

CHAPTER 26

Music

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By the late Duecento and early Trecento, music had acquired nearly all the characteristics that we associate with the art form today. Professional musicians coexisted with amateur performers and composers. A well-established and efficient system of notation and means of transmission had been developed. Scholars had written textbooks documenting both the scientific and, to a lesser extent, the artistic fundamentals of music. Music existed to accompany, document, and amplify nearly every aspect of life, from gleeful dancing to solemn ceremony, and from sacred worship to bawdy celebration. Many uses for music and a variety of musical expressions would have been known to Dante – and indeed his writings give ample evidence of his rich learning in this art – but the specific forms of musical expression and the vocabulary used to discuss music, its composition, its study, and its performance are quite foreign today. In addition, apprehending connections between Dante and music is complex since the musical world of Italy at the time he was writing is still little understood. Most studies of Italian music or medieval music begin their focus on the peninsula only after the arrival of the Black Death towards the middle of the Trecento, up to this point centring their discussions of European music history on French traditions.

This chapter provides a background to the music and ways of conceptualizing music that would have been known towards the end of the thirteenth century and into the mid-fourteenth century. It does not focus exclusively on new compositions that were written during the lifetime of Dante and his early readers in and around Florence, but also covers the older music and older musical ideals that were still in currency in the early fourteenth century.

The most important and pervasive musical tradition was also the oldest. Plainsong, or Gregorian chant as it is called today, was a set of codified relationships between music and words sung at the daily Mass and, especially in monasteries and at large churches, at the eight other ceremonies

called the hours of the Office. The musical style of plainsong varies greatly, from syllabic settings – that is, with one note per syllable – for long texts, to elaborate, melismatic settings where dozens of notes would be set to a single syllable, such as for those in the word ‘Alleluia’. Many syllabic chants were sung largely on a single pitch called the reciting tone or simply *tonus*. The beginnings of chants and the most melismatic parts of chants would be sung by a single soloist or small group of soloists. Other chants, especially simpler ones, were sung by the full choir and congregation, sometimes with the singers divided into two groups that sang each line in alternation (*antiphonal* chant). Because the sheer amount of music needed for the liturgical year was so vast, tunes were often reused. Aiding in the memorization of pieces were the ‘modes’ into which nearly every piece was classified. This system of eight modes aided singers by giving some sense of the stock phrases that they could expect to appear in the piece, as well as the range of the piece and which notes were the most important, that is the reciting tone and the *finalis*, the note on which the piece would come to rest at or near its end. The range of the piece was described as being either in an *authentic* mode, where the *finalis* would be near the bottom of the range (think *Row, row, row your boat*), or *plagal*, where the *finalis* would be closer to the centre of the range (as in *Happy birthday*). Mode also heavily influenced one of the most important forms of plainsong: the chanting of the 150 Psalms throughout the week. Each Psalm verse ended with one of a set of stock figures determined by the mode, usually to move from the reciting tone to the *finalis*.

In addition to the largely fixed traditions of plainsong, newer sacred musical forms would have been familiar to Dante and his early readers. Although the texts of the Mass and Office were codified long before the end of the thirteenth century (though new Masses for new saints allowed for an expansion of the liturgy), there was still ample space within the Church for new musical creativity. As long as the entire text, and most of the music, was sung, there were no restrictions on additional music that could be added to a service. New verses called tropes, with original words and music, were frequently added to solemn services. Historically, the most significant type of troping was the addition of a second, then third, and sometimes fourth melody on top of the existing chant. These multi-part (polyphonic) elaborations originated by the ninth century and were known in Italy by at least the early eleventh century through the writings, particularly the *Micrologus* (1025/26), of the theorist and pedagogue Guido of Arezzo (c.991–after 1033), who is also credited with the invention of the musical staff and the names of the notes *do* (which he called *ut*), *re*, *mi*, *fa*,

and so on, which formed the first syllable of each line of the melody he wrote to the hymn *UT queant laxis, REsonare fibris, MIra gestorum ...* (So that [your servants] may, with loosened voices, resound the wonders of your deeds), like a medieval 'Doe, a deer ...'.

The added voice or voices in a polyphonic composition could set a single note against each note of the original chant, called the *vox principalis* or, later, *cantus firmus* or tenor (contrary to later usage, the tenor usually designated the lowest voice). This style was common in the earliest repertoires throughout Europe and continued to be common in Italy in Dante's lifetime and beyond. By the end of the Duecento, however, another style came to dominate in France and was also present on the peninsula. In 'florid polyphony', the added voices set two, three, or, in the case of the earlier but still circulating compositions of Leonin (fl. c.1175) and Perotin (fl. c.1200) of Notre Dame in Paris, even up to dozens or hundreds of notes against a single note of chant. Naturally, such settings necessitated singing the original melodies much more slowly than when they were performed as monophonic plainchant.

Theoretical writings about polyphony are primarily devoted to defining the intervals – that is, the distances between pitches sounded together – to be used. The octave, or the distance of eight notes, was always allowed in polyphony, and in fact notes an octave apart are referred to by the same letter name, as in (low) C to (high) C. Musicians have traditionally counted both the first and last note when measuring intervallic distances. For instance, the distance between A and D is a fourth and not a third, since this interval involves four notes, namely, A, B, C, and D. The terminology stems from Greek definitions of intervals as counting the number of strings on a harp that need to be sounded in order to play them. This form of counting leads to counterintuitive results. For example, the interval of a third followed by another interval of a third leads to the aggregate interval of a fifth, not a sixth. The fifth was the other generally agreed-upon proper interval for polyphonic music, though its usage is less straightforward than that of the octave. Of the seven fifths that can be created with the letters A to G, six are 'perfect', that is, consonant, while the seventh fifth, from B to F, is a discordant interval ('diminished') and not to be used as a stable entity.

The person who would have understood these intervals and in particular the mathematical underpinnings of the ratios of string lengths that create them was called a 'musician' (*musicus* in Latin). The term did not mean the same thing it does today. A musician was not just a skilled singer or performer of instruments (for which the terms *cantor* or a specific name

such as *tubicen* for trumpeter would have been used), nor a composer (for which no word fitting our definition was commonly used), but was applied only to one who had studied music theory in Latin and whose knowledge by the fourteenth century was increasingly backed up by a university degree. A musician knew that two strings whose lengths were in the ratio of 2 to 1 would sound tones an octave apart and those that were in the ratio of 3 to 2 would sound a perfect fifth. He also knew that the only strings whose tones would produce a consonant sonority were those in the ratios of 1:1, 2:1, 3:1, 4:1 (called multiples) or 3:2 or 4:3 (called super-particulars, that is, in the form $n+1:n$).

In Dante's time, interval theory was increasingly becoming divorced from compositional practice. While the octave and the fifth remained important consonances, the early Trecento marked the end of a centuries-long phasing out of the fourth as a stable consonance above or below the tenor. While it continued to be acknowledged in theoretical sources as a consonance for over a century, its function was generally being replaced by the third, though the third never appeared at the beginnings or ends of pieces or their larger subdivisions.

The rhythm of polyphonic and to some extent monophonic compositions became more codified and precise during Dante's lifetime and in the decades to follow. The earliest pieces still in circulation were written with repeating rhythmic cells such as Long (L) – Short (B = *breve*); L–B; L, or L–B–B; L–B–B; L. Theorists called these distinct patterns the rhythmic modes and most writers distinguished six of them. The lengths of individual notes were not determined by their individual shapes but rather by patterns in the number of notes grouped together in *ligatures*. For instance, the first pattern (L–B, or mode 1) was created by a group of three notes followed by consecutive groups of two. The second pattern (L–B–B, or mode 3) was created by a single note in isolation followed by groups of three. By the mid-to-late thirteenth century, a second system of rhythm came to be in use where the *shapes* of groups of notes rather than the *number* of notes in a group determined note lengths. Towards the dawning of the fourteenth century, a third system of rhythm began to emerge. In this system, as in modern music notation, the lengths of notes are generally determined by the shape of individual notes and not by their relationships to adjacent notes. The three rhythmic systems are summarized graphically in Figure 26.1. The propriety or superiority of one system over another formed a large part of the philosophical discourse on music of the time. In Italy, the strongest proponent of a new system for notation that distinguished itself throughout the fourteenth century as a national

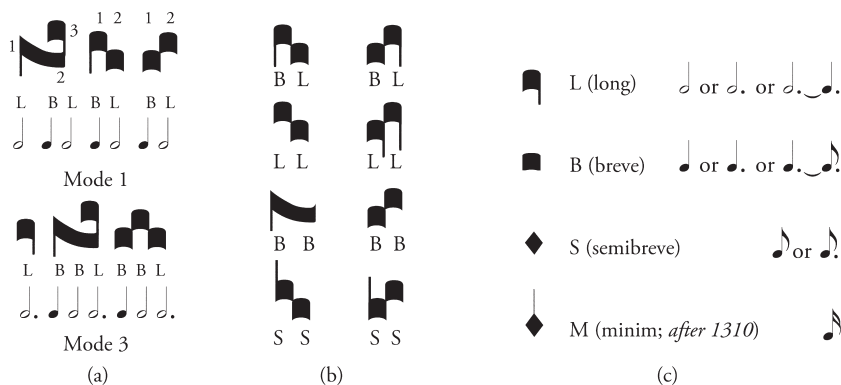


Figure 26.1 Examples of innovations in rhythmic notation arriving (a) *c. 1200*, (b) *c. 1260*, (c) *c. 1300*.

tradition separate from that emerging in France, was the composer and music theorist Marchetto of Padova (b. *c. 1275*), who set forth his system in the *Pomerium* written in Naples around 1319.

These new conceptions of intervals and rhythm are found in many of the polyphonic compositions either composed on the Italian peninsula or known to have been imported. The *Ordo* (Order) of Siena (1215) prescribes polyphony for these settings, and even though the music that was sung there does not survive, it gives important information about the feasts that were considered sufficiently solemn to receive special musical treatment. Of the music that does survive from before and during Dante's life, most pieces are settings of the phrase that dismisses the Office, 'Benedicamus Domino' (Let us bless the Lord) with its response 'Deo gratias' (Thanks be to God). This liturgical expression continued to be musically important up to the end of the fourteenth century, and three-part, rhythmic settings of the piece can be found for instance in a manuscript from Perugia (Biblioteca Capitolare, MS 15).¹ A work that may be interpreted in light of the therapeutic power of music expressed in *Purgatorio* is the two-voice sequence *Hec medela corporalis* (This bodily cure) written by one Bonaiutus de Casentino (d. 1312) on the occasion of an illness of his patron, Pope Boniface VIII (b. *c. 1235*; papacy 1294–1303).² Boniface was a collector of complex music of both Italian and French origin. French 'motets', or polyphonic pieces usually with multiple texts sung simultaneously over slow, often chant-based tenors, would have been known among the educated in Italy.

The motets of the period often quoted from or were inspired by monophonic secular music with which Dante was certainly well acquainted. The main centres for secular monophony were mostly located in present-day France, separated by language – Northern French and Occitan – by region (south and north), and by chronology (the latter flourishing over half a century after the former). Although many *trouvère* (northern poet-composers) manuscripts, primarily of Artois and Picardy origins, contain musical notation, only two surviving manuscripts dedicated to Occitan troubadour lyrics contain music for the songs. One of these manuscripts was written in Lombardy. Another Italian manuscript contains troubadour songs that have been contrafacted, that is to say, they were given new lyrics in a different language. Together they suggest that there was a wide diffusion of such music in Italy in Dante's time.

Some troubadour songs also yield clues about the largely unwritten instrumental traditions of the time. Raimbaut de Vaqueiras's (*fl.* 1180–1207) *Kalenda Maya* (Calends of May), for instance, is preceded by a *razo* that explains that the song is built upon a melody, an *estampie* (stamping dance), played by two fiddlers. On the staff of Figure 26.2 is a transcription of the melody of *Kalenda Maya* along with the first verse's lyrics. The biggest difficulty in reading and performing troubadour, and most *trouvère*, song is the interpretation of rhythm. Older editions of this music, as well as many recent editions of the related Italian sacred vernacular repertory of the lauda, tend to transcribe the music as if it were written in the 'modal rhythm' of Figure 26.1(a). A transcription following this interpretation, which emphasizes the possible dance origin of the melody, is shown in the upper of the two rhythmic transcriptions in Figure 26.2. More recent scholarship, however, argues that the rhythmic notation of the manuscript does not give any hints at such a rigid framework, and that a freer interpretation, while still taking into account syllabic accent and stress, is more likely to be accurate. The lower rhythmic transcription of Figure 26.2 follows this model, taking its rhythm directly from the noteshapes of one version of the piece.

Dante's first readers would have known several secular musical styles that were only just emerging in Italy at the end of the poet's life and in the decades to come. The three main Italian poetic forms that were set musically during the Trecento were the madrigal, *caccia*, and *ballata*. Early in the Trecento, the madrigal was the most common musical form, though its influence waned as the century progressed. Most madrigals are on Arcadian themes and, with the exception of a single setting by Jacopo da Bologna (*fl.* 1340–c.1386) of Petrarch's (1304–74) 'Not so much

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Ka - len - da ma - ya, Ni fuelh de fa-ya. Ni chan dau-zel, Ni flor de gla - ya.
Non truepquim pla - ya. Pros do - na ga-ya. Tro cun ir - nel Mes - sa - cir na - ya.

Del vo - stre bel cors quim re - tra - ya. Pla - zer no-vel an - mors m'a - tra - ya.

Qui ma-ya, em tra-ya, Vas vos do - na ve - ra - ya.
E cha-ya, de pla-ya, Ge-los ansquim n'e - stra - ya.

1. 2.

Figure 26.2 *Kalenda Maya* with two possible rhythmic interpretations.

did Diana please her lover', Italy's most esteemed poets are absent from surviving musical settings (the unrelated madrigal of the sixteenth century, by contrast, abounds in settings of Petrarch and to a lesser extent Boccaccio and Dante). The madrigal had already been described as a genre by the early fourteenth century, but is never mentioned in Dante's works. Musically, the madrigal was distinguished by two contrasting sections: a repeated section of two strophes termed the *terzetti* followed by a concluding through-composed *ritornello*. The *ritornello* was typically in a different metre from the first section; for instance, in triple time instead of duple. Most poetic lines of the madrigal had long melismas on the first and penultimate syllables, while the intervening syllables were set to a single note or few notes, sometimes in a style close to patter song. Such

opening and closing melismas, though unusual to modern ears, appear in most other newly composed Italian musical forms (both sacred and secular) of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, but the lengths of their melismas are rarely so pronounced as in the madrigal. Though musically madrigals can be highly ornamented, many early works actually conceal simple underlying structures, such as a series of perfect fifths in a row and the written sources may be frozen forms of styles of improvisation that are otherwise lost.

The *caccia* is a musical and poetic form for three singers similar in some ways to the madrigal but involving a hunting (or fishing, etc.) scene in dialogue with a canon (round) in the upper two voices. The second voice enters after the first voice has begun and chases it using the same musical material as the first. The *cacce* that survive with music differ from the only known description from near the time of Dante. That description states that the form has up to five singers and involves the passing of high and low material back and forth between two singers (voice exchange). This description seems closer to the type of piece found in England, exemplified by the *rota* (vocal round), 'Sumer is icumen in' (c.1250), which has up to four upper voices and a two-voice *pes* with voice exchange. It is probable that lost Italian pieces of the late thirteenth century were similar in construction.

Unlike the madrigal and *caccia* which began their existences as polyphonic genres, the earliest *ballate* (ballads) were monophonic pieces that relied for their musical interest on large-scale terraced descents and rhythmic flourishes. The descriptions of *ballate* singing at the end of each day of Boccaccio's (1313–75) *Decameron* probably refer to this type of *ballata*. Notably on at least three days the entire group sings with the soloist, probably on the *ripresa* (the refrain repeated between stanzas), and one day the performer is accompanied on the lute. The performance of song in the *Decameron* by women and mixed groups is also supported by evidence from other documents, as is the singing of sacred polyphony by women. (Performance of liturgical polyphony by mixed groups is less strongly attested, however.) The name of the genre and its descriptions in the *Decameron* and *De vulgari eloquentia* (II, iii, 5) all imply that the *ballata* was accompanied by dancing, but by the emergence of the polyphonic *ballata* around 1360, the connection between the two art forms was greatly weakened. (Note that the French equivalent, poetically and musically, of the Italian *ballata* is not the *ballade*, whose form is closer to that of the madrigal, but the *virelai*.)

Although purely instrumental music formed a large part of the medieval sound world, very few instrumental pieces were ever written down or survive. Thus modern performers seeking to recreate the instrumental sounds of Dante's time must extrapolate from scarce surviving examples such as the eight royal *estampies* from a single French – though possibly Neapolitan – manuscript from around 1300, the one surviving keyboard manuscript (the 'Robertsbridge codex' which was formerly thought to be an Italian source from around 1320; the manuscript's new provenance of England around 1360 gives it less authority for understanding Dante's sound world), and, as noted in the discussion of *Kalenda Maya* above, from allusions to instruments and instrumental forms in the texts of vocal pieces or in accompanying illuminations. The organ and *organetto*, an instrument played with one hand while the other worked the bellows, were common instruments in church performance. The harp, psaltery, and lute were the principal plucked strings, while the *vielle* (*viuola*) was the main bowed instrument. These instruments, along with recorders, were considered suitable for mixing with voices. Among the louder instruments were trumpets and horns of various types, bagpipes (*cornamuse*), loud double reeds such as shawms (*ciaramelle*), and drums such as the two-toned *nakers*.

As the instrumentation, tempo (speed), pitch level (key), *musica ficta* (sharps and flats), dynamics (volume), ornamentation, and vocal quality of Duecento and Trecento music was not indicated in their scores, modern recordings of the same piece can vary dramatically from ensemble to ensemble and disc to disc. Yet a neutral performance, using only the indications directly given in the manuscript, is inaccurate and impossible. Listeners are thus strongly cautioned not to take any single interpretation of a work as representing the composer's or medieval performers' actual intentions or performance practices. Although much is known and continues to be discovered about music and its performance in the time of Dante and his early readers, much more is unknown and still awaits discovery.³

Notes

- 1 The earliest polyphonic sacred pieces from Italy, along with some later works in similar styles, are collected in facsimile in F. A. Gallo and G. Vecchi, *I più antichi monumenti sacri italiani* (Università degli studi di Bologna, 1968), and many of the pieces from Dante's lifetime are edited in modern notation in K. von Fischer and F. A. Gallo (eds.), *Italian Sacred Music, Polyphonic Music of the Fourteenth Century* (hereafter PMFC) 12 (Monaco: Editions de l'Oiseau-lyre, 1976).

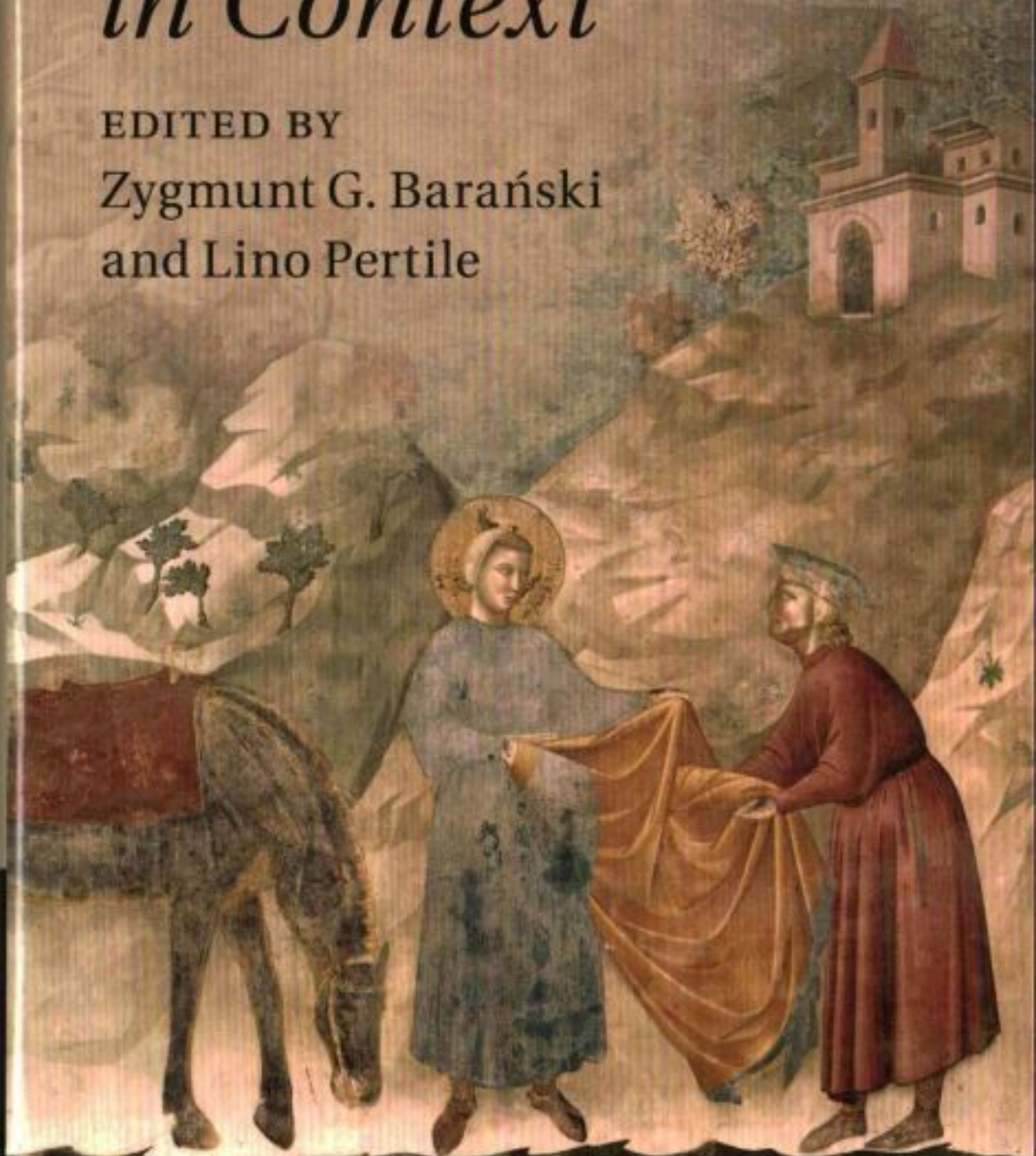
- 2 K. von Fischer and F. A. Gallo (eds.), *Italian Sacred and Ceremonial Music*, PMFC 13 (Monaco: Editions de l'Oiseau-lyre, 1987), no. 42.
- 3 I want to thank Lauren Jennings and Agostino Ziino for helpful comments during the writing of this chapter.

DANTE

in Context

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and Lino Pertile



DANTE IN CONTEXT

In the past seven centuries Dante has become world renowned, with his works translated into multiple languages and read by people of all ages and cultural backgrounds. This volume brings together interdisciplinary essays by leading international scholars to provide a comprehensive account of the historical, cultural, and intellectual context in which Dante lived and worked: from the economic, social, and political scene to the feel of daily life; from education and religion to the administration of justice; from medicine to philosophy and science; from classical antiquity to popular culture; and from the dramatic transformation of urban spaces to the explosion of visual arts and music. This book, while locating Dante in relation to each of these topics, offers readers a clear and reliable idea of what life was like for Dante as an outstanding poet and intellectual in the Italy of the late Middle Ages.

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CAMBRIDGE
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107033146

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First published 2015

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Dante in context / edited by Zygmunt G. Barański and Lino Pertile.

pages cm. – (Literature in context)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-03314-6 (hardback)

1. Dante Alighieri, 1265–1321. 2. Literature and society–Italy–History–To 1500. 3. Italy–Civilization–1268–1492. I. Baranski, Zygmunt G., editor. II. Pertile, Lino, editor.

PQ4353.A2D36 2015

851'.1–dc23 2015022566

ISBN 978-1-107-03314-6 Hardback

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