Dante, Music, and Lyric

Maria Clotilde Camboni

Abstract

Dante's works contain a wealth of musical references, and his linguistic treatise, De vulgari eloquentia, *is an invaluable source of knowledge regarding the performance practice of contemporary lyric poetry. Despite these indisputable facts, several scholars have cast doubt on Dante's actual musical knowledge, and the extent to which we can interpret his references to musical performance as representing historical practice. This paper explores the issue of musical performance of lyric poems, both by Dante and as represented within Dante's works. It addresses the question of Dante's first-hand experience of melodic delivery of lyric poems, the meanings of musical terms in* De vulgari eloquentia, *Dante's thoughts on sung performance and its relationship with texts, and every instance in which there is a suggestion that a poem by Dante was sung during his lifetime.*

In the second canto of Purgatorio, Dante meets his friend Casella among a group of newly arrived souls and asks him to sing in order to be consoled after the tribulations of his journey through Hell. Casella obliges, and starts singing one of Dante's own canzoni, *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona*, the subject of commentary in Book III of the *Convivio*.

Casella's performance and the resultant delay of the souls' journey up the mountain is soon interrupted, for reasons which have been extensively discussed in previous scholarship.[1] What is of interest here, however, is the fact that, in quite a few of these studies, doubts are cast on what appears to be one of the most fundamental and straightforward elements of Dante's narration of this episode, that is to say, the sheer fact that Casella could sing a poem by Dante. This is questioned for the first time at the very beginning of the fifteenth century by the author of a commentary usually known as "Anonimo fiorentino", who asserts that "canzoni morali" are not usually sung, and that *Amor che nella mente* must therefore be the incipit of a *ballata* (no previous commentator doubts the possibility of musical

1. For a review of different opinions, see Ciabattoni 2010, 99–103; more recently, see Marcozzi 2021.

delivery of such a text, however).[2] This poetic form in fact kept links with musical performance much longer than any other, as we know from this and other sources. However, some scholars seem to doubt not only that this specific poem might have been sung, but also the very possibility of contemporary musical delivery of Dante's lyric poetry.

This possibility seems to be at odds with what has long been considered one of the key features of early Italian poetry, the so-called "divorce" between music and poetry. Despite this not meaning that Italian poems could never be sung, in fact, the accepted hypothesis was that Italian lyric poetry was since the very beginning the product of a "primarily written and highly literary tradition" (Eisner 2018, 299). In recent decades the issue of whether early Italian lyric poetry was composed to be sung or to be read has been reconsidered, with a lively debate reawakened in particular by Joachim Schulze's work and important contributions by Maria Sofia Lannutti.[3] However, this debate has focused principally on the earliest Italian poets, active at the court of Frederick II.[4]

The aim of this paper is to reconsider the issue from a specifically Dantean perspective. It comprises three main sections. The first section concentrates on Dante's experience of melodic performances of lyric poetry and attempts to ascertain which passages in *De vulgari eloquentia* actually refer to musical delivery. The second section focuses on Dante's stance on sung delivery of vernacular poems, its relationship to texts, and the influence of such aspects on Dante and other authors in the Florentine environment. Finally, the third section explores all other cases in which the hypothesis of a sung performance of Dante's poems can be suggested.

"Sive cum soni modulatione [. . .], sive non"

Exploring the points presented above is made much more complicated by "serious problems of terminology, and ambiguities as to where the line falls

2. See Camboni 2017, 252–53, and Ciabattoni 2019, 93–94.
3. See Schulze 1989 (this contribution has been followed by many others: a list in Lannutti 2005, 158, and a recap in Lannutti 2008, 5–6); Lannutti 1999a, 1999b, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2011.
4. A critical account of the debate can be found in Gresti 2011, 138–43; a broader review is in Persico 2019, 15–36, who also provides an annotated bibliography (183–264: however, many of the summaries provided by Persico bear a fairly loose relationship to the works described). For a discussion of problematic misreadings of the "divorce" hypothesis, see Hughes 2021, 238–40.

between verbal poetry and what we would call musical setting or musical performance" (Bent 2003, 161–62). When Dante in the second book of the *Convivio* (2.11.9) speaks of the great beauty of *Voi ch'intendendo il terzo ciel movete*, which is such by virtue of three elements, the last one being "lo numero delle sue parti, che si pertiene alli musici", these musicians are clearly concerned with the music of poetry, or the harmony and proportions of the poetic text. However, when only a few sentences above he explains the function of the canzone's shorter final section, he is clearly talking of sung performances of the poems — even though he is at the same time explaining that his own choices in this regard were most of the time (but, not always) driven by a completely different aim:

> E acciò che questa parte più pienamente sia intesa, dico che generalmente si chiama in ciascuna canzone "tornata", però che li dicitori che prima usaro di farla, fenno quella perché, cantata la canzone, con certa parte del canto ad essa si ritornasse. Ma io rade volte a quella intenzione la feci, e acciò che altri se n'acorgesse, rade volte la puosi coll'ordine della canzone quanto è allo numero che alla nota è necessario; ma fecila quando alcuna cosa in addornamento della canzone era mestiero a dire, fuori de la sua sentenza, sì come in questa e nell'altre vedere si potràe.
>
> (*Convivio* 2.11.2–3)[5]

> So that this part may be more fully comprehensible, I will point out that in every canzone it is generally called the *tornata*, or return, since the poets who first were in the practice of using it did so in order that, once the canzone had been sung, a certain part of the song might be returned to. But I rarely have done it with that in mind; and to make this clear to others, I rarely have composed it following the structure of the canzone in terms of the number essential to its melody. Rather, I employed it when it was fitting to say something with the aim of embellishing the canzone, apart from its main contents, as can be seen in this canzone and others.[6]

Despite the fact that this passage alone seems sufficient to prove Dante's first-hand familiarity with musical performances of lyric poetry, a number

5. Alighieri 2014a, 294. Citations from the *De vulgari eloquentia* are normally taken from Tavoni 2011, and English translations of the work from Botterill 1996. Passages are cited according to the book, paragraph, and line divisions.
6. English translations of the *Convivio* are from Alighieri 2018.

of scholars have claimed a lack of knowledge on his part in this regard (Dragonetti 1960; Monterosso 1965; Gonfroy 1982). This opinion was founded on a misunderstanding of the relationship between textual structures and melodies as described in Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, and has been thoroughly disproved (Lannutti 2000; Camboni 2012). The misconstruction and related hypothesis on Dante's musical knowledge nevertheless leave their mark on even the most recent commentaries,[7] and a similar misunderstanding was recently used in support of a different hypothesis, also convincingly disproved (Di Santo 2019; Lannutti 2019b).

Such misconceptions arise all the more easily thanks to the above-mentioned ambiguities and the difficulty in interpreting terminology, especially strong in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, which also happens to be the work which contains the most evidence concerning Dante and the musical setting of lyric poetry. In the passage from the *Convivio* cited above, *cantare* and *canto* seem to refer unambiguously to an actual performance and melody. But verbs such as *canere* and *cantare* can also denote the act of composing poetry: thus, when Dante cites poems which ridicule certain Italian vernaculars (*De vulgari eloquentia* 1.11.4–5), the fact that he states that he saw ("vidi") one, while for another he uses the expression "quendam cecinisse recolimus" (literally, "we remember that someone sung") does not necessarily indicate that in this second case he recalls hearing someone singing the poem. On the other hand, this is far from impossible, even though translations tend to preclude this interpretation. This is probably a result of the success of the "divorce" hypothesis, even though, when in the following chapter (1.12.2) Dante uses the very same word *cecinisse* for the Sicilians, several translators choose a verb which is open to more than one interpretation.

This ambiguity is of utmost consequence for the word that could be the most relevant in the context of this article: *musica*. In the *De*

7. See Fenzi 2012, 212, on *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.10.2: "Dante per definire una stanza siffatta non ricorre alla sua specifica costruzione metrica [. . .] ma alla frase melodica [. . .] come se esistesse un cogente rapporto biunivoco tra struttura metrica e struttura musicale [. . .]. Ma gli studiosi hanno ormai accertato che tale rapporto è in verità assai libero, e in particolare che l'idea di fondo suggerita da Dante di una perfetta corrispondenza tra le due diverse strutture è semplicemente sbagliata". According to Fenzi 2012, 213, Tavoni 2011 also speaks of the "scarsa o forse nulla informazione di Dante rispetto all'effettivo corredo musicale della poesia in lingua d'oc"; however, I have been unable to locate the passage which he quotes. On this point, see the discussion on *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.10 in the following section.

vulgari eloquentia the term appears only once, in the much-cited definition of poetry as "fictio rethorica musicaque poita". As remarked by Margaret Bent (2003, 176), "this sentence has undergone several translations". She reproduces several of them and a different one can be quoted here: "an invention expressed according to the rhetorical and musical art" (Gozzi 2004, 215). In this case, scholars more or less unanimously agree that "music" refers to the science of proportions and therefore to a purely verbal harmony, in parallel with the meaning of its vernacular equivalent in the *Convivio*.[8] It must also be remarked that this definition does not seem to refer only to lyric poetry, but to every kind of poetic composition.

Another key term is *cantio*: according to Bent (2003, 172), this has at least three different meanings in Dante's Latin treatise: "the act of singing or declaiming"; a generic poem; and the specific poetic form of the canzone. While the third definition is the most common, and the second is clearly opposed to the third (in *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.3.4 and 2.8.2–6, especially the last occurrence), the first appears more elusive. In chapter 8 of *De vulgari eloquentia*'s second book, Dante in fact makes a distinction between *cantio* as *actio*, what is created by a poet, and *cantio* as *passio*, what is performed, whether sung or not. However, Dante evokes this second meaning only to deny its acceptability.

> Et circa hoc considerandum est quod cantio dupliciter accipi potest: uno modo secundum quod fabricatur ab autore suo, et sic est actio — et secundum istum modum Virgilius primo Eneidorum dicit "Arma virumque cano"; alio modo secundum quod fabricata profertur vel ab autore vel ab alio quicunque sit, sive cum soni modulatione proferatur, sive non: et sic est passio. Nam tunc agitur, modo vero agere videtur in alium, et sic tunc alicuius actio, modo quoque passio alicuius videtur. Et quia prius agitur ipsa quam agat, magis, immo prorsus denominari videtur ab eo quod agitur, et est actio alicuius, quam ab eo quod agit in alios. Signum autem huius est quod nunquam dicimus "Hec est cantio Petri" eo quod ipsam proferat, sed eo quod fabricaverit illam.
>
> (*De vulgari eloquentia* 2.8.4)

> And on this point it must be taken into account that *cantio* has a double meaning: one usage refers to something created by an author, so that there is action — and this is the sense in which Virgil uses the word in the first book of the *Aeneid*, when he writes '*arma virumque*

8. See Stevens 1968, 15; Fenzi 2012, 163–65; Tavoni 2011, passim.

> *cano*'; the other refers to the occasions on which this creation is performed, either by the author or by someone else, whoever it may be, with or without a musical accompaniment — and in this sense it is passive. For on such occasions the canzone itself acts upon someone or something, whereas in the former case it is acted upon; and so in one case it appears as an action carried out by someone, in the other as an action perceived by someone. And because it is acted upon before it acts in its turn, the argument seems plausible, indeed convincing, that it takes its name from the fact that it is acted upon, and is somebody's action, rather than from the fact that it acts upon others. The proof of this is the fact that we never say 'that's Peter's song' when referring to something Peter has performed, but only to something he has written.

His aim here is clearly to affirm the primacy of the creator on the performer, of verbal texts on the melodies that could be used to render them, and above all the total autonomy and independence of vernacular poetry with regard to its delivery, probably in an attempt to give it equal status with classical poetry by means of marginalizing its performative and socially contingent aspects. Particularly interesting in this regard is Dante's statement that the preservation of canzoni in books is a marker of their higher value with respect to other lyric forms.

> Preterea, que nobilissima sunt carissime conservantur. Sed inter ea que cantata sunt, cantiones carissime conservantur, ut constat visitantibus libros: ergo cantiones nobilissime sunt, et per consequens modus earum nobilissimus est.
>
> (*De vulgari eloquentia* 2.3.7)

> Furthermore, the noblest things are preserved with the greatest care; but, among the things that are sung, *canzoni* are preserved the most carefully, as is clear to anyone who looks at books; therefore, *canzoni* are most noble, and theirs is the noblest of forms.

The works of Classical authors were obviously transmitted by books, which therefore function as sites of cultural legitimation for vernacular poetry. Dante's attempt to legitimize vernacular poetry by means of claiming its full autonomy as a cultural object appears with the utmost clarity when, immediately after establishing that *cantio* must be the act of composing, he denies that a melody alone can be called *cantio*.

> Preterea disserendum est utrum cantio dicatur fabricatio verborum armonizatorum vel ipsa modulatio. Ad quod dicimus quod nunquam modulatio dicitur cantio, sed sonus, vel thonus, vel nota, vel melos. Nullus enim tibicen, vel organista, vel cytharedus melodiam suam cantionem vocat, nisi in quantum nupta est alicui cantioni; sed armonizantes verba opera sua cantiones vocant, et etiam talia verba in cartulis absque prolatore iacentia cantiones vocamus.
>
> (*De vulgari eloquentia* 2.8.5)

> Furthermore, we must now discuss whether the word *canzone* should be used to refer to a composition made up of words arranged with due regard to harmony, or simply to a piece of music. To which I answer that a piece of music as such is never given the name *canzone*, but is rather called 'sound'; or 'tone', or 'note', or 'melody'. For no player of a wind or keyboard or stringed instrument ever calls his melody a *canzone*, except when it is wedded to a real *canzone*; but those who harmonize words call their works *canzoni*, and even when we see such words written down on the page, in the absence of any performer, we call them *canzoni*.]

Paradoxically, the passages in which Dante is clearly striving to minimize the relevance of musical performance are the very same passages which shed light on these aspects. Despite Botterill's misleading translation (an analogous translation is provided by Tavoni; a better solution would be "with musical inflection") and Bent's doubts in this regard,[9] "cum soni modulatione" in *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.8.3 is a clear reference to melodic delivery. Moreover, if this kind of delivery were absolutely unlikely in his age, why would Dante make a distinction between sung and unsung performance? The mention of the latter clearly aims at supporting his position that poetry is completely autonomous and independent from music: something similar happens almost a century later (1392) in Eustache Deschamps' *Art de Dictier et de Fere Chançons* (Camboni 2017, 197–200). As for the passage which follows, in which we twice encounter the word *modulatio*, as well as several others which refer unambiguously to musical performance (*sonus*, *thonus*, *nota*, *melos*, *melodia*), Pirrotta correctly remarked that, in the absence of any musical dissemination of vernacular

9. "Sia che venga eseguita con accompagnamento musicale sia senza": Tavoni 2011, 1473. Bent 2003, 168 expresses a less than enthusiastic opinion on Botterill's translation, also wondering whether the expression means "sung or measured with musical sound versus spoken, or recited aloud versus silently."

poems (and, I would add, also in the event that Dante had no experience whatsoever of it), doubts about the possibility of *cantio* denoting a melody make no sense.[10] This therefore seems indirect proof of Dante's first-hand knowledge and experience of musical performances of vernacular lyric poetry.

It must be remarked that Dante's will to establish the primacy of a poem's verbal construction over its possible performance also appears earlier in the *De vulgari eloquentia*. In the third chapter of the second book of the treatise, among the many elements that should demonstrate the superior status of the canzone form, Dante makes a comparison with the *ballata*. The reason for the latter being inferior is that it is not autonomous, but needs dancers ("indigent enim plausoribus"). This lack of self-sufficiency is what diminishes the value of the *ballata*. Also interesting is the choice of word used by Dante, "plausores", literally meaning "clappers". The reference to the action of clapping hands is for rather incomprehensible reasons considered not credible by Persico (2018); however, this fits perfectly with one of the main texts describing the performance of a *ballata*, Giovanni del Virgilio's *Diaffonus*. According to this source, the *ripresa* or refrain of the *ballata* was performed "voce sequente manus", meaning in all likelihood that the dancers clapped their hands to mark the beat.[11] Dante's mention of "plausores" is therefore yet another element in favour of him having first-hand experience of musical performances of lyric poetry.

"Cantus" and Dante's Rules for Composing Canzoni

Let us now focus more closely on Dante's thoughts regarding the melodic performance of lyric poems. Again, we have to take into account a potentially ambiguous term: *cantus*. We encounter this word in *De vulgari eloquentia* for the first time in the ninth chapter of the second book, where Dante lists the three principles on which the technique of the canzone is based. The first of these is the *divisio cantus*, which is translated by Botterill as "the articulation of the melody". Bent (2003, 180) rightly comments that this "indeed could be its primary meaning in the context of a purely musical discussion, which this is clearly not". However, I would not agree that the

10. Pirrotta 1984, 44. On the meaning of *modulatio*, see Bent 2003, 173, Persico 2016, and Persico 2017.

11. The *Diaffonus* can be read most recently in Cecchini 1986; an analysis of the relevant passage can be found in Camboni 2017, 101–04.

chapters where *cantus divisio* is discussed "are not at all about music as now commonly understood" (Bent 2003, 180).

The word *cantus* returns again at the end of the same ninth chapter, when Dante defines the stanza as "a coherent arrangement of lines and syllables" "sub certo cantu". The passage has elicited different reactions, especially in what concerns the meaning of *certo*. Monterosso's interpretation is that each canzone must have a unique melody, specially composed, and Stevens agrees with him.[12] Among the most recent commentators, Tavoni agrees with Mengaldo, *pace* Monterosso, to say that *certo* should simply refer to a "melodia [. . .] 'ben precisa', 'ben determinata'"; Fenzi, in contrast, returns to Monterosso's hypothesis.[13] Both Fenzi and Tavoni clarify that *cantus*, despite being translated with "melody", is not an actual sequence of notes. The *cantus divisio* is in fact the arrangement of the parts and the relations between them. And yet this "structure" is not and cannot be wholly unrelated from the tune that could be used to deliver a text formed according to the structure in question.

This becomes clearer in the following chapters of the *De vulgari eloquentia*. Chapter ten is entirely dedicated to *cantus*. The most relevant part is sprinkled with musical lexicon, and like *modulatio*, *oda* also apparently refers unequivocally to music as we understand it today.

> [2] Dicimus ergo quod omnis stantia ad quandam odam recipiendam armonizata est. Sed in modis diversificari videntur, quia quedam sunt sub una oda continua usque ad ultimum progressive, hoc est sine iteratione modulationis cuiusquam et sine diesi — et diesim dicimus deductionem vergentem de una oda in aliam (hanc voltam vocamus, cum vulgus alloquimur). Et huiusmodi stantia usus est fere in omnibus cantionibus suis Arnaldus Danielis, et nos eum secuti sumus cum diximus
>
> Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra.
>
> [3] Quedam vero sunt diesim patientes: et diesis esse non potest, secundum quod eam appellamus, nisi reiteratio unius ode fiat, vel ante diesim, vel post, vel undique. [4] Si ante diesim repetitio fiat, stantiam dicimus

12. Monterosso 1965, 91; Stevens 1968, 17. Interpreting "cantus" as "structure" (see below), this hypothesis would chime with the particular value accorded by medieval poets to novelty in poetic structures (regarding this aspect, with a special focus on the early Italian tradition, see Camboni 2017, 141–55, 376–89).
13. Tavoni 2011, 1489, quoting Mengaldo 1968; Fenzi 2012, 209.

> habere pedes; et duos habere decet, licet quandoque tres fiant, rarissime tamen. Si repetitio fiat post diesim, tunc dicimus stantiam habere versus. Si ante non fiat repetitio, stantiam dicimus habere frontem. Si post non fiat, dicimus habere sirma, sive caudam.
>
> (*De vulgari eloquentia* 2.10.2–4)

> I say, then, that every stanza is constructed harmoniously for the purpose of having a particular melody attached to it. But it is clear that stanzas differ in form. For some are accompanied by an uninterrupted melody, in an ordered progression from beginning to end — that is, without any repetition of musical phrases or any diesis (and by diesis I mean a movement from one melody to another, which we call a 'turn' when speaking the vernacular). Stanzas of this kind were used by Arnaut Daniel in nearly all his *canzoni*, and I followed him when I wrote
>
> *Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d'ombra.*
>
> Some stanzas, on the other hand, tolerate diesis: but there can be no diesis, in the sense in which I use the term, unless one melody be repeated, either before the diesis, or after it, or on either side. If the repetition occurs before the diesis, we say that the stanza has 'feet' [*pedes*]; and it should have two of these, although cases do occur — albeit very rarely — where it has three. If the repetition comes after the diesis, we say that the stanza has 'verses' [*versus*]. If there is no repetition before the diesis, we say the stanza has a 'forehead' [*frons*]; if there is none after, then we say it has a 'tail' (*sirma, cauda*).

Dante's rather elliptical description of different stanzaic structures with respect to Arnaut Daniel's poems, together with the fact that this is often conflated with a similar but wholly separate discussion in chapter thirteen, are at the root of the series of misunderstandings mentioned in the previous section.[14] In order to approach a better understanding of Dante's approach to the relationship between poetic texts and their musical delivery, we can first of all consider the Latin word used by Dante referring to the second type of stanza, *patientes* in "diesim patientes."

Diesis has a rather uncommon meaning in this context, denoting the passage (or more precisely the division) between two parts of a canzone's

14. For a more detailed explanation and refutation of the main misconception, see Lannutti 2000, 20–22; Camboni 2012, 5–25.

structure (or *cantus*) in instances in which it is divisible. We will see how this works in practice and what its relationship to text and music is shortly, but essentially the possibility of diesis implies that a canzone can be divided into several parts. This is true for both the stanza and its musical performance: however, even if the former allows for such a division in the latter, this does not necessarily mean that the melodic delivery has to adopt a structure that can be divided in parts according to Dante's definition. This is why Dante uses the word "patientes", meaning "allowing". What Dante is *not* specifying here is that a stanza that can be performed using what Hendrick van der Werf (1972) calls the "conventional melodic form" (in which the first and second pair of verses are sung to the same music) can also be performed with a so-called 'through-composed' melody. However, he is also not saying the opposite, as many scholars seem to believe. This is coherent with his general attitude: as explained by Lannutti, Dante is principally concerned with the creation of poetry, not its performance, and every reference to the latter is essentially incidental.[15]

As for "omnis stantia ad quandam odam recipiendam armonizata est" (which is a rephrasing of "cantio nil aliud esse videtur quam actio completa dictantis verba modulationi armonizata" in the previous chapter 2.9.6), Botterill's translation is again misleading. A better translation is provided by Bent (2003, 175): "every stanza should be constructed harmoniously so that it is fit to receive a melody of a certain kind". As explained recently by Fenzi,[16] this simply means that the stanza has to be suited to receive a strophic melody (regardless of any specific setting); and in order for this condition to be fulfilled, it must correctly follow the form's metrical principles. The same is clearly true for the entire canzone and indeed all other lyric forms, as can be inferred by Dante's admittedly elliptical treatment.

This might seem mundane, and yet several canzoni were composed during Dante's lifetime which do not respect the rules for the correct composition of poems as explained in the second book of the *De vulgari*.[17]

15. "Dante intende offrire le norme della creazione poetica, non quelle della sua esecuzione [. . .] i riferimenti agli aspetti esecutivi, a tutto ciò che non riguarda l'analisi delle proporzioni (*scientia*) e la creazione fondata su quelle proporzioni (*opera*), sono esclusi dall'esposizione sistematica e toccati solo incidentalmente" (Lannutti 2000, 19). On the different possibilities open to the performer dealing with the same textual structure, see Monterosso 1965, 94 and Lannutti 2005, 160.
16. Fenzi 2012, 211–12; more diffusely Tavoni 2011, 1490–92.
17. The most impressive case is Dante's contemporary and fellow citizen Chiaro Davanzati; for an analysis of his and other examples of "irregular" canzoni, see Camboni 2017, 295–301.

This also means that the purpose of these rules is to allow for musical performance of the poems. The point is expressed even more clearly in the following chapters.

As explained by Dante in the above passage, the different kinds of *cantus divisio* are defined by the presence (or lack) of repeated sections and their position at the beginning of the stanza, at its conclusion, or overall. This can be considered true for the structure of the poetic text and that of the musical delivery as well. As stated above, it is not necessary to sing a text with a structure that allows for repetitions using a melody that presents them. However, text and associated melody cannot be wholly unrelated in terms of their structure.

The non-liturgical medieval monodic melodies that we know of (for example troubadours and trouvères' poems) are fairly syllabic: there is an extremely strong correlation between melodic and textual lines, and obviously verses in the melody normally correspond to stanzas. Due to this relationship between music and text, the textual structure must have repeated sections in order for them to be sung to a tune presenting repetitions of melodic passages. The repeated sections do not need to have the same rhymes or rhyme structure — Dante himself states as much[18] — but since in the melodic performance of a text words and melody are related, they need to have the same number of lines and of syllables in each line. This aspect is stressed several times in the second book of the *De vulgari*, at least once in chapter eleven and once again in chapter twelve, on both occasions alluding to musical performance. This could be true also for a third passage in chapter twelve, though the text is disputed.[19]

> Nec etiam pretermictendum est quin iterum asseramus pedes ab invicem necessario carminum et sillabarum equalitatem et habitudinem accipere, quia non aliter cantus repetitio fieri posset. Hoc idem in versibus esse servandum astruimus.
>
> (*De vulgari eloquentia* 2.11.13)

18. On this point, see Camboni 2012, 9–15 and Camboni 2017, 14–19.
19. *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.12.7 reads in fact "in dictamine magno sufficit enim unicum pentasillabum in tota stantia conseri, vel duo ad plus <in pedibus>: et dico "pedibus" propter necessitatem qua pedibus versibusque coartantur" in Tavoni 2011, while in the previous text and in Fenzi 2012 the text reads "necessitatem qua pedibus versibusque cantatur" ["in a poem in the high style it will be enough if a single pentasyllable be inserted into the whole stanza, or two, at the most, in the *pedes*; and I say 'in the *pedes*' because of the need to maintain equality in the melody of *pedes* and *versus*"].

> Nor, again, should I fail to reiterate the following point: that in their mutual relationship the *pedes* should be equal, in both number of lines and number of syllables, as well as in their organization; for otherwise it will not be possible to repeat their melody exactly. And I hold that this principle is also to be observed in the *versus*.
>
> Non aliter ingeminatio cantus fieri posset, ad quam pedes fiunt, ut dictum est, et per consequens pedes esse non possent.
>
> (*De vulgari eloquentia* 2.12.9)
>
> Otherwise, it will not be possible to repeat the melody exactly, which is the purpose for which the *pedes* are designed, as I said above, and thus they will not really be *pedes*.

We are once again confronted with Dante's elusive *cantus*. It is still possible to interpret the "repetitio cantus" of the first passage as the repetition of sections in an abstract structure, but it starts to be rather cumbersome, and this is even more true for the "ingeminatio cantus" in the last one. After all, the *pedes* are repeated sections in the structure; therefore, to say that the purpose of repeated sections is to allow the repetition of sections is itself an unnecessary repetition in an otherwise rather compact text. It therefore seems that Dante is referring here to an aspect of musical delivery, what was mentioned above as the "conventional melodic form", or some variation of it.

What is more, the word *cantus* is apparently employed to allude to this very same aspect in the passage dedicated to the canzone by another contemporary treatment of vernacular literature, even more succinct than Dante's. In a series of Latin glosses dedicated to the different "inveniendi modi" ("ways of composing", which in several cases are downright metrical forms) and written around 1313, Francesco da Barberino provides the following short description of the canzone.

> [50] Priorum autem modorum diverse sunt species, nam cantionum extensarum, dummodo fiant similes primi pedes et postea sibi similes due volte, tot sunt modi quot subtilis homo sciverit commutare. [51] De similitudine autem intelligas ut sub eisdem vocibus concurrant ad cantum; posses etiam facere plures pedes et voltas. [52] Habet etiam cantio que in fine ponitur huius libri quoddam additum post voltas quod egeret alio per se sono: istud addere et mutare non est novorum, sed sequi.

> In fact, regarding the extended canzone, so long as we arrange similarly first the *piedi* and then similarly between them the two *volte*, there are many ways as a clever man might know how to vary them. As to the similarity you may understand that they [the two *piedi* and the two *volte*] may be sung to the same notes. You may also write additional *piedi* and *volte*. And furthermore, the canzone which is found at the end of this book has an added part after the *volte* which would need a different setting exclusively for itself.[20]

The interpretation of the last segment is rather controversial,[21] but there is no doubt that here (as elsewhere in his glosses) Francesco da Barberino is referring to some aspect of melodic performance. What is more interesting, however, is what precedes. According to Francesco da Barberino, canzoni can take many different shapes, provided that the "pedes" are alike and the "volte" as well. "Pedes" and "volte" are the repeated sections respectively at the beginning and at the end of the stanza (Dante names the latter ones "versus"). Francesco da Barberino therefore gives the same prescription that we have seen stressed by Dante; both authors also say that these repeated sections could be two or more. Concerning such conformity, Francesco invites us to understand that its aim is to allow that repeated sections "sub eisdem vocibus concurrant ad cantum". Although the expression "concurrere ad cantum" could still be ambiguous (be sung, or just performed in any way),[22] the mention of the "eisdem vocibus" makes clear that here there is a clear reference to a musical performance of the repeated sections on the same notes. The author — who, it must be remarked, had by this time spent five years beyond the Alps — is therefore not only making the same prescription as Dante, he is also providing the same justification for its necessity.

Despite the fact that both writers come from the same environment, the *De vulgari eloquentia* and Francesco da Barberino glosses are clearly independent texts, as neither author is aware of the other's text while writing his. They seem therefore to reflect a thought that was probably shared by several people in Florence towards the end of the thirteenth century. It seems clear that for both authors musical performances could be a likely destination for vernacular poems, and that these had to be made in

20. The passage is reproduced from the edition provided by Panzera 1997 and the translation is the one by Marrocco 1956, 707, which however omits the very last section.
21. For different hypotheses, see Camboni 2012, 45–53.
22. On this point, see Camboni 2011, 70, 81.

such a way that allowed them to be sung. We shall thus conclude that, in spite of the fact that in the *De vulgari eloquentia* Dante makes every effort to confer autonomy from musical performance on poetry, the performative dimension had a deep influence on his way of conceiving and composing lyric texts.

Singing Dante's Lyric Poetry

Having established that lyric poetry was indeed sung in late thirteenth-century Tuscany (and in all likelihood more widely on the Italian peninsula), and that this possibility had profound consequences for the way in which lyric poetry was composed,[23] we come now to our final topic. Besides Casella's episode, several other elements point to a musical delivery of poems by Dante.

Most of the texts concerned are *ballate*. In the *Vita nova*, Love instructs Dante to have his *ballata* adorned "with sweet music".[24] A rich scholarly discussion has arisen around other texts showing some internal evidence of having been sung, such as *Per una ghirlandetta*, and in particular the meaning of "vesta" in its final stanza.

> Le parolette mie novelle,
> che di fiori fatto han ballata,
> per leggiadria ci hanno tolt'elle
> una vesta ch'altrui fu data:
> però siate pregata,
> qual uom la canterà,
> che li facciate onore.[25]

> These freshly minted words of mine, / which knit a ballad out of flowers, / have taken as an ornament / a dress another was to wear: / and so I now request, / whoever sings its tune, / please greet him graciously.

23. This influence extends in all likelihood to syntactic aspects and their relationship to the structure of the strophes; for some points on this, see Camboni 2017, 59–63.
24. "No·lle mandare in parte alcuna, sanza me, ove potessero essere intese da·llei, ma falle adornare di soave armonia, nella quale io sarò tutte le volte che farà mestiere" (Alighieri 2011, 860). See also Ciabattoni 2019, 98–100.
25. Citations from the *Rime* are taken from Alighieri 2011. English translations are from Alighieri 2014b.

Another instance of "vesta" in a lyric poem by Dante can be found in the sonnet *Se Lippo amico sè tu che mi leggi*, which fulfils the role of accompanying another Dantean text, in all likelihood the single-stanza canzone *Lo meo servente core*.

> Lo qual ti guido esta pulcella nuda
> che vien di rieto a me sì vergognosa
> ch'atorno gir non osa
> perch'ella non ha vesta in cui si chiuda;
> e prego il cor gentil che 'n te riposa
> che la rivesta e tegnala per druda,
> sì che sia cognosciuda
> e possa andar là 'vunqu'è disïosa.
>
> So I bestow on you this undressed girl / who follows me with such a sense of shame / she dares not go about / because she hasn't any clothes to wear. / Hence I would ask you out of charity / to clothe her and then keep her as your own, / so she will then be known / and go wherever she should wish to go.

With reference to a passage in Pietro Bembo's *Prose nelle quali si ragiona della volgar lingua*, which states that *ballate* were called "clothed" ("vestite") when having more than one stanza, many critics have hypothesised that Dante was asking his friend Lippo to add new textual parts to his poem. However, this seems to have been thoroughly disproven, and the commonly held interpretation is now that in all these passages we are confronted with references to musical settings.[26] Dante would therefore ask Lippo, maybe the very same musician mentioned among others, including Casella, in a sonnet by Nicolò de' Rossi (Elsheikh 1971), to provide his text

26. See Gorni 1981, 82–87; Giunta 2005, 239–52; Ciabattoni 2019, 94–98. I would hypothesize that Bembo's statement derives from a reading of Gianni Alfani's *Guato una donna dov'io la scontrai* in its complete, three-stanzas version. We know that Bembo had it in one of his anthologies of lyric poetry, since it has been explicitly transcribed from this source in its partial copy of the so-called "Raccolta Bartoliniana", while the shorter version, circulating in the Veneto region, was transcribed among others by his friend Agostino Isidoro Mezzabarba in 1509, and in any case could be read in the 1518 print anthology *Canzoni di Dante, Madrigali del detto. Madrigali di m. Cino & di m. Girardo Novello* (Venice: Guglielmo da Monferrato; republished a few months later in Milan by Agostino da Vimercate). On Alfani's poem, see Baldassari 2020.

with a musical setting. A third musician mentioned in Nicolò de' Rossi's sonnet, Scochetto, might have set yet another *ballata* by Dante to music, *Deh, Violetta, che 'n ombra d'Amore*, according to a rubric in a now lost manuscript.[27]

Despite general agreement concerning the fact that "vesta" in the last stanza of *Per una ghirlandetta* refers to a musical setting, some perplexities remain regarding the meaning of "ch'altrui fu data", or "given to another". The prevailing interpretation is that the musical setting had been previously associated with another poem and was reused for Dante's *ballata*, which would therefore be a case of *contrafacture*, in which a new poem is composed to a pre-existing melody. The practice will apparently become common in the Italian context towards the end of the fourteenth century, usually involve the substitution of a sacred text for a secular one: hence the number of *lauda* texts which bear the rubric "cantasi come" (to be sung like) followed by the incipit of a secular poem. However, as remarked by Giunta in his commentary, there are no documented cases of "cantasi come" rubrics in thirteen-century manuscripts.[28] The direction of the supposed *contrafacture* is also problematic, considering that a secular love poem would be reusing the melody of an unknown model. More recently, Lannutti has remarked that "altrui" can ordinarily only refer to a person. This would mean that the musical setting has not been given (previously) to another poem, but to someone else. A few questions consequently arise about the identity of both the person giving and receiving it, and whether we are discussing authors or musicians. Lannutti's hypothesis is that the melody had been given, probably by Love itself, to the angel of love who is presented as singing in the first stanza. This is why the poet begs the beloved to welcome whoever will sing the tune, because nobody will be able to do it well enough, considering its preternatural nature (Lannutti 2019a, 55–57). A different hypothesis in my opinion could simply be that the melody for *Per una ghirlandetta* has been given by whoever conceived it to others to be sung. We know that sometimes texts were set to music by people other than their author; for instance, in the case of Casella, a rubric of the manuscript Vatican latin 3214 (152*r*) explains that he "diede il suono" to *Lontana dimoranza* by Lemmo Orlandi, but it seems unlikely that they could be the only performers of the resulting creation. The reason why the beloved should be gracious to whoever sings the text is that it will probably be delivered to her by a person other than the poet — who, according to

27. See Lannutti 2019a, 46.

28. See Alighieri 2011, 176–77; on the "cantasi come" tradition, see Wilson 2009.

the beginning of the second stanza, is currently in a different place from her — or the musician. The fact that the address to the lady, the reference to a performance in her presence, and the address to the performer tasked with the singing all take place in the final stanza of *Per una ghirlandetta*, also conforms with what usually happens in Occitanic and Oitanic envoys. Sometimes, in fact, troubadours and trouvères would send a poem to their beloved, or to someone else, by means of a named or unnamed jongleur. The set of elements in the last verse of *Per una ghirlandetta* can be compared to these envoys, and several scholars have pointed to the strong influence of transalpine poetry on *Per una ghirlandetta*.

So far, all elements pointing to a melodic delivery of Dante's poems concern his *ballate*, and the lone exception of Casella's performance of *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona* stands out as an exceptional case. However, some clues about the performance of yet another Dantean canzone can be found in the tradition of *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*, the first canzone of the *Vita nova*, mentioned twice in the *De vulgari eloquentia* and once in *Purgatorio*.

Besides the manuscripts of the *Vita nova*, *Donne ch'avete* is transmitted by several other witnesses. The earliest is a Memoriale bolognese, one of the official registers of the Bolognese government. The notaries appointed to record various contracts and transactions sometimes inserted vernacular poems into the spaces between the Latin documents that they had to notarize. *Donne ch'avete* was copied in Memoriale 82 (129*v*) between the end of August and the beginning of September 1292, but not in its entirety. The last two stanzas are missing and several other lines or parts of lines have been skipped as well. The notary, Pietro *Alegrançe* or Allegranze, son of a Florentine, copied in his register what Justin Steinberg (2007, 18) described as "several fragments" of Dante's renown poem:

> Donne ch'aviti intellecto d'amore,
> e' vòi' cun voi dela mia donna dire,
> non perch'eo creda soa laude fenire,
> ma rasonar per isfogar la mente.
> E' dico che pensando al so vallore,
> Amor sì dolce me se fa sentire,
> cha, s'eo allora non perdesse ardire,
> farei parlando innamorar la gente.
> Ma eo non vòi' parlar sì altamente,
> ch'eo devenisse per temença vile;
> ma tractarò del so stato gentile

respecto de lei legeramente,
donne e dongelle amorose, cu*n* voi,
ché no è cosa de parlare altrui.

Angello chiama in divino intellecto
e dice: "Sire, [.....*-ede*]
meravegla nel'acto [.....*-ede*]
d'un'anema che fim quasù respiende".
Nel c[*i*]elo no àve null'altro deffecto
se no aver lei: al so Segnor la chede,
e çaschun santo ne crida merçede.
Sola Pietà nostra parte deffende,
[.....*-ende*]:
"Dillecti mei, sofferiti in pace
che vostra spene sie quanto ne piace
[.....*-ende*]
[.....*-ati*]
[.....*-ati*]".

Madonna è dixiata in summo c[*i*]elo:
or vòi' de soa vertù farve asavere.
Dico, qual vòle gentil donna parere
vada cun lei; quando va per via,
gecta nei cor' villani Amor un gelo,
per ch'onne lor vertù aghiaça e pere;
e qual sofferisse de starla a vedere
deveria nobel cosa, o se moria.
[.....*-ia*]
[.....*-ute*]
[.....*-ute*]
[.....*-ia*].
Anche gl'à Deo maçor gratia dato
che non pò mal fenir chi gl'à parlato.[29]

It is clear that the notary here is not transcribing from a written source, but by heart. There is no other possible explanation for the missing sections. The most interesting characteristic of the Memoriale's transcription of

29. The text is reproduced from Orlando 2005, 79–80, without modification. The italics represent integrations by the editor.

Donne ch'avete is however a rather surprising one: namely, that despite all the words and lines that he did not manage to remember and write down, Pietro the notary succeeded in marking perfectly with the appropriate para-signs and points all the beginnings of each of the three strophes and of their different sections.

This falls in line with a general behavior of the copyists in these occasional poetic transcriptions and contradicts what can instead be observed in the main poetic anthologies, where mistakes in marking strophes and their sections are quite common. A hypothesis I have presented previously is that the sung performance of poetry forces listeners to pay attention to certain structural elements, whereas when poems are read the focus tends to be on the individual lines. This hypothesis explains a number of phenomena and historical developments in pre-Petrarchan lyric poetry, where there was clearly an ongoing process of progressive loss of influence by the performative aspect. However, we have seen that this influence for Dante was still quite strong; and returning to Pietro Allegranze's transcription of *Donne ch'avete*, the most likely hypothesis for its peculiar characteristics is that the recollection of the poem was colored by the memory of a melodic rendition.[30]

Two more elements can be added as corroborating evidence for this hypothesis. The first is that for this particular notary we have proof that he sang: just a few years later he was found singing in the streets at night, as we know from a contemporary official report (Fiori 1992). The second is that in the manuscript tradition of *Donne ch'avete* there are other clues pointing to a sung delivery. To be more precise, these can be found in the second earliest extant transcription of the canzone, in the well-known lyric anthology Vat. Lat. 3793.

This is the only poem by Dante copied in one of the earliest lyric anthologies. It was not copied by its main copyist, however, but by a later hand on leaves left blank by the main scribe. It is therefore in all likelihood an occasional transcription, not part of the original planning of the manuscript. The transcription is complete, but the stanzas are in the wrong order, the fifth preceding the fourth. This is despite the fact that the fifth stanza must be clearly the last one, functioning as a congedo. The phenomenon of having stanzas in several different arrangement is

30. A reproduction of the Memoriale's transcription of *Donne ch'avete* can be found in Camboni 2017, 211; for a more detailed account of the hypothesis on the perception of poetic structures, its change and related phenomena, see Camboni 2017, 200ff.

extremely common in the Occitanic tradition, though seldom occurs in the Italian tradition, and in all likelihood originates in connection with the performance of the texts.[31] We can therefore consider the striking arrangement of its stanzas in Vat. Lat. 3793 as yet another element supporting the hypothesis of a sung performance of a canzone by Dante.

Due to the problems of terminology and various ambiguities, the conclusions of this article remain necessarily tentative. However, the evidence presented above shows beyond reasonable doubt that Dante had first-hand experience of sung poetry, and that in at least some of the circles where he moved during his life the musical delivery of lyric poetry was not a rare occurrence. Furthermore, though not all of Dante's lyric poems were composed to be sung (I am thinking here especially of the longer and more philosophical canzoni), it seems clear that they were nevertheless fashioned in such a way that they could be. Above all, it is clear that music had a deep influence on his thought and practice as a lyric poet.

Sorbonne Université

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31. Data on this phenomenon in Troubadour poetry can be found in Van Vleck 1991, 71–90; a hypothesis on how this could occur is in Camboni 2017, 213–15.

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