The Culture of Semiotics: Opera as a Synchronous Practice

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Abstract

In this article I assess recent literature on topoi in musicological studies outlining questions (particularly the problematic synonymous use of topos and trope) redefining what the topos denotes, expanding on current understandings of topoi and contributing to the recent topic studies debate in musicology.

What I call topoi here are chiefly abstract nouns such as fate, destiny, love, death, grief, piety and others which dominate libretto texts first set down by the writer and then represented musically. I broadly define these topoi as affecting and expressive thematic signifiers. Furthermore, I argue that topoi in opera enable the identification of themes or motific triggers which do not directly evoke any of the five senses. In other words, topoi (to my mind) are overarching conceptual provocations that might directly engage an audience's emotional and/or intellectual faculties rather than appealing to the sensory experiences: sight; sound; smell; taste or touch. Operatic topoi therefore operate on a non-figurative level by shaping the narrative, its representation and interpretation by means of ideas, patterns and conceptual elements which might resonate with an audience's imagination, thoughts and impressions rather than through direct sensory stimulation.

However, in modern literary criticism the term topos has come to be used to identify a conventional or recurring theme or expression, often in a pejorative sense as connoting a 'cliché.' By resorting to familiar and overused expressions, critics lose the opportunity to explore what is unique and innovative about each individual staging. Rather than offering a new or insightful account, writers frequently rely on a bank of clichéd interpretations of topoi, repeating an oft-used formula that has been used numerous times to describe the narrative and characters.

For my purposes, topoi are conventional (albeit sometimes stereotypical) theatrical, literary or musico-rhetorical devices representing standardised ideas or concepts. My use of the term 'topos' ultimately derives from the persuasive aspect of classical rhetoric (see below) but has been adapted for my purpose, which is essentially to deconstruct how cultural practices, texts and ideologies enable readers/audiences to make 'meaning,' incorporating the imperative literary-thematic aspect explicated above.

Many critical theorists today follow Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE) in conceptualising/defining topoi as particular stereotypical arguments that an audience could comprehend without difficulty. Aristotle first recorded the notion of the topos in Topica (350 BCE). He convincingly used topoi to locate the invention of an argument's proposition in ἔνδοξα/endoxa (opinions held by a consensus of people) deriving from δόξα/doxa (individual opinions). It is also my contention (following Aristotle) that the affective connotation of a topos (or an 'argument') is located in a shared premise which is why abstract noun or affective topoi might be considered to be prototypical or archetypal. In this article, I thus maintain that a topos (which is fundamentally a thematic context) might be collectively understood as a commonplace or common sense but could also perceived as formulaic or prosaic.

In the twentieth century the 'topos' label became widely associated with literary studies following German philologist ER Curtius' European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages (1948). Curtius linked rhetorical forms to modern literary constructions in an attempt to bring back or re-invent the European Latin heritage. Curtius' innovation produced common modes of expression which both represented and had an impact or 'troped' on literary and for my purposes musico-rhetorical 'clichés.' Topoi in critical theory have a number of methodological applications here. As I argued above, I employ the term to refer to the thematic and/or conceptual rhetorical constructions by means of which I critique text, music, culture, discourse and society.

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1. Topic Theory

In this article I argue that topoi are valuable tools when employed for the purpose of textual interpretation. One discernible advantage of thematic analysis is that an effective understanding of the topoi present in the text, helps persuasively to both identify textual questions and also to locate the text within the cultural and moral discourse at the time it was produced and beyond. A topos might also provide an underlying coherence to a text that is not immediately obvious on the surface. My enquiry considers how topoi travel and mutate in both literary and musico-rhetorical history. Because when a topos surfaces in a specific historical situation, it is, according to Curtius, a sign of a change in the 'psychological state' of the culture producing the topos. Similarly, topoi emerge because of various historical phenomena that pervade a given culture. I apply topoi heuristically to enable the identification and exploration of hidden values or meanings. In this thesis, topoi serve a number of purposes including operating as scaffolding with which I construct my argument about how connotation and denotation are designed and reproduced. Additionally, topoi facilitate the deconstruction and communication of signification.

I use topoi critique and thematic investigation interchangeably to conduct a semiotic analysis. In practice, this means that a topos (understood as thematic signification) might be effectively conveyed by a particular device (textual and/or musical 'sign') which necessitates the semiotic framework employed, vis-à-vis signifier v. signified. I consider topoi to function more like themes than motifs because of their usage and repetition.

Literary theory usefully defines a theme as the main topic of a text, usually if not always, reflecting large existential concepts. However, a critique of topoi could also in principle, be a simple inventory of co-present themes, because like any cultural product an opera is essentially made up of topoi of different systemic levels and different degrees of particularity/generality. Moreover, I argue that topoi, like themes, which are usually assumed to be governing ideas or even universal concepts (sometimes clichés or stereotypes), can actually vary and transfigure. Whether a topos is a cliché or a universal concept depends largely on interpretation which may be counterposed to description or analysis. However, to speak of 'interpretation' invites misunderstanding from the outset. In order to examine this idea more closely, I unpack some relevant contemporary theories below.

Concerning the relevance and usefulness of topoi to musical exegesis, I argue that musical rhetoric, based on motifs, rhythmic and melodic figures or structural forms, can operate aesthetically to give signification or 'meaning' by evoking 'passion' or emotion. Similarly, musico-rhetorical devices can influence dramatic characterisation and the reception thereof. Topic theory in musicology has focused mainly on musical figures and devices, calling them topoi. But somewhat problematically, the discourse often applies the terms 'topos' and tropus [trope] synonymously. I advocate Robert Hatten's line of reasoning that topoi have the potential to become tropes. For my purposes, a trope is an elaboration or explication of a predictable figure (which in rhetoric can serve as a device involving a change or transference of meaning working at a conceptual level) whilst a topos as a theme, functions representationally. In other words a topos is a tool of invention signifying themes/concepts which a tropus not only denotes but also expands upon and develops.

Topic theory in musicology has thus far been applied to music written from the eighteenth century onwards. I explain below to what extent the theoretical concept prevalent in the eighteenth century, is applicable to 17th-century music. In Danuta Mirka's introduction to Topic Theory published in 2014, she rightly suggested that by the eighteenth century the idea that all musical parameters had affective qualities was a well-known paradigm. I argue that topic theories like earlier Affekt theories can be usefully applied to 17th-century works in particular, approaching the process as a hermeneutic philosophical problem. In so doing, I claim that text and music can express, or be expressive of, human emotions like joy or sorrow.

The term topos borrowed from rhetoric was first applied to musicology by Leonard Ratner (1916 – 2011) in Music: The Listener's Art (1957) and then developed in his Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style (the "Expression" chapter) (1980) leading to the widespread adoption of the scholarly term 'topic theory.' Treating the topos as a musico-rhetorical mechanism representing 'meaning' Ratner divided topoi into two groups: 1. Functional types like dances or marches; 2. Styles including Turkish, military and hunting, generating a thesaurus of characteristic figures. In my view, although pioneering, because Ratner's definition focussed only on the mechanisms of individual musico-rhetorical devices it was incomplete. Perhaps the profoundest flaw in Ratner's argument was that it did not address the broader, socio-cultural aspects of music. Treating topics as rigid tools of representation meant that context was ignored. In addition, fixing topics definitively risked bypassing multiple 'meanings.' These issues were rectified to some extent by two of his students at Stanford University, Wye Jamison Allanbrook and Kofi Agawu.

Allanbrook and Agawu both extended Ratner's topical classification system. Allanbrook noted similarities between Ratner's musico-rhetorical topic theory and Curtis' 'common place' literary model. For Allanbrook, topical signification began with the recognition of a style and/or genre which was present in a particular passage of music. She believed that 18th-century listeners were fully familiar with this style/genre based musical

vocabulary, frequently encountering it in its basic forms. Recognition would have been instant and enjoyable. Allanbrook's notion of topical signification justly extended to associations of styles and/or genres with affects and also to their connections with social contexts. A case in point might be that dances were correlated with ballrooms and the social status of dancers; church music with religious ceremonials; pastoral music with the landscape; military marches with battlefields and parades; hunting calls with hunts. For this last reason especially, Allanbrook correctly suggested that music was mimetic of the world.

Agawu expanded Ratner's analytical scheme, providing a 'universe of topic' in his monograph Playing with Signs (1991): chapter 2, figure 2. By adding classificatory categories, Agawu thereby included a variety of different affects and also some significant forms.

Like Agawu and many other scholars, I study topoi as points of departure for hermeneutic investigation, arguing that their significance is context-specific not definitive. However, I also find that topoi have generalised or correlated 'meanings' which have been identified within the musicological discourse. Agawu was particularly interested in the structural and expressive qualities or attributes of music. Depicting musical rhetoric, Agawu considered a language-based model to be useful. Building on Raymond Monelle's argument which I shall return to later, Agawu expected musico-rhetorical analysis to do three things: 1. Explain the 'laws' governing the moment-by-moment succession of events in a piece of music. He decided that progression or sequence were the musical syntax; 2. Explicate higher level organisation such as, in literary terms, sentence, paragraph, chapter and more; 3. Provide a framework for understanding the discourse of music. Although according to Agawu there is no correlation between circumstance and 'meaning,' Agawu's method is valuable to my argument because I also interpret the sequence of musico-rhetorical and textual occurrences as events unfolding temporarily, whilst providing a constructive interpretation in terms of formation and organisation. Like both Agawu and Monelle, I argue that musical tropes provide a context/contexts for various types and levels of associative signification. Topic theories viewed through postmodern lenses can provide various ways in which to understand an operatic work.

Robert Hatten rightly referred to the synthesis through which various musical elements combined to become an emergent entity that was not predictable as the sum of its parts. Hatten's theory conveniently applied not only to gesture but also to topics (which he defined as patches of music that triggered clear associations with styles, genres and expressive meanings). For Hatten, separation (which was characteristic of an analytical approach to musical understanding) was often inadequate to illuminate even basic musical modalities like structure and process. I endorse Hatten's argument that a synthetic approach might be more effective, that is, a combination of hermeneutic and structuralist methods which together serve to enrich musical understanding and subsequent interpretation. Hatten usefully linked a structuralist account (oppositions, their marked asymmetries, and their expressive correlations) to a more hermeneutic understanding — one that goes beyond general types of meaning to address individual particularity as encountered in the unique contexts of specific works. I argue that expressive correlation is brought about both by unique context/s and also by formal and structural elements. In essence this means that like Hatten I fuse analytical interpretation with a critical awareness of both contextual and expressive signification.

Following literary theory post-structuralist musicology generated a whole new range of arguments about the role of the listener or 'receiver' of music. The notion that a proliferation of interpretants existed led musicologists directly toward a postmodern interpretative paradigm. It became de rigueur to observe that an artwork required a hermeneutic interrogation. Viewed through this lens, it is apparent and inevitable that the configurations of fate, destiny, love, death and the other topoi represented in opera have the potential to offer a multiplicity of meanings. For example in some modern staging representations wherein dramaturgical priorities mould and shape audiences' experiences/perceptions of the work together with critical responses.

Recent adaptations of Ratner's original topic theory have incorporated the notions of connotation and denotation offered by literary theory. However according to my argument comparing music to language has always foundered on the ability of words to name or mean something 'specific' — the process called denotation — and the lack of such specificity in music. Furthermore, Peter Burkholder (2006) rightly contended that there were mechanisms in music which informed listeners intuitively followed. According to those musico-rhetorical mechanisms or devices, music denotes something in particular (a 'meaning') which in turn both embodies and conveys connotations. Those connotations are significant here because they create patterns that are similar to the processes by which audiences 'understand' poetry, drama, or other 'linguistic artworks.' Extending Burkholder's argument whilst designing a new paradigm, I argue for the inclusion of textual topoi in the exploration and explication of musical rhetoric. Burkholder did not apply the labels connotation and denotation to musical meaning in their strictest sense, but only insofar as they conveyed the analogous impression that associations emerged with greater or lesser degrees of probability, variability, and consistency.

2. Semiotics in musicology

In the section below I briefly survey particular aspects of contemporary music semiotics pertaining to my study. Since music semiotics is such a large area of enquiry I have necessarily limited my review to: Nattiez (1990); Monelle (1992); Tarasti (1996); Walkling (1996); Lidov (2005); Hutcheon (2012); Rumph (2012); Agawu (2014) and Saussure (2013).

The following investigation is necessary and relevant to my argument because (as numerous scholars have noted), during the Early Modern era the concept of musical signs and symbols traversed the art of persuasion through language. Thus like many other scholars I argue that rhetorical principles play an important part in the analysis and interpretation of 17th-century music. 17th-century music theoreticians like Charles Butler and Thomas Mace (see below) and composers like Henry Purcell discussed and applied figurative conventions to craft and design music that connoted specific narratives, ideas and/or emotions. Characterising music as a discourse was central to Butler, Mace and many of their peers, by whom music was treated as a type of rhetoric. Early modern theorists and composers applied techniques similar to those used in speech in order to evoke audience responses.

The first musicologist I evaluate in this segment is Raymond Monelle because he rightly affirmed that semiotics could provide a useful framework for the understanding of music within a context. Monelle expanded upon what he considered to be one of the linchpins of 20th-century linguistics — the declaration that linguistics is a synchronic study concerned with language as it is understood and spoken at this moment not with the (diachronic) history of the language. Like Agawu a synchronic dissection according to Monelle must first rationalise the laws that govern the moment-by-moment succession of events in a piece, which is the syntax of the music. Second and consequently it must expound upon the constraints affecting organisation at higher levels, the levels of sentence, paragraph, chapter and beyond. Monelle usefully explored some of the implications of structuralist binary oppositions. In Linguistics and Semiotics in Music (1992) he attested that:

> Traditional metaphysics and epistemology have always privileged one of the terms in each opposition. In the field of aesthetics, the preference has been for forms of signification that revealed the 'essential.' Thus, symbolism has been preferred to allegory, metaphor to metonymy. The opposite of metaphor is metonymy. This is the figure of speech in which an idea is indicated by some object or quality only accidentally related to it. The most trivial examples are the use of 'head' to mean the whole animal ('two hundred head of cattle'). In each of these oppositions, the first term is considered motivated, organic, the second arbitrary, mechanical. Thus, 'music is a symbol of affective life' (Langer); 'music is a metaphor of the stress and release of emotion' (Ferguson). In each case music does more than merely point to feeling as its object; it typifies, exemplifies, clarifies feeling by presenting its essential qualities. The connection with feeling is motivated rather than accidental.

In accordance with my argument, Monelle's definition of the affective quality of music coincides with the idea that 'feeling' is connoted by music. Likewise, Monelle's 'essential qualities' might be expressed as musico-rhetorical tropes. In addition, the literary-textual topoi given by libretti (considered as thematic representations) might also be vehicles of both affect and metaphor. In other words, topoi in libretti not only signify certain specific themes or concepts but also operate as means by which affective states and resonant metaphors can be conveyed. As I clarify in later chapters, the interaction between music and text serves to enrich the audience's interpretation of and engagement with the libretto, providing layers of meaning that might stimulate emotional responses whilst enhancing the overall complexity and effect of the work.

Monelle justifiably argued that the semantic study of music often took the form of a search for simple reference — for instance, the military or peasant style — or for specific topics like 'fanfare' or 'Sturm und Drang.' For Monelle, music semiotics necessitated a narrative viewpoint, the conception of music as emotional or moral plot. Monelle convincingly argued that specific features of methodology characterised the music semiologist. The first and perhaps traditionally most common was Schenkerian graphic analysis which was diachronic and syntagmatic, being concerned with the temporal continuum of music and the texture of successive events in a syntactic structure. Other traditional approaches like Wagnerian Leitmotif were paradigmatic, searching through the whole discourse for recurrent items which could then be grouped taxonomically.

I argue for the possibilities of both a synchronic and a diachronic operatic work. That is, both caught in the present (contemporary stagings) and as a series of events over time (for instance arguments about the most 'authentic' version and also later 'modernisers.') My argument draws on the association between langue and parole which goes back to Guido Adler (1855 – 1941) the 'father of musicology' who divided music research into two branches: the systematic (isolating the musical langue — its constant, immutable and general regularities) and the historic (identifying the musical parole — the varied practices of music with their different conceptual systems

over the course of time). In this thesis I argue for both synchronic (langue) and diachronic (parole) readings of opera.

My approach has some similarities to Saussure's structuralism as mediated by Nattiez. Jean-Jacques Nattiez's Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music (1990) (a structuralist critique of music) promoted Saussure's notion that the linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name but a concept (signified) and a sound-image (signifier). The latter is not the material sound — a purely physical thing — but the psychological imprint of the sound or the impression that it makes on our senses.

Nattiez drew on Saussure's separation of the synchronic (langue) from the diachronic (parole) whereby a language system could be plausible independent of the language's history.

Somewhat less specific than topic theory (evaluated above) structuralist musicology tended not to group musical elements in the same way. Paraphrasing Monelle, the postmodern message refers first to meta-narratives, an acceptance of heterogeneity and multifariousness in preference to uniformity and unity. Postmodern activities like *Regietheater* bring into being an infinite range of 'others.' In place of a principle of sameness as the pivot of intellectual activity, there is a principle of otherness. Nattiez helpfully contended that the musical work is not merely a 'text' composed of 'structures,' rather the work is constituted by the procedures that have engendered it (acts of composition) and the procedures to which it gives rise: acts of interpretation and perception. What Nattiez designated the essence of a musical work is at once its genesis, its organisation, and the way in which it is 'perceived.'

Furthermore, Monelle interestingly noted that language considered in the 'here and now' manifested itself as a performance — something that was reborn in every utterance of a native speaker. Saussure called this 'speech' (parole, the diachronic). In Saussure's view, structure was not possible in language unless the relationship between the signifier and the signified was stable. My point of departure is that music generally and opera in particular can never embody the stable forms identified by Saussure because of its inherent fluidity due to its relationship with performance. Notated musico-rhetorical topoi can only ever be approximations not static relationships between signifier and signified. To put it another way, summarising Nattiez, there is no one – to – one correspondence between a musical signifier, the movement aroused and the feelings evoked. Nattiez solved this problem by terming musical symbolism 'polysemic.' Moreover, Agawu convincingly defined each sign as the indissoluble union of a signifier and a signified. Needless to say, he also acknowledged that the significance of an individual topos was comprised of a set of signifiers which were created by the action of various parameters.

Equally weighted were Agawu's and Nattiez's readings of Saussure's theory of the distinction between two linguistic dimensions. For Agawu, langue referred to the larger system of language and was 'social.' Parole was translated as 'speech' or the individual utterances made by a speaker of a language and was therefore individual. In Agawu's terms, the classical style was a langue with the individual 'utterances' of Mozart and Haydn (among others) as various paroles. Agawu also considered the structuralist distinction between synchronic and diachronic dimensions. He defined historical change as that represented in the evolution of a composer's language. The study of a system without Agawu's 'props of chronology' encompassed the synchronic dimension. According to Agawu, the synchronic has been a crucial component of the structuralist enterprise informing Ratner's approach to topic theory. And to be sure the actual account of 'meaning' inevitably (for Agawu) took a narrative form retaining an implicit diachronic dimension. However it might be the case that there are certain sonic relationships which create or cause affective responses in listeners. Nattiez described the perceptions of a western musician based on the connotations below:

high   shrill   clear   happy   joyous   (and so forth)

low   deep   dark   sad   tragic   (and so forth)

In opera this type of semiosis might manifest as various musical effects and devices. In relation to my argument about topoi: for example, fate might in certain circumstances be represented musically by slow tempi, minor keys and chromaticism; destiny using faster tempi, diatonic melodies, no dissonance or chromatic melodic movement; love might make use of fast music in major keys, mostly diatonic melodies and some dissonance; death might be written in major keys at moderate tempi with minimal or no dissonance.

Returning to Monelle's Linguistics and Semiotics (1992), he less convincingly observed that semioticians tended to seek out structure rather than trying to interpret 'meaning.' Monelle was of the view that music alone could not express specific emotions like love or anger because topoi such as these imply real life situations which must be depicted in words. I argue that music at times affirms and at other times contradicts the libretto text.

Just like the notion that there were several doctrines of the affections in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Monelle contested (following Nattiez) that a survey of music semiotics would reveal not a single developing discipline but a collection of varied and unrelated programmes. Rather than a single study called 'semiology' Monelle believed that there were semiologies or more precisely, possible semiological projects. My semiological project here is not only to ascertain the significance of fate, destiny, love and death to operatic audiences but also to argue that the topoi are relevant to audiences today. To this end I turn next to Eero Tarasti.

Tarasti mistakenly read semantic content from musical structure without reference either to the historical context of a composition or to the subjective position of an interpreter. Although Tarasti's Myth and Music (1979) was accurately styled by David Lidov as the first book of semiotic affiliation to convey the idea that a serious semiotics of music could be more than merely structuralist. Tarasti described music as a process, usefully arguing that the inner 'form-building forces' were inextricably bound to the nature of music as a specifically temporal art. In A Theory of Musical Semiotics (1994) Tarasti well defined musicological text strategy as an isotopy: in music, the same theme or thematic idea could be presented in a different light leading to a different result; a dramatic solution; the achievement or unfulfillment of the action.

The relevance of the historic/diachronic paradigm was accurately identified by Andrew Walkling in 1996 when he rightly commented on the rise of a new interest among scholars in historical contextualisation. By 2005, the debate about musical 'meaning' had evolved to include new historicism. Similarly, in Is Language a Music: Writings on Musical Form and Signification (2005) Lidov defined a topic as a category of musical figure that had developed an association with a unit of thought, determined by cultural tradition. However, Lidov linked the etymology of a musical topic to an underlying icon. Lidov's association between a topic and a moment in time precluded the type of postmodern reading that I suggest. Whilst Lidov justifiably asserted that because music is an art, its possibilities of ambiguation are of its essence, he also contentiously argued that structuralism celebrated ambiguity.

Some of the structuralist dialectic oppositions that I construe in opera are creator vs interpreter; writer vs reader; topos vs tropus and surface denotation vs expressive significance. In so doing, I consider various interactions between the producers of a work and those engaging with it, including between authors 'constructing' the narrative and audiences 'deconstructing' or deciphering it. My analysis also underlines diverse acts of context specific meaning co-creation. In addition, my argument connecting topoi (common themes) and tropes (rhetorical devices) examines how thematic components might be articulated and communicated. Finally, I address different types and levels of 'meaning' as the 'literal' text might initially preclude nuanced interpretation.

The final musicologist in this section is Stephen Rumph whose monograph Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics was published in 2012. Rumph's approach informs my study because he viewed characterisation through a particular lens. According to Rumph, operatic characters traditionally knew precisely what they were, what they did and what they felt. Rumph's first two examples (below) are taken from Mozart's opera The Marriage of Figaro (1786) and his third is from The Magic Flute (1791):

1. Cherubino's first aria in Le nozze di Figaro betrays a surprising uncertainty:

Non so piùcosa son, cosafaccio.

I no longer know what I am or what I do.

2. The Countess Almaviva spells out her feelings in her opening aria:

Porgi amor qualcheristoro al mioduolo, a'mieisospir!

Grant, love, some remedy for my sorrow, for my sighs!

3. The Queen of the Night exclaims:

Der höllerachekocht in meinemherzen, tod und verzweiflungflammet um mich her!

Hell's vengeance cooks in my heart! Death and despair flame about me!

Rumph argued that aria text abounds in emotive vocabulary. The characters know their minds. I apply Rumph's argument to Nahum Tate and Henry Purcell's early modern opera *Dido and Aeneas* (c. 1689) wherein lead protagonists enjoy transparent access to their thoughts and emotions. Like the Queen and the Countess, Dido in her final lament seeks to persuade a listener (Belinda). The Queen incites Pamina to murder. The Countess implores Cupid for mercy. Like 'Der höllerache' and 'Porgi amor' then, 'When I am laid in earth' exemplifies rhetoric or persuasive speech that was designed to move both an audience and also another character in the drama, real or imagined. As in all fictional representation, there are various 'layers' at work here. To the character

on the stage, what Dido sings is real whilst to the audience the entire experience is fictitious with varying degrees of 'verisimilitude.'

Both text and music were designed to convince on-stage listeners and those in the audience by using conventional signs belonging to a code shared by the onstage and offstage audience, correlating with an equally conventional set of affects. However, Rumph also convincingly argues that musicologists cannot be sure whether musical topics like pianto [sigh] were part of the composer's expressive design or prosodic convention. Hutcheon usefully augments the argument thus:

Because the convention of opera is that characters on stage do not hear the music they sing, except when they self-consciously perform what are called 'phenomenal songs' (lullabies, toasts, etc). Only the audience hears the rest of the music; only the audience has access to its level of meaning. This is why music can represent interiority. In fact, however, opera also has a fixed convention for representing interiority: the aria. Dramatic action and conversation stop during the aria and we eavesdrop on a character's moment of introspection and reflection.

In this article I assessed various relevant semiotic investigative methods. I identified those which informed my argument, evaluating whether or not a method might be pertinent to my study of fate, destiny, love, death and other topoi representations in opera. In so doing, I uncovered links between semiosis and topic theory. In my view, music semiotics is more than an adaptation of linguistic and scientific method to music studies. Whilst in traditional philosophy semiotics is a branch of epistemology with a history going back to Aristotle and beyond, as Monelle and other musicologists rightly demonstrated, music semiotics is a theory of music with an epistemological basis of its own. Semiotic theory in musicology offers different perspectives, some of which are relevant to my argument. According to Bálint Veres, musical evaluation often takes its mediality or communicative nature for granted. Veres' approach to music signification suggests that meaning resides both in the written score and in the interpretation. The mediality of a composition is encoded by its performance practice and is therefore available to be decoded and recoded in each and every staging of any operatic work past, present or future.