

Giuseppe Verdi - *Laudi alla Vergine Maria*

In the last years of his career Giuseppe Verdi returned to the sacred genre by composing, at different moments and for different ensembles, four choral pieces - *Ave Maria*, *Stabat Mater*, *Laudi alla Vergine Maria*, *Te Deum* - which were published together as the *Quattro Pezzi Sacri* at the insistence of the publisher Ricordi (in 1898). In the *Laudi alla Vergine Maria*, completed in 1889, Verdi sets to music the prayer to the Virgin addressed by Saint Bernard in Dante's Canto XXXIII of "Paradise". The simple choral writing, mainly homorhythmic and homophonic, with cadences at the end of each triplet, testifies to Verdi's desire to give absolute intelligibility to Dante's text. Initially intended for two soprano and two alto a cappella voices, the *Laudi* are generally performed by the four-part female choir.

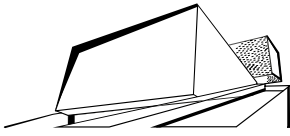
Tigran Mansurian - *Purgatorio*

If Verdi's *Laudi* therefore aspire to the status of *mundane music*, the piece commissioned by Ravenna Festival to Tigran Mansurian on the occasion of Dante's centenary undoubtedly falls in the universe of *human music*. Not only because the Armenian composer has chosen to move within the poetic environment of "Purgatory", in which, as we have seen the "real" music, made by men for men, dominates the sound stage, but because it is a work that seems to fully realize the characters that Boethius assigns to the music of the "middle kingdom": the search for a "new form of consonance" that puts the human being in harmony with himself, the ability to put the sphere of rational thought with that of irrational thought, the constant intent to create a balance between the abstractness of musical thought and the concreteness of sound perception. The piece, which is simply called *Purgatorio*, is a diptych for baritone, mixed chamber choir, string orchestra and percussion that combines two well-known poetic places of the Second Reign: the incipit of the first Canto, "Per run better waters raises the sails", and our Father's prayer with which the eleventh Canto opens. In the first altarpiece it is the choir who intones, after an extensive orchestral introduction, the two initial triplets, while the baritone intervenes only in the central part. In the second it is the solo voice, without any accompaniment, to expose the first and last verse of the prayer, leaving the central section to the choir and orchestra.

«On my desk - confides Mansurian - I have always kept one of the many translations of the Divine Comedy into Armenian and when I received the proposal to write a new work from Ravenna Festival, I searched my library for all the essays I knew dedicated to Dante's work and I studied them thoroughly. Indeed, the request filled me with joy, but it also plunged me into a thousand questions. Three times I started writing the song and only with the fourth version can I say that I have partially dissolved my doubts. I felt and still feel a strong sense of responsibility in the confrontations of Dante, Ravenna and Maestro Muti who will have the goodness to conduct my piece both in Armenia and in Italy.»

Franz Liszt - *Dante-Symphonie*

Among the romantic composers Franz Liszt was the only one to try his hand at the Divine Comedy. The meeting with the Supreme Poet took place in the late 1930s, leaving an indelible mark on the young Liszt, who was so impressed by his reading of the Comedy that he decided to create a great musical composition on the theme. But the arrival at the *Dante-Symphonie*, composed between 1855 and 1856, took place gradually starting from *Le vieux vagabond*, one of his first *Lieder* of 1848, and *Après une lecture de Dante - Fantasia quasi Sonata*, inserted in the second volume of *Années de Pèlerinage*, in which there are some thematic materials later developed in the *Dante-Symphonie*. The work, which was presented on 7 November 1857 in Dresden, is a scheduled symphony in two parts, for female choir and orchestra, inspired by Dante's Hell and Purgatory. As in the symphonic poems, here too Liszt identifies some topical moments of Dante's text to be translated into sounds. The excited start with the menacing blasts of brass accompanied by bangs of eardrums breaks the curtain on the image of the sorrowful city, the crackling of the arches inflames the orchestra like the eternal fire of the circles of Hell, while the melancholy and sentimental interlude a halfway gives voice to the unhappy lovers Paolo and Francesca. In Purgatory the atmosphere becomes mysterious, the timbre of the oboe softly makes its way accompanied by the harps, a heartfelt recitative of the cello initiates a broad dialogue with the orchestra and the violas instead open the complex section of the fugue



that animates the central part. The increasingly rarefied sounds of the final part of Purgatory prepare the ground for the concluding Magnificat with an archaizing tone. The original project of a score in three movements corresponding to the three canticles of the Divine Comedy was shelved by Liszt at the suggestion of Richard Wagner, who considered it humanly impossible to describe Paradise with sounds, "whose splendor could only be contemplated with the eyes of soul". At the end of the page Liszt then composed the short Magnificat sung by the female voices, a window on the celestial sounds of that Third Kingdom that the human being can only imagine by perceiving its distant resonances.