

**NAXOS**  
AudioBooks

Benedict Flynn  
**A Life of Dante**

Read by **John Shrapnel**

**NON-  
FICTION**

**BIOGRAPHY**



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1	The final journey back to Ravenna	6:21
2	Florence – the great city on Arno’s fair river	4:07
3	Dante was born in May 1265...	7:21
4	The first sight of Beatrice Portinari	4:14
5	Death and philosophy	6:31
6	Dante marries Gemma Donati	2:59
7	Dante, aged 30, 1295	5:33
8	1300 – political upheaval and the beginning of Inferno	13:31
9	Dante in exile	4:23
10	Convivio – The Banquet – a work of instruction	2:15
11	Letters	7:21
12	Ravenna 1318; death 1321	5:49
13	The last 13 cantos of Paradiso; final burial	8:50

**Total time: 79:23**

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## Benedict Flynn

# A Life of Dante

The Italy of Dante's time was lively, vigorous, occasionally dangerous but certainly bold. The central mediaeval period – the Dark Ages, as they are traditionally called – were over, and the first stirrings of the Renaissance could be detected. It was a time when learning, kept alive within the Church during those difficult centuries after the collapse of the Roman Empire, was being rediscovered by the aristocracy; and the growing class of merchants flourished in this profitable period of trade and commerce, where powerful guilds were growing and benefiting from the new trading routes.

With the help of translations from the Arabic, the works and thoughts of classical Greece – in particular Aristotle – were beginning to cast an influence once more; and music and poetry, through the troubadours, and painters were transforming the artistic lives and environment of late 13th-century Italy.

Of course, the Church continued to be the primary single influence – often in matters of state as well as religion. In

Constantinople, the Byzantine Empire ruled over its people in a stricter alliance between church and state, continuing the traditions of the Roman empire of the Caesars. In the West, however, and in particular in the Italian peninsular, there was no longer such a neat homogeneity.

The city state was the primary unit. Florence, Venice, Ravenna, Pistoia, Siena – the citizens felt loyalty to the place of their birth. The loyalty was defined by their home town, rather than their nation or their language; and politics and the rule of law was dictated by constantly shifting alliances, making the Italy of the 13th and 14th centuries an unpredictable place to be. And only too often, if there wasn't a dominant political or military power, foreign kings or princes would be called upon to involve themselves in local disputes for spoil, lands or political benefits. The only single personage to hold some measure of national control over Italy was the Pope – through his religious power.

This was reflected in the two main political factions. The aristocratic party was

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represented by the Ghibellines – who looked towards the Holy Roman Emperor as their principal protector. The opposing party was represented by the Guelfs (among them, powerful bankers), hoping for more democratic rule, who looked towards the Pope as their principal figure.

This was the background of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) as he grew up in Florence. It is important to have some idea of this setting, for although *The Divine Comedy* may be set in another world, and meant as a commentary for mankind for all time, it was, paradoxically, placed very strongly in Dante's own time. Many of the characters who appear in *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* were contemporaries or near contemporaries of Dante himself. This is why, when he enters into conversation with them, in their enduring trials, he often talks about matters other than their 'sins' or the actions that led them to their place of penance or reflection. We need the footnotes to explain the background, but Dante's contemporaries would have known about them directly.

This is also why he wrote in Italian rather than Latin, the accepted custom of the time. He wanted *The Divine Comedy* to be read by a wider audience than offered by

Latin, a language not necessarily studied by many of the new merchant families. Dante also makes the point that writing in Italian would have allowed greater access to the poem by women.

So, the life of Dante, and the background against which he wrote, is essential to a reading of *The Divine Comedy*. He was born into a Guelf family. His natural aptitude for learning and poetry was recognised, and he became active in the state life of Florence, becoming one of the Priors, which exercised considerable influence on the running of the city. But however able as a man of letters, he seemed less adept at operating in the darker shadows of politics and intrigue, and came out the worse after infighting between two sections of the Guelf party, the Blacks and the Whites. In 1302, while away from Florence, he was condemned to the stake and had no choice but to go into exile. It proved to be a bitter life sentence, not helped by his changing political views which resulted in him being known as Dante the Ghibelline.

This was the public part of his life. The more private (though it became very public...) was his reverence for a girl he saw from a distance when he was nine. The

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encounter with Beatrice Portinari was to transform his inner life and propel him along the road of poetry, which was to sustain his life as an exile. Nine years after that initial sight of her, he met her at a party and they exchanged a few words. A little later they met again, but she had heard some 'scandalous' reports about him and snubbed him. He was heartbroken. He saw her at a distance once more before she died in 1290.

Despite – perhaps because – he seems to have had a reputation for leading a passionate life, Dante described his feelings for Beatrice very clearly as 'most chaste'. Passion travels easily (and even simultaneously) down both secular and sacred routes and, for Dante, Beatrice became the symbol of purity, a constant star that his uncertain life so needed.

She provided the impulse for his poetry. His learning and his awareness of political and commercial life was unusually combined with an energy for living and the spiritual search. Out of all this and his homelessness, emerged *The Divine Comedy*.

**Notes by Nicolas Soames**

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**The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue**

MUSIC OF THE TROUBADOURS  
Ensemble Unicorn

8.554257

**Music programming by Nicolas Soames**

Cover picture; Dante Alighieri – Portrait, Andrea del Castagno

# Benedict Flynn

## A Life of Dante

Read by **John Shrapnel**

Dante's vision, **The Divine Comedy**, has profoundly affected every generation since it first appeared in the early 14th century. Here is a brief account of his life, compiled from various sources (including his first biographer, Boccaccio) by Benedict Flynn, whose new translation of the Comedy on Naxos AudioBooks, read by Heathcote Williams, has been widely acclaimed. It sets the known facts of Dante's life against the turmoil of the times, and puts the very personal nature of his poetry into perspective.



Born in Birmingham and brought up in Manchester, **John Shrapnel** joined the National Theatre (under Laurence Olivier) playing many classical roles including Banquo and Orsino. With the RSC he has appeared in classical Greek theatre as well as numerous Shakespearean plays. His TV work varies from Stoppard's *Professional Foul* and *Vanity Fair* to *Inspector Morse* and *Hornblower*. Films include *Nicholas and Alexandra*, *One Hundred and One Dalmations* and the role of Galus in *Gladiator*.

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