. His career came to a premature end: due to delicate health, Godard was forced to leave Paris for Cannes, where he died in 1895.



# DANTE BIOGRAPHY



Raphael - *The Parnassus* (1510) - detail of Dante

## Dante [Durante] Alighieri (1265-1321)

Born into a family of minor nobility established in business (his father was a financial broker and moneylender), Dante soon lost his mother (1275) then his father (1281). He was brought up by his brothers and sisters. At the age of nine he met for the first time the girl who was to inspire him to write 'what was never said of any woman'; he saw her again when he was eighteen, and she died when he was twenty-five. His passion for the young woman was transformed into mystical love: Beatrice became a symbol of active virtue, a source of grandeur of the soul and a means of surpassing the self.

Between 1291 and 1295, Dante studied philosophy and theology and expounded his conception of wisdom in the *Vita Nuova* (The new life), followed by the *Convivio* (The banquet, published in 1307): for him, moral good is the purpose of all human activity. Even amid its miseries and its errors, human love is a natural love of God; the human being who loves beauty loves God without knowing Him. In parallel with this, Dante had direct experience of the terrible political convulsions and volte-faces characteristic of Italy during this period. In 1293 an Ordinance of Justice stripped the nobility of the right to take part in public affairs; two years later, that right was restored only to those who renounced their rank by joining a guild. Dante chose to join that of the apothecaries and doctors (which was also the booksellers' guild) and quickly became an important spokesman for the White Guelfs, who advocated a more democratic conception of power and the separation of spiritual and temporal sovereignty. In 1300 he was among the six priors who decided to proscribe the leaders of the two Guelf parties in order to calm the conflicts between White and Black Guelfs. Since Pope Boniface VIII was intriguing in favour of the Blacks, Dante was sent on an embassy to Rome with two other emissaries; Boniface retained him there while the Black Guelfs took power in Florence (1301) and he was sentenced to exile along with fourteen other Whites.

During his exile, Dante organised resistance; he supported the cause of the Emperor against the temporal claims of the Papacy; he travelled around the Italian city states (Bologna, Verona), met the legate of the new Pope, Benedict XI, and detached himself from the Whites in order to devote himself more fully to the completion of the work known as the *Comedia* (which was to be called *Divina Comedia* from the Venetian edition of 1555) which he had probably begun in 1307. He died in Ravenna on 14 September 1321.

On the occasion of the six hundredth anniversary of Dante's birth, Victor Hugo wrote:

Each nation gives the others a part of its great man. The union of peoples begins with the fraternity of geniuses. Progress will increasingly follow this path, which is the path of light. And that is how, step by step and without a jolt, we shall reach the great realisation; that is how, children of dispersal, we shall enter into concord; that is how, by the sheer force of things, by the sheer power of ideas, we shall all of us achieve cordiality, peace, harmony.

# DANTE AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY MUSIC

by Hélène Cao

‘When the poet depicted Hell, he depicted his life.’

(Victor Hugo, ‘Après une lecture de Dante’,  
*Les Voix intérieures*, 1837)

After being set to music by the madrigalists of the late Renaissance, Dante entered a purgatory from which he was not to emerge until the early nineteenth century. In 1805, Nicola Zingarelli’s *Canto XXXIII di Dante* inaugurated a long series of compositions based on the works of the Florentine writer. Nevertheless, only a part of his œuvre appealed to the Romantic sensibility: composers almost always chose the *Divine Comedy*; and in that *magnum opus*, their preference went to the *Inferno*, from which they most often extracted the tragic love story of Francesca da Rimini (Canto V).

## **Dante, herald of Romanticism**

Composers neglected Dante the political exile (the writer had to leave Florence for ever in 1302, after the Black Guelphs seized power). Nor did they pay any attention to the philosophical speculations he took up as an antidote to the death of Beatrice: though deeply moved by the idea of love thwarted by death, they set aside his passion for total knowledge, a theme they associated more readily with Faust. This view of things had its consequences for the way they perceived Beatrice. In 1837, Liszt wrote of the *Divine Comedy*:

In that immense, incomparable poem, there is one thing that has always singularly shocked me, namely the fact that the poet conceived of Beatrice not as the ideal of love, but as the ideal of knowledge. I do not like finding in that lovely transfigured body the mind of a learned theologian, explaining dogma, refuting heresy, expatiating upon mysteries. It is not by reasoning and demonstration that woman reigns over the heart of man; it is not her role to *prove* the existence of God, but to make man sense it through her love, and to draw him after her towards heavenly matters. Her power lies in feeling and not in knowledge: the loving woman is sublime; she is man’s true guardian angel.

Thus, a sister to Goethe’s Gretchen, Beatrice became another incarnation of ‘the eternal feminine’.

Dante’s descent into Hell was an obvious source of fascination to an era captivated by the supernatural, eager for spectacular tableaux that could justify harmonic and orchestral innovations. But the taste for the picturesque was accompanied by a questioning of the destiny of the world and of humanity, a fear of the unknown and of what the future might hold. This existential anguish, which may be sensed in the operas of the time, is still more perceptible outside the theatre. It was not by chance that Gustav Mahler originally named the finale of his First Symphony (1888, revised 1893-96) *Dall’ inferno al paradiso* and described it as ‘the sudden despairing outburst of a deeply wounded heart’ (the composer later deleted these annotations). Moreover, the trajectory from Hell to Heaven was likened to the quest for the ideal, with Dante as the embodiment of the Romantic artist, as witness the last lines of Victor Hugo’s *Après une lecture de Dante*:

Yes, that indeed is life, O inspired poet,  
And its hazy path clogged with obstacles.  
But, that nothing may be lacking on that narrow road,  
You always show us, standing to your right,  
The genius with his calm brow, his lucid eyes,  
Serene Virgil who says: Let us go on.

As to the religious dimension of the *Comedia* (it was Boccaccio who added the adjective ‘divine’, absent from the original), it answered the need for a spirituality on the fringes of official dogmas, echoed by the *Magnificat* that concludes Liszt’s *Dante-Symphonie* (1856-57) and the *Laudi alla Vergine Maria* on the text of the final canto of the *Paradiso* that forms the third of Verdi’s *Four Sacred Pieces* (1889-90).

## **The Divine Comedy, an inexhaustible source of inspiration**

*Tanto gentile e tanto onesta*, a piano piece by Liszt based on a sonnet from the *Vita nova*, is one of the few works that does not take its source in the *Comedy*, a few characters from which proved especially attractive to composers. Among these

are Pia de' Tolomei (Canto V of the *Purgatorio*), who gave rise to four operas (one of them by Donizetti, in 1837), Ugolino della Gherardesca (Canto XXXIII of the *Inferno*) and, of course, Francesca da Rimini. The Pisan tyrant Ugolino provided the bloody horror that was so enjoyed at the period, since it was said – on the basis of a misinterpretation of a line in Dante – that he had eaten his own children. This sombre character inspired Zingarelli's *Canto XXXIII di Dante* (a work for four sopranos and string trio), the opera *Ugolino, oder Der Hungerturm* by Ignaz Xaver Seyfried (1821) and Donizetti's *Il conte Ugolino* (cantata for bass and piano, 1828). Dante appears in person notably in the present work by Benjamin Godard, Alexandre Massa's opera *Le Dante* (1868), the *mélodie* by William Chaumet *Dante au tombeau de Béatrice* (1877), and the symphonic poem by Max d'Ollone *La Vision de Dante* (1899). We may add to this list the opera of Ambroise Thomas *Françoise de Rimini*, in which Dante and Virgil, in Hell, witness the drama of Paolo and Francesca (1882).

Between 1804 and 1857 (the year Liszt completed his *Dante-Symphonie*), Francesca da Rimini inspired more than twenty operas in Italy alone (Carlini in 1825, Mercadante in 1830-31, Maglioni in 1840, etc.). The subject subsequently crossed national borders and was taken up in Germany by Hermann Goetz (1877) and in France by Marius Boullard (an operetta of 1876) and Ambroise Thomas. Although the existence of Francesca and her relationship with her brother-in-law Paolo are historically documented, the reality fell well short of the Dantean image of an absolute love. Francesca also offers us the image of an unfathomable grief, concentrated in the young woman's lament that has been so often set to music: 'There is no greater pain / than to remember the happy time / in misery.' Tellingly, Rossini included these lines in Act Three of *Otello* (1816); sung by a gondolier, they give Desdemona a presentiment of her grim destiny.

Francesca, the only woman to speak in the *Inferno*, also crystallised the attention of composers because she appears in an episode possessing dramatic potential. When the Romantics brought the story to the operatic stage, they stamped it with the conventions of the period (the same may be said of the operas on Pia and Ugolino). Ambroise Thomas's score contains arias, ensembles and choruses, not to mention the predictable genre pieces (military music, a prayer, a ballet). The exception that confirms the rule is Rossini's opera, which refers to Dante in the context of an act where the composer departs from the customs of his time with remarkable boldness, abandoning the formal structures of *opera seria* for continuous discourse.

#### ***Dante and instrumental music***

Composers adapted Dante's themes, but did not often set his verse to music. What is more, they placed him at the heart of their reflection on the poeticisation of music. In the second half of the nineteenth century, at the moment when the genre of the symphonic poem was being developed, Dante prompted the composition of numerous instrumental works. They are almost all forgotten nowadays, despite undeniable successes such as William Wallace's *The Passing of Beatrice* (1892). Tchaikovsky and Liszt have withstood the test of time. A few years after completing his 'symphonic fantasy' *Francesca da Rimini* (1876), however, Tchaikovsky judged that he had treated the subject only superficially. It is true that the storm in Hell (in the two outer sections) and the lyricism of the central section are not without their reminiscences of *Romeo and Juliet*, his 'fantasy overture' of 1869. Several critics and composers denounced the incongruity of excessively Russian inflections. Nevertheless, the evocation of Hell (influenced by the engravings of Gustave Doré, which had impressed Tchaikovsky) dictated dissonances and a harmonic instability that the composer might not have thought of without this subject to stimulate him.

Dante was one of the guiding threads of Liszt's creative output. 'If I feel within myself the necessary energy and strength, I will embark on a symphonic work based on Dante, then another on Faust', he declared as early as 1839. It is worth reminding ourselves of the exact title of the aforesaid *Dante-Symphonie: Eine Symphonie zu Dantes Divina Commedia* (A symphony on the *Divine Comedy* of Dante), which places the emphasis on the literary work, not the name of its author. Each of the parts of the poem (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*) corresponds to a movement in the symphony, the last of which avoids Dante's own text and instead opts for the liturgical *Magnificat*, sung by women's (or children's) voices. In the first movement, Dante's voice resonates *in absentia*, in a few lines from the *Inferno* inscribed above the instrumental melodic line.

In 1861, Liszt completed *Après une lecture du Dante*, which he included in the second *Année de Pèlerinage*. He had initially envisaged the title *Paralipomènes à la Divina Commedia. Fantaisie symphonique*, an indication that he regarded his piano piece as a 'supplement' to Dante's work, not an illustration of it, and that he sought to give it an orchestral breadth. The literary substratum led to the elaboration of a form emancipated from pre-existing designs (although some traces of sonata form remain) and to bold strokes in the musical language unparalleled at the time (one should especially underline the importance of the tritone). Dante 'may perhaps one day find his musical expression in the Beethoven of the future', Liszt surmised in a letter to Berlioz of 1839. Throughout the nineteenth century, the author of the *Divine Comedy* was able to satisfy the bourgeois public's need for entertainment while at the same time nurturing metaphysical aspirations that called for a renewal of styles and forms.

# HOW A WRITER WENT FROM NOTHING TO EVERYTHING: DANTE IN THE FINE ARTS OF THE 19TH CENTURY

by Pierre Sérié

Surprising as it may seem, until the 1820s people read Dante (he was part of the standard syllabus of Humanities) but no one painted him. And we will see that the idea of composing a large-format picture based on the *Divine Comedy* came to an ‘agitator’ who aimed to cause a scandal while remaining within the limits of the tolerable: we are in 1822, the agitator in question is called Delacroix, and his canvas is entitled *Dante and Virgil*. Before this date, which created a precedent, artists had limited themselves to illustrating Dante’s text in engravings, among them John Flaxman and William Blake. Indeed, two Englishmen who were his exact contemporaries owed their fame to the work: the sculptor John Flaxman and the artist-poet William Blake.

Visually speaking, then, Dante’s output came into existence only very belatedly, whereas from the sixteenth century onwards it featured in a significant position, not to say the very front rank, in the western cultural pantheon. Indeed, beginning with the Venetian edition of 1555, was not the very title of his key text extended by an epithet that placed it above everything else? His *Comedia* was henceforth to be known as ‘the’ *Divine Comedy*, thus endorsing Boccaccio’s designation of the poem. As to the author, Raphael had accorded him the supreme honour in his fresco *Parnassus* (1510-11) at the Vatican Palace (figure 1): he was the only Modern to figurer among the Ancients on the top of Mount Parnassus, to the left of Apollo surrounded by the Muses, in the centre of a group of three with Homer and Virgil. Dante is seen in profile, climbing Mount Parnassus to meet Homer (the foundational poet par excellence) and Virgil, not quite on the same plane as them yet, but nearly so. This detail is important. It is not only that it conveys Dante’s precedence over all the Moderns (indeed, he is better placed than most of the classical authors, the majority of whom are relegated to the lower corners). It also supposes that a very special role is reserved for him. The almost completed ascent speaks of the promise of a new Golden Age (the Renaissance, still to come *circa* 1300, but already well underway in 1510) of which he, Dante, was regarded as the initiator. The divine Florentine was viewed as serving as an intermediary between the Ancients and the Moderns according to a cyclic notion of history as consisting in an alternation of phases of progress and decline. While still belonging to the age of darkness (the Middle Ages), Dante was supposedly the first to announce the return of the happy time. Was that not how he saw it himself, addressing Virgil in these terms, as if he owed nothing to his contemporaries or his immediate predecessors?



Raphael - *The Parnassus* (1510)

You are my master and my author.  
You are the one from whom alone I took  
the noble style that has brought me honour.  
(*Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto I, lines 85-87*)

From Raphael to Ingres, from sixteenth-century Italy to nineteenth-century France, the filiation is direct – ‘Raphael is God come down to earth’, said Ingres – and the tone does not vary one iota. Ingres’s *The Apotheosis of Homer* (1827) grants Dante the same privileged status in the allegory of the history of the arts and letters. We find him once more on the left-hand side of the composition, seen from the waist up, between the lower level, allotted to the Moderns, who are shown head-and-shoulders like spectators, and the Ancients, portrayed full length, who form a circle around Homer. Virgil has an arm around his shoulder, and he alone is among both the Ancients and the Moderns, the figure who forms the link between them. Except that, just above him, we see Raphael guided by Apelles, completely integrated with the Ancients; from which we conclude that there is a Modern more advanced than Dante in terms of the return to Antiquity . . . But setting aside Ingres’s personal cult of Raphael, the important thing here is the consensus established

around the figure of Dante: he has been crowned Prince of Poets of the modern era. The tutelary father of the Renaissance, as it were. And, on this point, Ingres and Delacroix were in agreement. Even if Delacroix said it in his own, inevitably controversial way: 'Without Dante, Giotto does not count' (*Journal*, 4 May 1853). In other words: I, a painter, acknowledge that my art owes everything to poetry.

The fact remains that, from Raphael to Ingres, Dante was present in all minds yet completely absent from museums, except when it came to the pantheon of illustrious men. Why was it seemingly impossible to paint works based on Dante's until the famous bombshell of 1822, this 'picture by a young man that was a revolution' (Baudelaire, *Exposition universelle de 1855*)? Clearly Delacroix was the only one daring enough to translate the *Divine Comedy* into painting. Was this the talisman of the liberated Moderns (the Romantics) in their enterprise of undermining the classical theoretical edifice? Odilon Redon states quite plainly that if the *Dante and Virgil* of Delacroix marked a milestone in history, it was principally thanks to its subject: this painting 'is modern because it takes after Dante himself, and because that immense mind, perhaps the most astonishing of all . . . that great Tuscan genius, I say, was still powerful enough to be present among us in our time' (*À soi-même*, 1878). According to this view, Delacroix owed everything to the *Divine Comedy*.

It is true that Dante's magnum opus fitted fairly smoothly into the anti-classical project of hybridisation of the genres nurtured by the likes of Delacroix or Hugo (the Preface to *Cromwell*, 1827). In this triptych that transports the reader from the realm of sinners (*Inferno*) to that of repentance (*Purgatorio*) and finally to contemplation of eternal truth (*Paradiso*), every register is solicited – low (elegy), medium (comedy), high (tragedy) – and the sublime constantly rubs shoulders with the grotesque. At one point, the grandiose vision of threatening demons closes strangely as they scatter ('They wheeled round by the dike toward the left, / but first each pressed a tongue between his teeth / to blow a signal to their leader; / and he had made a trumpet of his arse', *Inferno*, Canto XXI, lines 136-139). Later, a scene of horror ends on an obscene gesture ('At the end of his words, the thief / raised both his hands and made the figs', *Inferno*, Canto XXV, lines 1-2). Incidentally, Delacroix often deplored the 'improvements' made to the text by translators who could not bear the crudeness of such lines. 'It is must be admitted', he wrote, 'that our Moderns (I speak of such men as Racine or Voltaire) were not acquainted with this type of sublime, these astonishing naïvetés that poeticise vulgar details, turn them into paintings for the imagination, and delight it' (*Journal*, 3 September 1858). For the taste of an *honnête homme* of 1820, Dante was not 'reasonable', and that is precisely why Delacroix, who 'didn't like reasonable painting' (*Journal*, 7 May 1824), esteemed him so highly.

To set the *Divine Comedy* to images was to take risks, both because the subject was new, and because it was 'enormous': it assembles everything that the western world had been capable of imagining (ancient myths, Christian cosmogony, Greco-Roman and medieval history). In short, its material was inexhaustible, its horizon infinite. What a contrast with the classical Humanities (and above all the modern French classics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) built on rigour, logic, order and concision (think, for example, of the rule of the three unities in Racinian drama)! For the visual artist, to draw on the *Divine Comedy* allowed one to break free from the usages inherited from masters recognised as such by legitimate authority: the Academy, the School. To make one's profession as a history painter while associating with Dante boiled down to postulating the possibility of a non-academic history painting. And then, did Dante not excite artists' temerity? Acknowledging that one can believe more easily in what one sees than what one reads, the poet constantly defers to his readers' eyes. How could painters have resisted such encouragement?

Look well, therefore: for you will see such things  
as are not easily believed from speech alone.  
(*Inferno*, Canto XIII, lines 20-21)

[I] saw a thing I would be loath  
to mention without further proof,  
but that my conscience reassures me.  
(*Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, lines 113-115)

Or again, in the last canto of the *Inferno*, to describe the effect produced on him by the sight of Lucifer's infernal city:

Do not ask, reader, for I do not write it,  
since any words would fail to be enough.  
(*Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, lines 23-24)

The fabulous world Dante describes obviously had the wherewithal to fire the painter's imagination. But, above all, there is the fact that we have here the poetic 'I' used for the first time in Romance literature. The creator depicting

himself. This 'I' with universal value entrusted the artist with a quasi-divine mission, that of illuminator and denigrator of the world of today and prophet of the world to come. Dante is the chosen one who has been permitted to traverse the three realms (Hell, Purgatory, Heaven) in earthly form, while still living. He therefore brings testimony of the living among the dead and, conversely, of the dead among the living. Was this not the image of the artist that was forged in the nineteenth century, that of the great initiate fatally misunderstood by his contemporaries, forging ahead of them, at the 'avant-garde' of society? Dante the committed, proscribed poet fascinated the writers of those modern times who were condemned to exile. M<sup>me</sup> de Staël and Victor Hugo identified with him. Balzac made him a character in his novel *Les Proscrits* (1831).

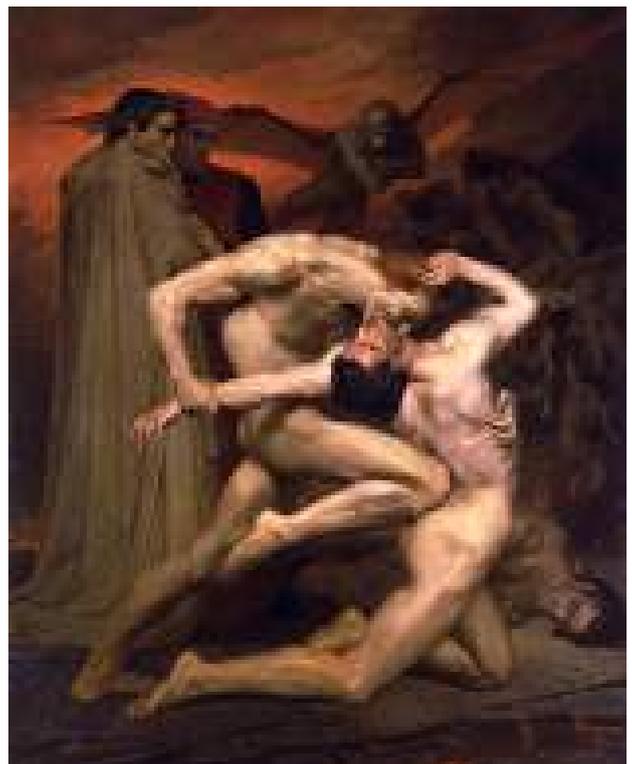
Unbridled imagination and the myth of the *artiste maudit*: here are two characteristics of the Romantic sensibility. There remain the inversion of values and the question of the antihero: the first two panels of the triptych that forms the *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno* and *Purgatorio*) fell into the category of the anti-subject for the history painter, traditionally called on to illustrate examples of the virtues. But, in the nineteenth century, the *Paradiso* found little favour with visual artists. The *Purgatorio* barely roused greater interest: was it perhaps not monstrous enough? It is not insignificant that when a pupil of Ingres (Hippolyte Flandrin) dared to tackle the *Divine Comedy*, he turned his attention to the *Purgatorio*, the lesser evil as it were (contrary to what its title implies, his *Dante and Virgil in Hell* illustrates Canto XIII of the . . . *Purgatorio*). And moreover, like a good 'classicist', Flandrin purges the episode in question of the slightest note that might run counter to the 'Beau idéal'. The viewer will not see the sewed-up eyes of the sinners mentioned by Dante ('an iron wire pierces all their eyelids, / and stitches them together, as is done / to the untamed falcon that will not stay still', *Purgatorio*, Canto XIII, lines 70-72). The 'Romantics', for their part, opted for the *Inferno*, and there, when it came to horror or ugliness, they were spoilt for choice, since the damned are punished, following the principle of mimesis (or, as Dante puts it, the *lex talionis*), according to the nature of their sin ('The rigid justice that torments me / takes its occasion from the place I sinned / to make my sighs come faster', *Inferno*, Canto XXX, lines 70-71). The punishments are therefore as varied as the crimes . . . One who fomented the sedition of son against father is decapitated:

Because I severed beings so conjoined,  
severed, alas, I carry my own brain  
from its origin that lies in this trunk;  
thus retribution may be observed in me.  
(*Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, lines 139-142)

Others, who have strayed from the true faith, are 'schismatised' (that is, cut in two down the middle):

There is a devil here behind,  
who schismatises us so cruelly,  
putting each one to the sword's point once more  
as soon as we have done our doleful round:  
for all our wounds have closed again  
before we come once more in front of him.  
(*Inferno*, Canto XXVIII, lines 37-42)

Although the two scenes above were never actually painted – it is hard to see how they could have been without lapsing into a certain absurdity – our artists finally found worse yet: anthropophagy (Gianni Schicchi, Ugolino). The plastic treatment of the subject took the form of oxymoron with William Bouguereau (figure 2), who combines the height of horror (a damned soul ripping open another's throat with his teeth) and the formal perfection of the figures seen in strict profile and moving in a very abstract circular rhythm. But, over and above the sensationalism of shocking images that seize the attention of visitors to art exhibitions, does the *Divine Comedy* not take on a much more subversive dimension from its very narrator, Dante in person? That the spectacle is a dreadful one is something that goes without saying. But that the great man should lose his dignity, and should lead the reader into his wicked passions by proxy, is quite inadmissible. Yet the itinerary of the visitor to Hell in many respects resembles a moral fall. First there is the



William Bouguereau - *Dante and Virgile* (1850)

excessive curiosity of the narrator. Dante admits several times to being devoured by the urge to see a little more ('The souls that lie within the sepulchres, / may they be seen? For all the lids are raised, / and no one there is standing guard', *Inferno*, Canto X, lines 7-9). Worse, he acquires a taste for this spectacle and asks for more ('And I said: "Master, I would greatly like / to see him soused in this broth / before we leave the lake"', *Inferno*, Canto VIII, lines 52-54). And, finally, having reached the lowest depths of Hell, Dante loses all humanity. He tortures one of its recalcitrant inmates with his own hands:

Then I seized him by the scruff of the neck  
and said: 'Either you must name yourself,  
or not a single hair will remain there!'  
[...]  
Now I had his hair twisted in my hand  
and had already plucked more tufts than one  
while he howled with his eyes cast down.  
(*Inferno*, Canto XXXII, lines 97-99, 103-105)



Eugène Delacroix - *Dante and Virgile in Hell* (1822)

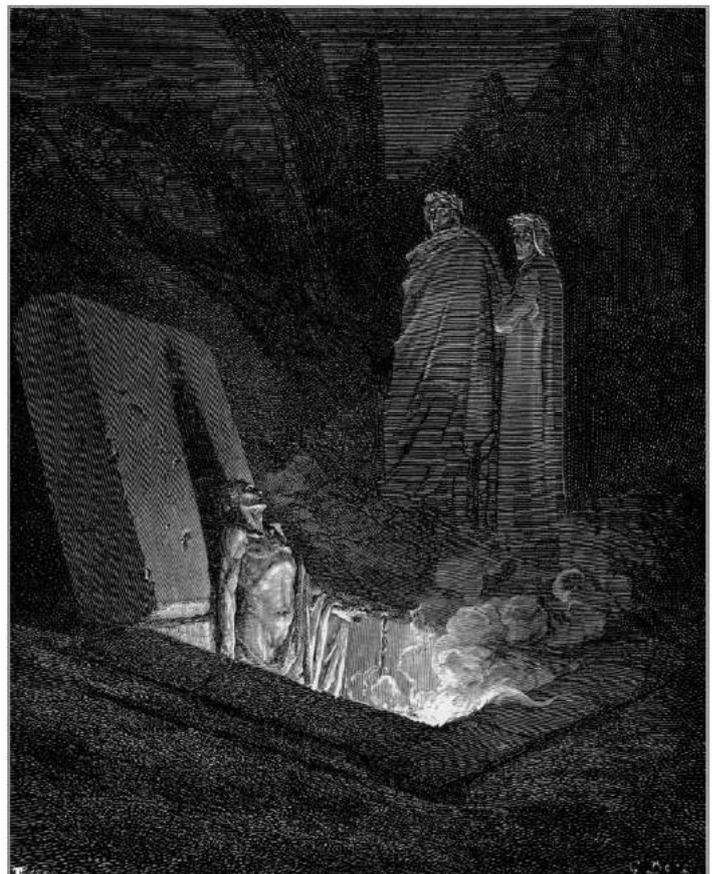
Dante's future redemption (in the *Paradiso*) justifies this moral failure in the text of the *Inferno*, but since painting belongs to the arts of space and not of time, on canvas the divine poet remains for ever compromised. Can it be that Dante personifies the figure of the antihero? At this stage of the discussion, our reader has a better idea of why the *Divine Comedy* was never painted in large format before Delacroix. But Delacroix hit hard right away, for he interpolated a scene of cannibalism still to come into an episode (the crossing of the lake surrounding the infernal city of Dis) that did not include it in the original (figure 3). What Géricault, though authorised by the facts of the case, had refused to show in *The Raft of the Medusa* at the previous Salon (1819), Delacroix literally thrusts in the spectator's face in 1822: the motif of two figures devouring each other visible in the lower right-hand corner is situated exactly at the viewer's eye level. This scene of unprecedented violence is all the more prominent since, in this part of the composition, the boat in the median plane seems to pivot, slightly increasing the perspective and, as a result, further detaching these two cannibals from the rest of the picture. Isolated on the lower edge of the canvas, the two heads go almost out of frame. With deliberate irrelevance, Delacroix uses them as a binding agent between the virtual space of the painted image and the real space of the viewer. Yes, there was certainly an element of calculation in Delacroix's choice of Dante for the

only painting he exhibited at the Salon that year. In so doing, he was staking his all ('I'm trying my luck', he wrote). The *Inferno* proved to be scandalous in its content yet at the same time, by the very fact of its status as a classic, a useful bulwark against criticism. With the *Divine Comedy*, Delacroix knew precisely just how provocative he could be without going too far.

Hence the œuvre of Dante was to constitute the cornerstone of a renewed conception of tradition, a tradition no longer understood as a corpus of rules to be respected, as had been the case until then, but akin, on the contrary, to a succession of deviations from the rules. The tradition of the rupture was born. Seventy-eight years later, at the hands of Rodin this time, Dante (now transmogrified into *The Thinker*) and his *Divine Comedy* were to be the source of another milestone in art history: *The Gates of Hell*, the chief attraction of the pavilion of the Pont de l'Alma on the fringes of the Exposition Universelle of 1900. In the meantime, the Florentine poet and his work (whether the *Divine Comedy* or the *Vita Nuova*) had become the daily bread of visual artists, for better or for worse.

The 'better' might well be the English Pre-Raphaelites and, first and foremost, the painter and poet (and translator of the *Vita Nuova*) Dante-Gabriel Rossetti. Britain lacked a solid tradition of history painting, and its artists tended to favour instead the sentimental vein of the Dantean corpus. Through the unhappy love of Dante and Beatrice (or Paolo and Francesca), Rossetti and his disciples succeeded in marrying genre painting and poetry, a hybridisation unknown to the French. The 'worse' would be the sensational pictures that sought to attract the spectator's gaze through spectacular effects. Gustave Moreau was roused to indignation by the success Gustave Doré's illustrations for the *Divine Comedy* achieved: 'Dante by Doré, the masterpiece for the lamplighter at the Porte Saint-Martin or the stage-hand at the Gaîté' (*Écrits*, 1862). He little knew how true he spoke. To force fate's hand and reach out to an unlettered public, history painters were to make excessive use of theatrical machinery such as the trapdoor, which Doré had been the first to depict (figure 4). The Salon painter had an immoderate penchant for subjects on the borderlines of taste, those of the last cantos of the *Inferno* where the crescendo of horror reaches its culmination. And to illustrate this, what better example than the immense *Dante and Virgil in the Ninth Circle of Hell*, which Doré exhibited at the Salon of 1861?

... I saw two frozen in a single hole,  
so that the head of one was the other's hat:  
and as a hungry man will gnaw at bread,  
the one above had set his teeth in the other  
at that place where the brain joins with the neck.  
(*Inferno*, Canto XXXII, lines 125-129)



Gustave Doré - *Dante and Virgil before Farinata* (1861)

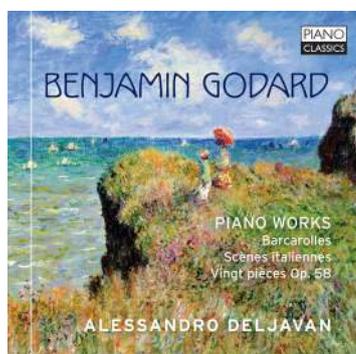
# ABOUT GODARD

## FESTIVAL BENJAMIN GODARD IN THE PARISIAN SALONS

Venice / 9 April – 15 May 2016

This cycle of nine concerts being held in spring 2016 will present a varied selection of Godard's works, highlighting his two favoured instruments, the violin and the piano, both of which he mastered to a similar degree of virtuosity. The four sonatas he wrote specifically for violin, as well as the two for piano, are worthy of attention, as they encapsulate the art of the Parisian salons of the time: thematic or programmatic pieces, Germanic inspiration after Beethoven and a melodic line tinged by voice. It is no coincidence that the other genre portrayed so outstandingly by Godard should be the French *mélodie*, based on contemporary poems and Renaissance sonnets.

## RECORDINGS



### **Barcarolles, Scènes italiennes and Vingt Pièces**

Alessandro Deljavan *piano*  
PIANO CLASSICS (2014)



### **Les three String Quartets**

Quatuor Élysée  
TIMPANI (2015)



### **Sonata No 2, Sonate fantastique, Promenade en mer, Sur la mer, Au matin, Conte de fées**

Eliane Reyes *piano*  
GRAND PIANO (2015)

## New releases

### **Complete Sonatas for violin and piano**

Nicolas Dautricourt *violin*  
Dana Ciocarlie *piano*  
APARTÉ  
Release date: March 2016

### **Selection of mélodies**

Tassis Christoyannis *baritone*  
Jeff Cohen *piano*  
APARTÉ  
Release date: March 2016

### **Symphony No 2, Trois Morceaux, Symphonie gothique**

Munich Radio Orchestra  
David Reiland *conductor*  
CPO

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