

## Godard's *Dante*

*Gérard Condé*

The immediate appeal exuded by the works of Benjamin Godard 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)

Godard prided himself on never having opened a score by 'ce bon monsieur Wagner', as he called him. 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.

Despite superior gifts and solid studies of harmony and counterpoint at the Paris Conservatoire in the class of Napoléon-Henri Reber, 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, lacking lofty artistic rigour 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, his operas and his symphonies, is to offer the listener attractive melodies with well-defined rhythms, harmonised without ostentatious sophistication (though more subtly than it may appear on the surface), 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]?' The latter, a *symphonie dramatique* awarded a Prix de la Ville de Paris, had established Godard's reputation in 1878. The resurrection of the work, generally 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*, inspired by the life of another Italian poet and given its first performance on the stage of the Opéra-Comique on 13 May 1890.

The generally favourable public reaction contrasted with the almost unanimous severity of a press corps that believed itself empowered to judge according to Wagnerian criteria; we must therefore take their comments with some degree of caution. Maybe the cast was not up to the serious demands of the score. 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 opera of the composer of *Mignon*, performed to a lukewarm reception in April 1882. Whereas the libretto set by his illustrious predecessor showed in flashback (after a prologue that takes place in Hell) the love affair and death of Paolo and Francesca, placed in the historical context, that of *Dante* is based on romanced episodes of the poet’s life borrowed from Boccaccio and the *Vita nova*. Allusion to the *Divine Comedy* (reduced to two of its three parts, *Inferno* and *Paradiso*) is limited to ‘Dante’s Dream’, which occupies the last part of Act Three.

Camille Bellaigue, in the *Revue des deux mondes*, was unsparing in his criticism: ‘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 Paradise, 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 what we know of the historical

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\* That is, appalling, terrifying, the reference being exclusively to the popular perception of Dante’s *Inferno*. (Translator’s note.)

reality, but no more than Dante himself in his poem, and one may content oneself with appreciating its legitimacy from the sole viewpoint of musico-dramatic pertinence.



#### AN OVERVIEW OF THE SCORE

Introduced by a brisk chromatic progression, the opening chorus, 'straight-forward, very lively and with agreeable dialogue' (according to Ernest Reyer), 'very dashing, full of movement and warmth' (Arthur Pougin), 'full of energy and accent' (Victorin de Joncières), plunges the listener into the midst of the struggles in Florence between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines. The harangue that marks the entrance of Dante himself, deliberately tense in its vocal writing, is based on Boccaccio, but is equally inspired by the conflicts that had divided France since 1870 ('La Patrie est en deuil'): '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 *Comedy*. One realises that the role has been allotted to a light, fairly penetrating tenor voice, which on reflection is better suited to the fiery personality of the young Alighieri than the stereotyped solemn 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.

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\*\* Georges Boulanger (1837-91), military man and populist politician who had come close to provoking a coup d'état in 1889. (Translator's note.)

The people and the party leaders 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 nova*. The baritone at once admits that 'to portray her adequately, O poet, would require your language'. Here is a fluid, expressive inspiration, shorn of all superfluity, whose long concluding high G flat (on 's'envoler') was intended to guarantee the baritone his ovation. The dialogue continues, and, after a pathetic *a parte* from Dante, Bardi departs, accompanied by the same incisive, implacable motif with which he made his entrance; a motif that is also ambivalent, characterising Bardi while at the same time preparing us for the despair to which Dante, now alone, will give free rein.

At the age of twenty-three, what does future glory matter to the poet when he is faced with losing Beatrice? His aria is in two sections: the first, introverted, obsessional, deeply melancholic, hovers perpetually around the immutable A in the bass, while the second, more agitated, more vehement in its vocal writing, expresses his decision to reconquer his fair beloved. 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', to quote the apt description of Joncières) and a naïve musical inspiration give their dialogue a dignified, sensitive tone that delineates the characters more surely than any stage action: 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, which she recalls with contagious emotion. All of this sorts ill with the portrait that Dante has left us of Beatrice in his writings; 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 her?

The *coup de théâtre* that closes the first act ventures still further into fictional territory: 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 grand, 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, perhaps misled by the singer’s performance, for the motif is resilient rather than banal. The Florentines 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 praised ‘the rich sound produced by the orchestral accompaniment and the voices’.



When the curtain rises on the second act, the sombre, threatening motif of Bardi (on which the Entr’acte 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 ...*’), 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'), justifies the indication 'Air' in the score. Bellaigue's allusion to an operetta-like chorus of conspirators (between the Entr'acte and the Air) suggests that this must have been cut subsequently. We will meet a reminiscence of it later on.

The duet between Bardi and Gemma was 'favourably received at the premiere', observes Pougin, who attributes its success solely to the talent of the mezzo, Jeanne-Eugénie Nardi. It is true that her obsessional, archaically tinged arioso 'Si ma douleur est amère', with its repeated descending lines, plays a prominent role in this number. The duet as a whole is introduced by a run on the clarinet, whose veiled timbre is enough in itself to modify the atmosphere radically, and which will recur later. An extended piece with accents of a slightly forced vehemence (not least in the interventions of the baritone), it offers a remarkable progression to the point where the protagonists' vocal lines interweave as each insists on his or her point of view. 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 backward-looking musical inspiration and the yearning evocation of what should have been but never will be. 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 classic non-modulating *romance* in identical strophes concluded by the obligatory *sanglot* or sob.

'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 Reyer admired for its 'air of sophisti-

cated comedy and the details of the orchestra'. Although 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), it is above all the ensemble in 6/8 time ('C'en est fait'), 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 mocking remarks, the announcement of the poet's banishment, his vain attempt to make Beatrice go back on the promise that has been forced from her, set the action moving again before the curtain falls.



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 melody of the Old Man introduces the patriarchal note that prepares the arrival of the students come to honour Virgil's tomb with a fervent ode, performed to the sound of flutes and harps (an agreeable, consciously naïve section cut after the dress rehearsal). As the musical style thus grows more elevated by degrees, the worshippers of the Latin poet will make way for one more illustrious than themselves: Dante, 'clad in his historical costume', addresses a fervent prayer to his master to grant him inspiration for the masterpiece he dreams of. The Invocation ('Ô maître, lève-toi') is vocally unremarkable. It is, rather, the sobriety of the declamation, the orchestral and harmonic colour, and still more, perhaps, the grim beauty of the sombre arioso from which it emerges 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 ghostly regularity of a slow waltz in dark hues suggesting music from beyond the grave.

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. 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’. Our ears will judge quite differently; and, more judiciously than his colleague, the Berliozian 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’. 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 ponderous rhythm that accompanies the heavenly choir, interrupted by the vision of Beatrice, gives this number a character much odder than it is genuinely religious’ (Reyer), for these ‘overwhelmed and overwhelming chords in a breathless rhythm’ seem to Bellaigue ‘as contrary as can be to any illusion of beatitude and serenity’. This judgment is doubtless acceptable on a short view, but is nevertheless lacking in perception, for if one considers the rhythmic effect within the overall context of Dante’s dream, it appears as the necessary

counterweight to the violence of the scenes from the *Inferno*. 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 mew-ing, of which the effect is really not felicitous.' The effect is unusual because of the difficulty of achieving precise intonation on these intervals; but Godard, a consummate violinist, knew what he wanted: a sense of fragility on the point of snapping.



The Prélude to the fourth act takes up the solo violin motif associated with Beatrice. The first tableau, which features Dante's awakening from his dream, still full of wonder, 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 Virgilian freshness (at the start) nor animation (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).

After an Interlude to cover the set change, which may be regarded as a symphonic poem of the soul, without a precise subject, we 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.

The two women then sing an airy duet revealing the tender rapport between them and gradually mounting in tension. The text of the prayer sung by Beatrice, now alone on stage ('De l'éternel sommeil'), is so

conventional in expression that the composer did his best to use it to show off the singer's dramatic qualities; the result is a number whose vehement intensity seems ill assorted with the character, but which is very well carried off. 'There are graceful details in the scene where Gemma announces to Beatrice that two strangers have arrived', admitted Adolphe Jullien, admiring the rhythmic, melodic and instrumental flexibility that makes it so full of life and that culminates in the meeting of the lovers. The quartet that resolves their relationship, shaken by unsettling drumrolls, is more ambiguous in expression than one might have expected. Left alone, the poet and his muse launch into a duet that skirts the abyss of mawkishness without ever quite falling into it. One understands why it was encoed. The final scene, in which Beatrice breathes her last, sees the return of the three-note motif, introduced by a quotation of the plainchant *Dies irae*, and a reminiscence of the characteristic rhythm that accompanied the Heavenly Chorus.

Having come to the end of this survey of the score, one feels that its almost unanimous rejection by the critics – or, at any rate, their often contradictory attitude – 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.

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Costumes for Dante and Beatrice (Act I). BnF, Paris.

Costumes pour Dante et Béatrice (acte I). Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Costumes for Bardi and Gemma (Act I). BnF, Paris.

Costumes pour Bardi et Gemma (acte I). Bibliothèque nationale de France.