

# Trilogia dantesca: Commentary

by Eric Massey

## GENESIS AND EVOLUTION

The primary basis of Curt Cacioppo's *Trilogia dantesca* is an original hymn which dates back to the mid-1980's. This "Hymn of Affirmation" (aka "Hymn to God's Love," texted by the composer) permeates each movement, provides phrase by phrase the material for the variations of the last movement, and is sung outright (at approximately the golden mean point in the structure) as the chorus proclaims Dante's celestial verses that begin with the words "Quanto fia lunga la festa di paradiso." Other thematic materials reach back 10 or even 15 years further – the *Geist der Schwere* subject dates from the composer's early undergraduate days, as do the countersubject and *marziale* theme of the *Allegro*, and the flute theme of the middle section of *Numina*. The concept of the work itself originated when he was in high school studying (and attempting to write poetry in) Latin. At that time he made a preliminary effort to produce a piano concerto with a choral finale on his own Latin text. The idea of including the chorus was in no way influenced by Busoni's great concerto, unknown to him until later in his career. Rather it was Beethoven's *Choral Fantasy* and kindred works that served as models. (It should be clearly stated that this *Vexilla* has nothing whatever to do with the solo piano piece of Liszt. On the other hand, one readily acknowledges more than passing likeness between the principal themes of the *Piano Concerto in e minor* (1902) by German-American pianist and composer William Becker, with whose protégé and assistant Cacioppo studied as a young man, and the "battle theme" of *Vexilla*. Cyclical recurrence is a feature of both works, and the second theme of Becker's concerto finds itself quoted outright toward the end of *Adfirmatio*.)

The image displays two musical staves. The upper staff, titled "Becker: Concerto", features a melodic line in G major (one sharp) with a treble clef. It begins with a quarter note G, followed by a quarter note A, and then a series of eighth notes: B, C, D, E, F#, G. A dynamic marking "tr" is placed above the final G. The lower staff, titled "Cacioppo: Vexilla", also features a melodic line in G major with a treble clef. It begins with a quarter note G, followed by a quarter note A, and then a series of eighth notes: B, C, D, E, F#, G. A dynamic marking "trm" is placed above the final G. Both staves include a bracketed section of eighth notes below the main line.

The initial fugal material of *Vexilla* was explored to a point in 1973 or '74, in a four-hands format (the concept for the 6/8 treatment it would receive in

Adfirmatio occurred at the same time). It was extended further and incorporated into a piano and tape piece entitled *Fuga cavalcantiana* (1984), which integrated recitation of a poem by Dante's mentor, Guido Cavalcanti, into its fabric ("O cieco mondo"). The cantabile theme, introduced as a clarinet solo, emerged in

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1977 during a whimsical period of reliving childhood impressions. The Trilogy was first set down as a concerto for piano and orchestra in 1990-91. In that version, the Adfirmatio movement, while still largely based on the aforementioned hymn, remained purely instrumental and far more limited in scope. *Vexilla* was performed in a two piano reduction in 1994 with the composer as soloist, and Paul Orgel accompanying. *Numina* (still without chorus) was performed twice in a scored down version for chamber orchestra in 1995 with Paul Orgel as soloist and the Orchestra 2001 conducted by Geoffrey Michaels. The decision to replace the original draft of Adfirmatio with a full-blown choral finale came suddenly in the year 2000 while traveling across northern Spain from La Coruña toward Bilbao and ultimately southeast to Barcelona. In a moment of illumination, the indispensability of sung text that would articulate images of starry brightness and of divine light, and the absolute necessity of including it, became urgent. Obedient to this inspiration, passages for choral setting were chosen for Adfirmatio, and choral parts were added to *Numina*. The new Adfirmatio movement was composed from December 2004 into December of 2005, during which time a number of emendations to *Vexilla* were made and the full orchestration of the outer movements was completed. The Antiphon a cappella was written between Christmas and New Year's '05-'06, and the echo/accompagnato version was realized around St. Patrick's Day.

## SYNOPSIS

*Vexilla* begins with a slow and lugubrious introduction which gathers momentum, accelerating into a sonata allegro movement. Climactic writing for the piano in the development section replaces any cadenza. The scene begins in the deepest gulches of the pit. A serpentine motif slowly replicates itself, and in the entanglement is trapped an innocent soul. We hear the hammering of picks and the scraping of pointed trowels as demons erect the infernal city (a corner of the Hay Wain triptych of Heironymous Bosch, well known to the composer, depicts their diabolical enterprise vividly). The exposition presents a battle theme from which respite is tentatively found in the *cantabile* melody. The Boschian *martellato* returns at the outset of the development, which climaxes in an eruption of hellish rage. The recapitulation offers moments of occasional repose, but cries of lamentation from anguished souls struggling to escape the fiery abyss predominate.

The **Antiphon a cappella**, which connects the first two movements, is modeled on one of St. Hildegard of Bingen's sequences, but is fundamentally a chant-style reworking of the hymn tune that will be revealed in the last movement.

**Numina** corresponds to Dante's Purgatorio, and is cast in three sections, slow-fast-slow. The outer sections give a fantasy treatment to the hymn tune, with cyclical recurrences of themes from the first movement appearing. The middle section functions as a sort of scherzo, or *tarantella*, whose main melody was presented in the development of the first movement. There are passages that express an almost dirge-like sense of doing penance (Gesualdo lurks in the shadows), while others contain clear major triadic harmony which deliver rays of hope and promise.

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The **Antiphon al eco** links Numina to Adfirmatio. The echoes begin to harmonize in canon, and woodwinds and brass accompany the vocal line. The sopranos represent the angelic nymphs who implore emerald-eyed Beatrice to turn herself to her faithful one, and reveal to him the splendor, the beauty, the eternal living light that her veils conceal.

**Adfirmatio** begins with powerful timpani strokes commanding that the door of the sky be opened. The writing is festive and florid, leading to an orchestral statement of the hymn ornamented by a descant in the piano. A set of 6 character variations ensues: *cantabile*, *alla marcia*, *pastorale poco melanconico*, *musette*, *ostinato/trio/ostinato*, *sarabanda funebre* (in which can be heard a quotation from Josquin's *Déploration sur la mort d'Ockeghem*). A bold octave cadenza for piano brings the chorus to its feet, and the opening fugal material of *Vexilla* returns, now texted with words of Nietzsche that describe the fiend. This spills over into a *fortissimo* outcry from the brass, of particular meaning to the composer. Marked *patetico*, it is here that the noxious worm, in an uncharacteristic admission, gives vent to his woe. The choir then sings of darkness and the imprisonment of the anima. The piano then in an impressionistic episode full of trills and arpeggios punctuated by calls from the woodwinds carries us to another set of variations. At first the battle theme of *Vexilla* is reworked as a waltz, with a solo for Flügelhorn. (The battle theme even in its *marziale* form has underpinnings of a 3/4 metric structure). Systematically the entire exposition of the first movement is transformed in this way (Schumann makes a cameo appearance as the waltz segment unfolds). A tambourine roll invites the chorus back in, and they sing the first sentence of Romans 13:12, "night has passed, day is at hand." Piano and orchestra elaborate the music the choir has just presented. The chorus announces that the silence is broken among the celestial spirits, who now sing and turn in rhythmic step (Dante). Resolutely the choir implores (Romans), "Let us put aside the works of darkness and clad ourselves in the armor of light." What follows is a prismatic

passage that crisscrosses all of the available dominant seventh chords simultaneously – the light is so intense that the choristers must avert their glance, their melodic lines bending away (“*quei santi lumi*”). The piano returns us to the atmosphere of the opening of the movement, the timpani sound again, and the chorus at last sings the hymn tune straight through, texted to Dante:

Long as the feast of Paradise shall be,  
so long shall our love’s bliss shine forth from us  
and clothe us in these radiant robes you see.

Each robe reflects love’s ardor shining forth;  
the ardor, the vision; the vision shines down to us  
as each is granted grace beyond measure.

(Ciardi trans.)

The piano launches into the culminating variation on the full hymn, in conversation with orchestra and chorus. Yet just as they are about to cadence,

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the monster returns, the enemy of mankind, the emperor of pain, the author of all ill, determined to seize paradise. Through disfigured gigue rhythms he marshals his forces on, his minions busy again with their picks and trowels and hammers, inching their ramp higher and higher. It is not to be, however, and the chorus in rapid unison declamation shouts him down. Trying in vain to beat his great wings, he is cursed to resume his place at the center of all gravity, beyond Styx, beyond Malebolge, in the polluted ice of Cocytus. Our blessing, in contrast, is to view the stars and bask in their brightness, affirming the light and the permanence of the feast of paradise. Though glory prevails, the cloak of heaven still wears the sacrificial stain. To acknowledge this, a phrase from the battle theme is superimposed on the triumphal canonic procession toward the end of the work, harmonized using the composer’s dissonant *sarbaggiu* doublings. The brief tension disperses into G Major, and the drama concludes with a single Eucharistic triangle note.

## **STYLE, TECHNIQUE, PARALLELS**

The musical style of the Trilogy suggests a progression from the world of complete chromaticism to a reaffirmation of tonality. Yet within either sphere, elements of the other obtain. *Vexilla*, for all its rapid chromatic turnover and preference for dissonance, is obliquely grounded in e-flat minor, touching all of

the eleven other key regions major and/or minor along the way. Adfirmatio, though overtly rooted in the G Major of the hymn upon which it is based, can shift at any moment to an intervallic language of tritones, half-steps and major sevenths (as in the *ostinato* which, ironically, derives not from diabolical Vexilla materials, but from voice-leading elements within the hymn itself). Between these zones lie passages uninhibitedly romantic, or that evoke the archaic modes, with allusions to medieval cadence. Dante created a structure in which he could in a sense travel back in time and interact with personages from other epochs, Virgil, more than some 1300 years Dante's predecessor, being a main character. Cacioppo in his way does the same, allowing himself the latitude to embrace any historical idiom within his experience. The composer explains that, "I move from chamber to chamber through the corridors of paradise [ie, the Adfirmatio variations], to greet those authors whose timeless music – whose orrendic voices – have guided my journey through life, often quoting them or speaking in their dialect. And my journey is parallel to Dante's: one from darkness, disorientation and hopelessness, through awakening and discipline, to understanding and illumination, and the ability to execute form. As Christian Moevs cites in his book on the metaphysics of Dante, "form is the ultimate principle..."

In real terms, Cacioppo's *selva oscura* consisted in the drab conformity and cultural drought of the early 1950's in the U.S. Music and poetry became providential to him, and with the encouragement of a few key teachers and advice from professionals such as Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, he developed his craft to a degree that permitted him to realize his creative potential. His inspiration is nourished by contact re-established with his Italian heritage, and an avid interest in Native American studies. Parallels between the Trilogia and

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the Commedia continue in abundance. The piano cadence at the end of the first variation of Adfirmatio poignantly brings to mind the moment of Virgil's disappearance at the end of Purgatorio; at a later moment, the piano part itself attenuates to an apostrophe, so representative of the moment when Dante is temporarily blinded in the presence of Beatrice. The *musette* conjures up images of the court of Frederick II where Dante matriculated, and of mosaic work that adorns the Palace of the Normans in Palermo. The oboe solo that leads into the *sarabanda* reminds us of the *siciliano*. The choir, while restating lines from XIV, sings with the zeal of righteous indignation expressed in Canto XXI, and in the coda, over successive pedal points, descending chromatic harmonies flow like the river of light (Canto XXX). On a technical level, Dante's poetic device of *terza rima* suggests itself in the final movement in the way variation phrases alternately recur upon themselves. Then impressionistically, the composer's personal color/key associations make G Major the key with which to match Dante's symbolic and beatific green. Ultimately the broader question arises, is this work a piano concerto? Certainly it originated as one, and the pianist's role

is crucial. But the aim is not to provide a vehicle for virtuosity. Individual celebrity, as with Dante in his struggle to overcome the sin of pride, is subordinated to narrative, dramatic and liturgical aspects of the overall musical discourse. Perhaps the pianist's importance here is similar to that of a vocal soloist in a Mahler symphony.

## SOURCES

Vexilla. The epigraph *regis prodeunt inferni* comes from Dante's *Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, line 1 (together with the title word: "on march the banners of the King of Hell").

Antiphon a cappella. The English comes from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book One, lines 5, 13, 17, 20 – 24, and the final phrase in Aramaic comes from the Lord's Prayer ("deliver us from evil").

Numina. The epigraph *nil sine numine* is an overarching Masonic theme. The reference points also to Jungian notions of the numina, and the choral parts in this movement, untexted, represent numinal voices (the orendic voices, the voices of Beatrice and her angelic host).

Antiphon al eco (accompagnato). The words are drawn from Canto XXXI of *Purgatorio*, lines 116, 119, and 133-39.

Adfirmatio. The epigraph comes from Surat 57, A. 12 of the Holy Qur-an. The German comes from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Part, „Vom Gesicht und Rätsel.“ It describes the Spirit of Gravity, the Devil and Archfiend, who drops leaden thoughts into our ears and minds and harnesses us to wretchedness. We have a choice, though, for there is a doorway out. The English is by the composer. *Anima* is used in the Jungian sense. The adjective "orendic" stems from the Haudenosaunee word *orenda* which denotes spiritual power. The Latin comes from Romans 13:12 ("...let us turn from darkness and

clad ourselves in the armor of light"). The Italian is from Dante's *Paradiso*, Canto XIII, lines 28-29 and line 31, Canto XIV, lines 37 – 42, and from *Inferno*, last line of the final Canto. The references here are to investiture in light, clarity, ardor, vision, grace and value, numinal harmony, music and dance, and the joy of beholding the stars.

## TEXT OUTLAY

### *Antiphon a cappella*

Sing heav'nly muse!  
We invoke thy aid!  
Thou from the first wast present.  
We invoke thy aid!  
Restore us, inspire us, instruct us.  
Sing heav'nly muse,  
Dove-like, with mighty wings outspread!  
We invoke thy aid, o spirit!  
What in us is dark illumine;  
What is low raise and support.  
Sing heav'nly muse!  
Il-la paç-çan min beesha.  
Amen.

### *Antiphon al eco*

'Volgi, Beatrice, volgi li occhi santi,  
Volgi, Beatrice, volgi li smeraldi,  
Volgi li occhi rilucenti al tuo fedele  
Che, per vederti, ha mossi passi tanti!  
Fa noi grazia per grazia che disvele  
La bocca tua, sì che discerna  
La luce eterna, O isplendor,  
La bellezza che tu cele.'

### *Adfirmatio*

Geist der Schwere, Teufel und Erzfeind  
Zwerg...Maulwurf  
lahm...lähmend  
höhnisch saß  
Blei durch den Ohr  
Blei-tropfen-Gedanken in den Hirn  
täufelnd

es war aber ein Torweg

Orendic lyric loosed the portals to lucency.

Nox praecessit, dies autem appropinquavit.

Ruppe il silenzio ne' concordi numi  
- la luce -  
Compiè il cantare e volger sua misura  
- quei santi lumi -

Abjiciamus ergo opera tenebrarum,  
et induamur arma lucis.

Quanto fia lunga la festa  
di paradiso, tanto il nostro amore  
si raggerà dintorno cotal vesta.  
La sua chiarezza seguita l'ardore;  
l'ardor la visione, e quella è tanta,  
quant' ha di grazia sovra suo valore.

es war aber ein Torweg

anima lucis

Orendic lyric loosed the portals to lucency.

Quanto fia lunga la festa...

riveder[e] le stelle  
- lucis -  
- la festa -

