

## Dante in a Modern Context: A Review of Sepultura's Album *Dante XXI*

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### **Abstract**

Sepultura's *Dante XXI*, an attempt to create a modern-day soundtrack for Dante's *Divine Comedy*, provides us an opportunity of exploring the *Divine Comedy* through an aesthetic rendering of twenty-first-century national (and international) issues. The album also allows us to examine how a musical tenor can guide a modern audience along the same paths that Dante's medieval readers transversed. Although *Dante XXI* does not provide a narrative, plot-informed version of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the musical tenor employed by the band provides a rough sketch of Dante's journey. The listeners' musical involvement encourages them to embark on this journey for themselves.

### **Keywords**

Dante, *Divine Comedy*, Sepultura, *Dante XXI*, tenor, Italian literature

In 2006, Sepultura, a thrash metal band from Brazil, unleashed *Dante XXI* on the world. As lead singer Derrick Green acknowledges, this album is a modern-day soundtrack for the *Divine Comedy*. Going further, guitarist and lyricist Andreas Kisser reveals that the band's purpose "was to find the inspiration to write music and of course to make people read the book." In light of these statements, one might wonder what Sepultura adds to a discussion of Dante's *Divine Comedy*? One answer is that the band provides a timely aesthetic injection of critical commentary about current political institutions. Another answer is that the band, with the assistance of graphic artist Stephan Doitschinoff, gives us a work that explores the musicality and spirituality present in the

poem. Thus, Sepultura ultimately presents a work that, to employ one of Sartre's concepts, adds to the "inexhaustibility" of the *Divine Comedy*.

Doitschinoff's image of Dante, which adorns the album's cover, catches the attention of the listener before the album reaches the listener on an auditory level. The cover presents Dante in profile, looking to the right, and it brings to mind Giotto's



Figure 1: *Portrait of Dante Alighieri* on *Dante XXI* cover. (Used with permission from S. Doitschinoff.)



Figure 2: Giotto's *Portrait of Dante*. (Used as public domain.)

Dante, who also appears in profile, looking to the left.<sup>1</sup> This image, juxtaposed against Giotto's, suggests that with *Dante XXI* Sepultura is essentially speaking to Dante through time in order to better understand and appreciate the *Divine Comedy*. In aesthetically rendering its understanding of this poem, Sepultura does deviate from certain aspects of the poem. Yet the band does display structural faithfulness to Dante's work: the first six songs coincide with the *Divine Comedy's Inferno*, the next eight relate to *Purgatorio*, and the last song correlates to *Paradiso*. And instead of Dante's journey being literally recorded and relayed throughout the album, the band presents a more thematic work that explores justice, governmental corruption, religious organizations, and personal salvation.

The majority of *Dante XXI's* lyrical content provides an avenue

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<sup>1</sup> Doitschinoff admits the direct influence of the Giotto portrait.

for Sepultura to voice its own political and spiritual opinions. In one way, this political commentary, which I will elaborate on shortly, can be seen as an extension of Dante. According to Green, “[M]any of the same problems that were happening in Dante’s time are still happening today in the 21st century.” Specifically, these are the problems of faulty governments, local and national, and religious atrocities. In this aspect, the band carries on with the spirit of Dante. However, since the album lacks a cohesive narrative, it moves from an epic journey that presents itself in the poem towards a more abstract thematic representation of the *Divine Comedy*.

Some of the Dantean symbols appropriated by the band and used throughout the album for political commentary are curiously effective. For example, “Dark Wood of Error” portrays the three beasts as “The beast from the UK / The beast from the US / The UN beast.” Andreas Kisser, the song’s lyricist, draws upon the idea that the leopard, lion, and she-wolf represent political identities, as many critics have argued of Dante’s beasts, instead of particular sins. Doitschinoff’s art for “Dark Wood of Error” gives his portrayal of the beasts and possible vices. The image, shown here, displays the U.S. as the lion, the U.K. as the leopard, and the U.N. as the wolf. Instead of focusing on the kind of specific problems and atrocities that Dante



Figure 3: *Three Beasts* on “Dark Wood of Error.” (Used with permission from S. Doitschinoff.)

dwelt on, Sepultura calls attention to political institutions that appear “to solve the problems in the / world, but they don’t!” (“Dark Wood”).

Continuing the political discussion set forth in “Dark Wood of Error” is “Nuclear Seven,” a song in the Purgatory section. Here, the lyrics offer little hope, contrary to what one would expect in Dante’s Purgatory. Instead, the song attacks the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the world. It discusses the seven nations that

had nuclear capabilities and weapons when Sepultura recorded the album in 2005. The main focus of "Nuclear Seven" revolves around the abuse of power set forth by government. When asked about "Nuclear Seven" in relation to Dante's discussion of politics in the *Divine Comedy*, Green says, "Dante's dissatisfaction with the corruption and abuse of power from politics was something that we could all relate to in our own century now." He cites President Bush's election and Bush's subsequent terms in office as examples of the abuse of power.

Alongside Sepultura's commentary on political entities runs a critique of current religious organizations as well. The band discusses modern problems that afflict the Catholic Church. "Buried Words" tackles the sexual abuse scandals that plagued the Catholic Church in the early part of the early part of the twenty first century. Presenting the song from the point of view of a victim, Green states that the victim, because of the abusive nature of the incidents under the guise of religious experiences, psychologically buries the words and beliefs of the priests. On another level, "Buried Words" ties into the spiritual discussion maintained throughout the album about the Church's rule over an individual. The song concludes with Green screaming, "You're not the king of my world." Green's final line relates the Church's position today, in relation to the abuse scandal, to the Simonists that Dante places in the eighth circle of Hell.

Spiritually speaking, Sepultura appears to present views of salvation and justice that coincide with Dante's. Discussing the song "Crown and Miter," Green conveys that salvation "comes from an inward realization of one's self but also the respect of other souls that are in our world." In the song, Green sings

I had to learn, salvation  
To find my place in the world we live.  
I had to have, compassion  
To understand that I have to give.

This presentation places salvation on individuals' relationships with themselves and others, not on a governing entity that can buy it through indulgences or works.

In fact, Green never really states what the narrator's salvation truly is. Based on "Crown and Miter," we cannot determine if the

salvation comes in the form of temporal or spiritual happiness and power or both. Of course, Dante rails against the act of papal indulgences through Beatrice's diatribe in *Paradiso* 24.110-26. This salvation focuses on the spiritual realm; however, the idea of crown and miter relates to the temporal realm also. Near the end of their journey through Purgatory, Virgil tells Dante:

Await no further word or sign from me:  
your will is free, erect, and whole—to act  
against that would be to err: therefore  
I crown and miter you over yourself.”  
(*Purgatorio* 27.139-42)

The bestowal of temporal and spiritual power on Dante signifies Dante's salvation. The narrator in “Crown and Miter” has the same experience. Here, the speaker achieves salvation and “a way out.”

It could be argued that Green's concept of salvation, as he presents it in the song “Crown and Miter,” rests on the activity of the individual. Dante would never do this, would he? The final canto of the *Divine Comedy*, as Christopher Ryan argues, holds the key to this question. *Paradiso* 33 concludes with Dante's viewing of three circles stacked on top of each other in perfect symmetry. He becomes fixated by the image that appears in the second circle, which, “to [Dante] seemed painted with our effigy” (131). Dante wants to know how the human appearance fits the circle and resides within it (137-38). While questioning this sight, Dante receives the lightning-bolt flash of the *Visio Dei* and concludes the poem. Ryan argues, in “The Theology of Dante,” that Dante's central mission with the *Divine Comedy* and his other works “was to grasp how the divine is present in the human” (136). He goes on to say, “Indeed, in Dante's eyes there is for man no better way to discover God than to attend to that human nature shared by and restored by Christ” (136). By virtue of Dante's placing salvation within human nature, the individual contains the essential components that can lead one to salvation.

However, in “Crown and Miter,” the salvation that the narrator gains comes purely from the individual and not from an individual's inherent image of God. Earlier on *Dante XXI*, “City of Dis” states that salvation comes from the individual, not an institution or, as it appears, a higher being. The song focuses on the

Church and its role in society, as well as an individual's salvation. In "City of Dis," Green writes,

Can't force your own ways of tradition.  
It won't come from the suffering of victims.  
Can't believe in this filthy bloody system.  
Fires won't burn our right to have opinions.

These lyrics attempt to bring about an idea of self realization and salvation instead of a focus on an institution that, according to the lyrics, suffocates an individual's right to opinions. The song concludes with the lines "I can live, with myself / I have faith, in myself." The source of the narrator's salvation becomes clearer.

Another spiritual aspect that appears in both Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Sepultura's *Dante XXI* is the nature of one's dual positions on Earth and in eternity (per New Testament tenets as Dante would have understood them). Dante, of course, tackles this on the spiritual level whereas Sepultura attempt to discuss the question, not necessarily answer it, on the temporal level. In "Convicted in Life," the opening line, "Abandon hope who enter here," is the message conveyed on the gateway into Hell in Canto 3 of *Inferno*. However, the main focus of the song is not on how individuals end up in the traditional other-worldly Hell but on how they end up in Hell on Earth. According to Green, "Convicted in Life" examines the lives of individuals living in *favelas*, or Brazilian shanty towns. He states, "[P]risoners [in these *favelas*] were born convicted and not given the opportunity to change. People see them negatively, and the [prisoners] in the favela end up believing the negativity themselves."

In many aspects, this idea matches with Dante's view of individuals in Hell. The celestial eagle in Dante's *Paradiso* voices the question of God's justice as it relates to his punishments:

For you would say, "A man is born along  
the shoreline of the Indus River; none  
is there to speak or teach or write of Christ.  
And he, as far as human reason sees,  
in all he seeks and all he does is good;  
there is no sin within his life or speech.  
And that man dies unbaptized, without faith.

Where is this justice then that would condemn him?  
Where is his sin if he does not believe?"  
(*Paradiso* 19.70-78)

The eagle then answers the question by saying “Even / as are my songs to you—past understanding— /such is Eternal Judgment to you mortals” (lines 97-99). The eagle’s words harken back to the words of Virgil in *Inferno* 3, when Virgil discourses about the damned souls whose punishment awaits them while “celestial justice spurs them on” (line 125). The judgment and the justice become indiscernible to mortals; as Stevens says, the Eagle’s song makes “the contrast of earthly ignorance to heavenly Wisdom” clear (4). While Sepultura’s song does not ask the question on a spiritual level, it still presents the quandary in a way that makes the listener ponder the reasons for such inescapable problems: “Nothing seems to go as planned. / It makes no difference with the choices I make. / I’m convicted in life” (“Convicted”).

As I mentioned above, another correlation between Sepultura’s soundtrack and the poem manifests itself in the band’s use of music and the role music plays in the *Divine Comedy*. Musically, Sepultura’s album and Dante’s poem share two very striking aspects. First, Dante uses music to contrast the three sections in the *Divine Comedy* by moving the reader from Hell, a place devoid of harmony and order because of its removal from God, through Purgatory, where the music serves as an instrument to move the pilgrim forward with harmonic elements, to Heaven, a realm filled with order due to the presence of God. Edoardo Sanguineti describes this movement by saying,

They [Dante and Virgil] ascend from the noise and screams of Hell, through the extramusical, the inframusical, and the antimusical, to the music of Purgatory, which develops in the various forms—of earthly art with all its force as an alluring and enchanting attraction. But even at this level, which is humanly median, at least up to the edge of the divine forest of Eden, must in turn be regarded, relatively, as a sort of noise, compared to the heavenly transhumanization of the choirs of angels and of the blessed.

(70)

This harmony, in Dante's poem, manifests itself, ultimately, with God in *Paradiso*: "and she [Beatrice] began 'All things, among themselves, /possess an order; and this order is /the form that makes the universe like God'" (1.103-05).

The second aspect shared by Dante's work and this album is that as in the *Divine Comedy*, *Dante XXI* conveys through music the same transformation from chaos to harmony over the course of the album. For Sepultura, this order brings about a harmony within society and individuals themselves, instead of with a supreme God. To assist with the movement from chaos to harmony in the *Divine Comedy* and on *Dante XXI*, music acts as a guide, moving the pilgrim and listener through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. This notion of a guide has a parallel in a certain musical device found especially in medieval music, the musical tenor. Richard Hoppin, in *Medieval Music*, explains the idea of this tenor. Describing stylistic differences between two chants, he writes,

As a result of this process [of sustaining notes], the plainchant, or principal voice, in melismatic organum came to be called the "tenor," from the Latin *tenere*, "to hold." Thus, throughout the Middle Ages the term tenor does not designate a specific type of male voice but refers to one part, usually the lowest, of a polyphonic piece.

(203)

Both Dante and Sepultura use the tenor as a guide. Music helps to keep Dante moving through the various stages of the *Divine Comedy*.<sup>2</sup> Sepultura uses the tenor as sustained notes, or linked sounds, that guide the listener through the various stages of *Dante XXI*. Andreas Kisser says, when asked about the tenor in relation to *Dante XXI* as a soundtrack, that "the tones and sounds play a bigger role" when composing a conceptual idea that carries the listener on a journey.

*Dante XXI*'s opening song, "Lost (Intro)," creates an

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<sup>2</sup> Taking this idea of tenor and applying it to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Nino Pirrota, in "Dante Musicus: Gothicism, Scholasticism, and Music," defines it as "the voice that holds, but also the voice that guides" Dante through the realms of the after-life (248).

atmosphere not unlike that of *Inferno*. No discernible melody appears within “Lost (Intro)”; no instruments show up, except for the human voice in a collage of vocals, presenting a “representation of doubt and confusion that goes on in the head of anyone who has lost their path in life” (Green). Instead of constructing a polyphonic harmony with melodic movements, as Nino Pirrotta mentions, a sustained tenor appears underneath the jumbled lyrical pieces. Ultimately, this creates the auditory feeling that Dante experiences in Limbo. Standing before the Gate of Hell, he says,

Here sighs and lamentations and loud cries  
were echoing across the starless air,  
so that, as soon as I set out, I wept.  
Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements,  
accents of anger, words of suffering,  
and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands—  
all went to make a tumult that will whirl  
forever through that turbid, timeless air,  
like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls.  
(*Inferno* 3.22-30)

In much the same way that the sounds Dante hears cause him to weep, the introductory song on *Dante XXI* causes the listener to prepare for something dark and foreboding.

Contained within the same canto, Dante tells us of the souls awaiting Charon’s assistance across Acheron:

But all those spirits, naked and exhausted,  
had lost their color, and they gnashed their teeth  
as soon as they heard Charon’s cruel words;  
they execrated God and their own parents  
and humankind, and then the place and time  
of their conception’s seed and of their birth.  
(lines 100-05)

Here, Dante continues with the image of loud, disharmonious pronouncements from the souls in Hell: gnashing teeth and cursing God, their parents, and their places of birth. The souls know what awaits them; immediately after their outbursts at “Charon’s cruel words,” the multitude gathers together and begin “weeping aloud”

(line 107). As Charon begins the journey across the river, Virgil tells Dante that the souls, like himself, are guided and spurred on by something more. He says that the souls “are eager for the river crossing / because celestial justice spurs them on, / so that their fear is turned into desire” (lines 124-26). Unlike other passages in the *Divine Comedy*, the guidance does not come in the form of music, as we find in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Instead, it manifests itself in the “celestial justice” of God that “spurs them on” into their final destination in the afterlife. In Sepultura’s work, “Lost (Intro)” introduces the tenor of the album, initially, as a sustained voice underneath the auditory confusion layered above. This voice leads the audience through the song that becomes reminiscent of “celestial justice” spurring on the lost souls.

Before a direct entrance to Hell, Sepultura present us with a representation of Canto 1 on “Dark Wood of Error.” Musically, the song, a cacophony of sounds, encompasses the fear that Dante presents in the *Divine Comedy*. No melodic elements can be found in the song; instead, “Dark Wood of Error” contains rhythmical phrases on guitar and bass with the rhythms of tightly wound snare and bass drums underneath. Here, the musical mood for the rest of the songs in Sepultura’s Hell section becomes apparent. Close to two minutes into the song, intermingled with the foreboding music, a man’s breath can be heard, exasperated and desperate, running through tangled brush. Instead of lyrically presenting the fear “which even in recall renews [Dante’s] fear” (*Inferno* 3.6), Sepultura uses an approach that epitomizes an insecure and fragmented soul that runs scared of its surroundings. In conjunction with the running man, the instrumental introduction, until about one minute and a half into the song, contains sharp, dissonant stabs, from an indiscernible instrument. This stabbing provides the tenor throughout the majority of the song. When the vocals begin, the stabs appear to disappear or languish in the background, and the fast paced strumming of the distorted guitars ultimately takes over as the song’s tenor.

In order to represent the entrance into Hell, “by definition the realm of disharmony” (Pirrota 253), the song “Convicted In Life” maintains the same musical style presented in “Dark Wood of Error”: breakneck guitar riffs punctuated with driving drums. Opening “Convicted in Life,” the drums serve as the tenor, linking sounds together to form an almost uninterrupted wall. Eventually,

the guitar's distortion takes over, again, and serves as the guide through the end of the song. While continuing to present an unorganized musical landscape, most notably in the guitar solo that melds with the rest of the instruments and becomes aurally disjointed, "Convicted in Life" elevates the dark and disharmonious nature of Hell, where sinners lament and gnash their teeth, knowledgeable of their separation from God.

After a minute-long instrumental intro, the main guitar riff of "City of Dis" takes on the role of the tenor. The notes being played have distinction; however, the droning effect produced by the distortion gives the effect of a guiding voice. Layered on top of this main riff, at about twelve seconds, a clean guitar enters with a melody that contains a Middle Eastern feel, along with syncopated drums layered with studio effects. After the rapid progression of the song takes over, a tenor enters. At about two minutes and fifteen seconds, a second voice, underneath Green's, enters and acts as a guide for a portion of the song, bringing to mind the song that the morally apathetic "gurgle in their gullets" since they cannot, as Virgil says, "speak it in full words" (*Inferno* 7.125-26). Thus spiritual disharmony manifests itself here in "City of Dis" through these unpronounceable hymns.

The song "False" continues the use of the droning tenor as guide, using distortion, synthesized voices, vocal screams, lingering notes, and ultimately swelling horns. Even though these various guides do not sustain their initial volume or presence, individually, throughout the whole song, they still move the listener through Judecca. The most interesting tenor presented with "False" comes when the horns swell near the end. Apart from Master Adam's belly sounding like a drum in Canto 30 of *Inferno*, which Iannucci relates to Master Adam's disharmonious "body-soul," (lines 32-33) the only other reference to an instrument, the trumpet, occurs in Cantos 21 and 31. In both cases, the instrument does not produce pleasant or discernable sounds. Barbariccia "made a trumpet of his ass" (*Inferno* 21.139), thus losing all opportunity to produce melodious or harmonious music. On the other hand, Nimrod, in Canto 31, uses his mouth to produce incomprehensible sounds. However, we know that he also uses a horn. Virgil tells him, "O stupid soul, / keep to your horn and use that as an outlet /when rage or other passion touches you!" (lines 70-72). Both instances, the demon's and the giant's, maintain the feeling of chaos

perpetuated throughout the course of Hell. Neither entity can create a harmonious sound with the instrument provided; instead, the sounds come out as disharmonious and without order.

The use of the horns at the end of "False" serve as a representation of Judecca itself, "a great representation of power and strength" (Green). While Satan remains frozen in Judecca, Dante still paints him in a semi-powerful light. Virgil tells Dante, "Look! Here is Dis, and this the place where you / will have to arm yourself with fortitude" (*Inferno* 34.20-21). Later, Dante calls Satan "[t]he emperor of the despondent kingdom" (line 28). These three lines show that Satan still has power to lead one into sin, and to ultimately assist in the punishment of individuals for that sin, as displayed in his continuous gnawing of Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. Christopher Ryan says that "Dante would certainly want us to gaze steadily on that horror, for what he wants his readers never to forget about sin is the pain it inflicts on individuals, and the rending it causes in human society" (143). Ryan's argument perpetuates Sepultura's use of horns in "False" in reference to the power that sin, and ultimately Satan, has on an individual's life.

Concluding the section on Hell and beginning the transition to Purgatory, "Fighting On" presents a different, yet similar, musical atmosphere than the previous songs. Strummed chords flow through verses "to give the listener the feeling that something did change" (Green) between Hell and Purgatory, instead of single note hyper riffs or quick chord changes at lightning speed. Indeed, throughout the Purgatory section, Sepultura's songs contain screamed vocals and the occasional blistering riff to represent the idea that while things have changed, Purgatory contains a transitional stage between the world of disharmonious chaos and complete harmony. While "Fighting On" concludes Hell, it presents the listener with musical characteristics that will become more evident throughout Purgatory. However, these new characteristics still do not overpower the ones that manifest themselves over the course of the Hell part. At three and a half minutes, another voice appears underneath Green's. This time, the voice brings the listener back to "Lost (Intro)" with its indiscernible words and melody. As Dante says, of the flatterers, "We heard the people whine in the next pouch / And heard them as they snorted with their snouts; / We heard them use their palms to beat themselves" (*Inferno* 18.103-05). Sepultura continues to

manifest the unharmonious nature of the individuals' souls in Hell through music. The flatterers whine and beat themselves, unable to make discernable sounds, in the same way that Sepultura creates an atmosphere of chaos and incomprehensible sounds, leading the listener into an inharmonious experience, through the use of vocals that cannot be deciphered.

"Limboi (Intro)" represents the actual movement from Hell to Purgatory. Here, Sepultura's music parallels Dante's use of music in Purgatory in the respect that Dante uses music as a guide towards harmony with God and as an indication of the problems earthly music creates. Throughout the song, cellos and guitar announce the passage that the traveler will undertake. Green says, "The melody changes in Purgatory and classical instruments are more apparent" to show the transition from a realm of no hope to Purgatory, where hope resides with struggle. Ultimately, Dante signifies this shift musically in another way. Near the beginning of Canto 1, Dante says, "and what I sing will be that second kingdom, / in which the human soul is cleansed of sin" (lines 4-5). Later in that canto, while he is evoking the Muses, he writes,

may this poem rise again from Hell's dead realm;  
and may Calliope rise somewhat here,  
accompanying my singing with that music  
whose power struck the poor Pierides  
so forcefully that they despaired of pardon.  
(lines 8-12)

Here, Dante uses the idea of song to introduce us to Purgatory, but more importantly, he invokes the Muses to help him describe his journey through Purgatory towards Heaven through song. He even introduces Mars, representative of music in Dante's *Convivio*, in *Purgatory*, Canto 2. Through this, Dante reveals that "music is intimately related to harmony, which in turn, is a mathematical concept based on quantity and proportion" (Iannucci 29).<sup>3</sup> Introducing Mars indicates that music plays an important role in Purgatory and in Dante's journey.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this discussion, see Iannucci's "Casella's Song and the Tuning of the Soul." Here, he lays out Dante's views on music in the *Convivio* and the similarities his views share with Boethius.

In Ante-Purgatory, Dante encounters travelers on their way to Purgatory proper. Here, a melodious music, music that has no place in the inharmoniousness of Hell, fills the air. When the spirits, making the journey, begin to sing Psalm 113, they “sang as with one voice” (*Purgatorio* 2.48), creating a sound of harmony based on their ultimate goal. Contrasting this harmonious, spiritually leading sound, Casella’s rendition of Dante’s poem “Love that Discourses to Me in My Mind” enters. Even though we cannot say that Casella’s rendition does not contain melody or pleasantness because Dante, Virgil and the other souls stop and listen, we can say that it does not act as a guide to eternal harmony found in Paradise. Cato tells the listeners:

“What have we here, you laggard spirits?  
What negligence, what lingering is this?  
Quick, to the mountain to cast off the slough  
that will not let you see God show Himself!”  
(*Purgatorio* 2.120-23)

This opposition between music of the world and music of spiritual growth makes its way into Sepultura’s next song. “Ostia,” the first song with lyrics in Purgatory, maintains the musical landscape presented in “Fighting On.” Horns swell, vocals become more discernible, a piano enters, and, at about one minute and eighteen seconds, a minute-long break-down with strings occurs. On the other end of the spectrum, sliding guitar riffs, hammer-ons, and strong drumming still make an appearance. These contrasting effects carry over the idea that Purgatory still remains a place where harmony has not totally taken hold. Kisser’s lyrics make this idea clear, “Cannot believe I couldn’t escape. / No chance to leave this plague. / Have to be cleansed, from all the blame.” Even here, the pilgrim must suffer in order to move upward towards Heaven, much like Dante does on his journey.

As mentioned earlier, Dante, in *Purgatorio*, uses music as a guide uphill towards Heaven, like the spurring on of sinners by “celestial justice” in *Inferno* 3. Instead of justice, however, on the mountainous path through Purgatory, the Beatitudes act as the musical guide of Virgil and Dante. When the angel traces the seven Ps on Dante’s head, before his entrance into Purgatory, the angel tells Dante that they will be erased when he washes his wounds. As

Dante and Virgil leave the terrace of the prideful in Canto 12, Dante hears the first Beatitude, "*Beati pauperes spirititu* (line 110), sung. Upon hearing this, he says, "How different were these entryways from those / of Hell! For here it is with song one enters; / down there, it is with savage lamentations" (lines 112-14). After this, his first *P* fades and the trek up Mount Purgatory becomes slightly easier. Dante's introduction, along with the singing of the Beatitudes, places the role of music in Purgatory as a guide to harmony that will be fully obtained only in Heaven. As Iannucci says, "Purgatory is a realm of song. Hell of lamentation, where there is no signing of hymns" (33). Kisser echoes this observation of the cleansing of the soul through music when he writes "I have to be cleansed, from all this blame" ("Ostia").

In "Buried Words," possibly due to the subject matter, the musical template laid out in "Ostia" becomes subdued underneath a musical landscape that appears to have more in common with the auditory nature of Dante's Hell. The song contains the typical tenor that has been applied to the rest of the album at one point or another—distortion. This tenor carries the listener through "Buried Words" in the same way the voice that Dante and Virgil hear in *Purgatorio* 27 carries them forward—"A voice that sang beyond us was our guide; /and we, attentive to that voice, emerged /just at the point where it began to climb" (lines 55-57). Two aspects of the musical nature of "Buried Words" place it firmly in the Purgatory section of the album: the vocals and an underlying keyboard that appears at about one minute and forty seconds into the song. The vocals become discernible. While Green does not sing the words in a harmonic manner, his voice takes on a more understandable tone. Along with the vocals, a keyboard swells underneath the other instruments near the end of the song, creating a melodic effect and acting as a guide through the section it occupies.

Sepultura creates a looser atmosphere with the next song, "Nuclear Seven." Like "Buried Words," "Nuclear Seven" presents the listener with "melody changes in Purgatory and classical instruments" (Green) that become evident indicators of the transformation taking place. The guitar that carries throughout the song lets notes hang in the air instead of switching quickly between different ones. At some points, octaves on the guitar become infused into the instrumental work creating a more melodic and harmonious sound. In addition to the guitar work, strings make

another appearance, and Andreas Kisser provides a disjointed guitar solo that clashes with the melodic elements being presented, thus reinforcing the idea that the pilgrim still has work to do.

"Repeating the Horror" continues the same dynamics displayed in "Nuclear Seven"; however, this time the classical instruments almost become indistinguishable. Shortly before two minutes into the song, horns enter underneath the wall of sound created by the distorted guitars, drums, bass, and vocals. The lack of classical instrumentation and melody helps the listener know that the cleansing process of Purgatory has not reached its zenith. In discussing Casella's song, J. E. Stevens notes "the Casella episode hints with delicacy and firmness that the experience of music, however beautiful, can induce spiritual inattention and weakness" (7). He draws on the example of the Siren in *Purgatorio* 19, whose voice pleases mariners and leads them astray, to further explain the difference. While the Siren sings a beautiful tune, it causes pilgrims, and mariners, to deviate from their journey towards salvation or home. The ultimate goals of both works derive from the pilgrim's aspiration to achieve salvation, and in Dante's poem, earthly music distracts the pilgrim from that objective. Sepultura conveys this, inadvertently or not, through the placement and nature of "Repeating the Horror." The final thirty seconds of "Repeating the Horror" contain natural drums, with no studio effects. The drums ultimately serve as transition into "Eunoe (Intro)," where the listener prepares for the Garden of Eden. During "Eunoe (Intro)," cellos race through the song's twelve second length, providing an atmosphere of cleansing and renewal.

The final song in Sepultura's Purgatory section, "Crown and Miter," serves as the representation of the pilgrim's movement into Eden. The song serves as a culmination of the journey to this point. Classical instruments appear, racing riffs dot the musicscape, lingering notes surface, and screamed vocals (discernible and indiscernible) come and go. As discussed earlier, the song focuses on salvation of the individual. The musical aspects of the song drive home the feeling that the process has been a long and strenuous one, but Dante has seen it through. In *Purgatorio* 30, the angels sing to Dante, and he stands in awe, motionless. Stevens says, "Dante is at first frozen in his own self-reproaches; but as the music works on him and he experiences in their *dolce temper* the truth of God's mercy and love, he dissolves into tears [. . .]. The

experience of music is not just intellectual analogy in this context, but an actual part, the medium in fact, of spiritual experience” (5). “Crown and Miter” acts in the same way—as an awakening. Green, as stated earlier, writes, “There is a way out, salvation.” In both instances, the narrators’ epiphany shows salvation, compassion, and mercy.

“Primum Mobile (Intro)” comes before a direct entrance into the Empyrean for *Sepultura* as well as for Dante. *Sepultura*’s thirty second instrumental leads the listener into the final plane with strings and drums. The music, with the strings, creates an atmosphere that would possibly accompany the spheres in Dante; however, the ultimate climax comes when we reach “Still Flame,” *Sepultura*’s final song.

Beginning the final song “Still Flame” is the continuous chant of the word *Opia-lympia*, a word created by the band and used to signify unity. In conjunction with the chant, distorted strings provide the undercurrent that guides us through the auditory realm. After about one minute, the chant drops out, leaving the strings as the sole instrument for ten seconds. Then a sitar, drums, and a keyboard (or synthesizer) take over a new melody. Later, a single cello riffs effortlessly over the percussive rhythm until a distorted guitar takes over, culminating in a final musical build-up that ends with Green screaming “Still flame,” recalling Dante’s mind when it becomes “struck by light that flashed” (*Paradiso* 33.140). The conclusion of “Still Flame” reminds one that *Sepultura*’s purpose with *Dante XXI* comes from the band’s desire to create a modern-day soundtrack for the poem. The conclusion draws the listener’s mind to music rolling over movie credits, and harkens back to the musical culmination found in “Crown and Miter,” but this time, the song uses classical instruments with very little input from distorted guitars, bass, and drums. According to Kisser, “Only one song appears for Heaven because I feel we have very far to go before we reach that point.” Kisser’s words shed light on the reason why the semi-dark nature of “Still Flame” persists, even though we have reached paradise.

While *Dante XXI* does not follow directly in line with Dante’s poem, it gives us a new vehicle to examine the work. Lyrically, the album deviates from the poem at points, drawing connections to the *Divine Comedy* and modern times through time-specific examples. On the other hand, by giving us a modern interpretation

that incorporates music, Sepultura allows us to examine the music in, and possible modern musical connections to, Dante's poem. This venue for investigation is the result of the fact that ultimately, *Dante XXI's* musical interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* falls in line with the music presented within Dante's poem. From the unharmonious sounds found in Hell to the order found in Paradise, Sepultura, with their mixture of metal, thrash, punk, and classic instrumentation, presents us with a musical collage that displays this movement for us.

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### **Appendix: Interview with Derrick Green and Andreas Kisser (Abridged)**

Throughout the course of the album, melody does not play a large role until the songs about Purgatory. There, if I remember correctly, I hear the cello playing melodic lines, vocals underneath yours carrying melodies, octaves during some parts, and keys. Does this have anything to do with the transition from Hell to Purgatory? Also, I notice that melody and rhythm come together in

Paradise, without distortion. Was this a conscience decision?

*Green: It was our idea from the beginning process of working with this album to have a division between the songs. The first six songs (including the intro) are representations of Hell. The song "Limbo (Intro)" is the start of Purgatory. The song "Still Flame" is a representation of Paradise. The album is extremely fierce in the beginning because we wanted to capture the vibe of Hell. The melody changes in Purgatory, and classical instruments are more apparent in order to give the listener the feeling that something did change, as it does in Dante's work. The same goes with Paradise. We wanted to do something completely different with the song so that there would be no comparison between it and other songs.*

*Kisser: Yes, this we did on purpose. We felt Hell was very natural for us. We wrote Hell very raw and fast. On Purgatory we started to use the cellos and horns together with different arrangements for the songs, slower, and more melodic. It is a different vibe from Hell but still heavy and painful. On Heaven we did a song totally different from everything else, with electronic sounds and loops, weird voices, and a cello song. Only one song appears for Heaven because I feel we have very far to go before we reach that point.*

Still on the subject of music, the only type of melodic form I see in the album's Inferno section comes in the form of a horn. That melody is not really strong. Seeing that the only music in Dante's Hell comes from horns (Nimrod and a demon) and a slap on a damned sinner's belly, does the use of the horn reference that?

*Green: We never intended the horns to be a reference to that, but I like your idea! The idea I suggested to one of our producers was that the use of brass instruments is a great representation of power and strength. In our mind we were doing a sound track for the book, and we came up with that idea because we had worked on doing the score for various movies here in Brazil. I watched an interview about the making of the film 'Taxi Driver'. I am a fan of Bernard Hermann, the composer for the music in 'Taxi Driver' and other great films. In this interview, he talked about how he wanted to use all horns in the film to add to the strength of the character of Travis Bickle. We wanted to create a sinisterly powerful mood and having the brass instruments helped tremendously.*

*Kisser: Not really, but this is the beauty of making a conceptual album, especially with the Divine Comedy, where you can have different perspectives and trip with your own mind with our music as*

*background.*

In relation to the lyrics, whose point of view are the songs from? It appears that each is from different individuals in the different levels of the comedy.

*Green: Exactly. We wanted to change the perspective of the lyrics because there were so many ideas we wanted to write about.*

*Primarily, the lyrics are written from Dante's view.*

On the album, I notice that "Dark Wood of Error" and "Nuclear Seven" deal with politics. These two songs appear to focus on global politics. What relation do these songs have in common with Dante's discussion on politics? He focuses on Florentine politics and Italian politics as a whole (even though Italy was not unified). The power of the Roman Empire was also constantly in his view.

*Green: Dante's dissatisfaction with the corruption and abuse of power from politics is something we could all relate to in our own century now. The fact that a person like George W. Bush has managed to rob the elections of the biggest empire today, the USA, and to be able to manipulate other countries was something the Roman Empire was notorious for.*

Am I right that there are some songs in the Purgatory section of the album that do not display hope?

*Kisser: They all have hope. I think the book is very positive, besides the very heavy and painful events throughout the journey [in Purgatorio]. We have to pay attention to the bad things to find a way to improve and to fix our problems.*

I cannot discern the words spoken on "Lost (Intro)." What are they? They appear to be English and another language.

*Green: The words are in English and they were pieces from the lyrics on the album overlapping each other. It is a representation of doubt and confusion that goes on in the head of anyone who has lost a path to follow in life.*

At the end of "Fighting On," I can decipher some of the underlying vocals; however, I cannot decipher all of them. What are they?

*Kisser: Just vocal sounds to create a "code message" vibe.*

Was there a conscious effort to make the vocals more melodic on the latter half of the album?

*Kisser: Yes, following the steps of Dante's trip.*

The idea of "Convicted in Life" is that we cannot choose our eternal resting place. This is a notion of predestination. Dante

raises this question in *Paradiso* 19.70-78. I believe the image of the eagle answers him in Paradise. It says, “for we, though we see God, do not yet know/ all those whom He has chosen” (*Paradiso* 20.134-35). Also, it is apparent that the pagans in Limbo did not have a choice of their eternal destination. How does this predestination play into the speaker's attitude in “Convicted in Life?”

*Green: The idea was to write this song from the point of a prisoner in life. There are people here in Brazil that are born in a favela and will die in the favela. These prisoners were born convicted and not given the opportunity to change. People see them negatively, and the people in the favela end up believing the negativity themselves.*

*Kisser: I see “Convicted in Life” as the concept of self-respect. We need to put ourselves on the map and not just blame everything and everyone else for our problems. We are the main reason for the consequences we live with today. We create our problems and we also can solve these problems. Don't wait for rewards or punishments in the afterlife.*

Does “City of Dis” profess the idea that we can, and are, persecuted by individuals in power?

*Green: It is related to the Church forcing its will and its way on a person. It is about being an individual and standing for what you believe in, even in suffering the guilt of being punished or condemned.*

*Kisser: I see the City of Dis itself like any other metropolis, like Sao Paulo or New York. Chaos!*

Why does “Fighting On” conclude the section on Inferno? It appears that the song contains hope and determination, mixed in with despair. Does it serve as a transitional period, along with the instrumental?

*Green: Yes, because the feeling we wanted to convey in writing that song was that although Dante, in leaving Hell, had survived the voyage, the voyage was not over. In that voyage, he learned different aspects about himself that made him stronger. There was still the rest of the journey to go, though, and there was doubt about what was to happen next. That uncertainty, in turn, created despair.*

In “Ostia,” does the final stanza deal with a character from Purgatory? Or does it relate to someone in our modern world?

*Green: It deals with Congress, who is supposed to be representative of the people elected by the people. These faceless representatives—they are always changing. You never know who they*

*are. They go with whatever advances their own life.*

I am a little unclear on whom “Buried Words” refers to.

*Green: This song was written about the priests of today's Catholic church at large abusing their power. There are many people coming forward about being sexually abused by corrupted priests. The song was written from a victim's point of view. The words of the priests, their faith, and their beliefs were all killed and buried by the victims.*

Does the salvation in “Crown and Miter” come from individuality, with free will and love? Or does it come in the form of a spiritual realization of a higher being, such as a love for God?

*Green: It comes from an inward realization of one's self but also the respect of other souls that are in our world..*

*Kisser: I think we are far away from salvation. I see religion as the real evil on human history full of violence, blood, ignorance, humiliation, etc. Our salvation will come with respect to our planet, different cultures, different ways to live and survive. We have to stop forcing people to live under a culture of fear.*

In “Still Flame,” what does the word *opia-hympia* mean?

*Green: We made up the phrase to have a word to signify the type of unity that happens during the Olympic games—different countries and cultures coming together not to fight but to compete out of respect for humanity.*

In the music video for “Convicted in Life,” there is a picture of a bridge descending into hell, full of people. What does this scene mean?

*Green: For me, these people are those who stand by in life and do nothing to better themselves or the people around them in any way. They did no evil but they also did no good. They are the bridge that links us to things to come that are worse. Hitler came to power because of this. Bush came to power because of this.*

Why the title *Dante XXI*?

*Green: To show that many of the same problems that were happening in Dante's time are still happening today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*