



Semiotic Interpretation of Emotional Expression in Giacomo Puccini's "O Mio Babbino Caro"

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Abstract

This article explores the meaning of melody through semiotics interpretation of the emotional expression of Giacomo Puccini's song "O Mio Babbino Caro" in the context of romantic classical music. Using basic semiotics concepts, the analysis focuses on the symbols and signs found in romantic classical music, namely how composers use musical symbols to convey emotions. The application of semiotics to romantic classical music is discussed using an analytical method that covers musical symbols, the role of musicians in conveying emotions, and comparisons between composers' styles. This article explores how the meaning of a note can be interpreted more deeply. The discussion also involves the relevance of semiotics in the context of classical and romantic music, which presents challenges and opportunities in applying these concepts to contemporary music genres. The conclusion summarizes the key findings and the importance of emphasizing semiotics in understanding the meaning and expression of romantic classical songs and the potential to enrich musical interpretation more broadly. This article invites readers to reflect on how semiotics can enrich the experience of romantic classical music and to understand the emotionality in romantic classical music works.

Keywords: *Interpretation Semiotics; Expression; Giacomo Puccini*

INTRODUCTION

Classical music is a genre that has long been recognized as a form of music capable of conveying deep emotions through harmony and melody. The beauty or aesthetics of classical music lies in the composer's ability to depict complex and profound emotional nuances. However, understanding how meaning can actually be conveyed through these melodies requires a more structured approach. Classical music is regarded as a genre with a myriad of techniques. Classical music is seen as art form rich in composition and interpretation techniques. In this era, music is not only entertainment, but also a means of conveying meaning through symbolism and allegory. Thus, classical music acts as an aesthetic medium that seeks to provide an emotional and intellectual experience for its listeners (Taruskin 2005).

One of the beautiful forms of classical works is an aria or solo song composed by Giacomo Puccini entitled "O mio babbina caro." Giacomo Puccini was a very famous Italian opera composer, one of whose works was O mio babbina caro, composed in 1918 during the late Romantic era (Howard 2014). The piece O mio babbina caro has a melody that captivates listeners. In addition, this piece has a simple structure, namely A-B-A (Alibrandi 2015).

Taking a closer look at the work *O mio babbina caro*, this piece tells the story of a girl named Lauretta who begs her father for permission to marry the man she loves, Rinnucio. *O mio babbina caro* is performed in the opera *Gianni Schicchi* by Giacomo Puccini (Gorzelay-Mostak 2016). This work was originally born from a comedy opera full of intrigue and deception, but it presents a contrast through its deep emotional nuances. The dramatic intrigue is wrapped in an aria with a beautiful lyrical melody, hypnotizing listeners and drawing them into its musical expression. *O mio babbina caro* is performed during the *Lirico repeso*, which is a process of rest in the midst of conflict and comedy (Halliwell 2020).

The use of beautiful melodies in this work is able to mask the underlying sense of comedic intrigue. This confirms that music, particularly through the power of melody, has an expressive power that transcends words. In this context, the lyrics become secondary, while the melody emerges as the primary medium that touches the hearts of listeners (Sugiharto 2013). Musical interpretation should be applied to musical elements; that is what makes it different from language (Theodor 1993). Understanding music is different from understanding verbal language, because music has internal symbols that must be interpreted through aesthetic experience. Among the elements of music, melody is often seen as the most communicative element, because it is able to directly touch the emotions of the listener. However, expression and dynamic play also play an important role in enriching musical meaning, while harmony and tempo are supporting elements that strengthen the overall structure of the work.

This study discusses songs that blend classical and romantic styles by Giacomo Puccini. Semiotics, as the study of signs and symbols, provides a strong framework for analyzing meaning in the context of music. Concepts from semiotics such as icons, indices, and symbols can be applied to romantic classical music to reveal layers of meaning that may be hidden behind beautiful melodies and harmonies. Semiotics is applied by looking deeper into the work *O mio babbino caro*, specifically at the icons found in the song, such as the melody, expression, and dynamic play. The index will be directed at the relationship between signs and the context of the song's theme and mood, which will ultimately lead to an interpretation of the work. Therefore, this study aims to explain and detail how semiotic interpretation can open new horizons in understanding emotional expression in these works. Research such as this is necessary to support the understanding of how meaning is created and transmitted through the language of music, with a particular focus on the genre of romantic classical music, which plays an important role in the history of music.

METHOD

The method used in this study combines a semiotic analysis approach with case studies to reveal the meaning in the tone and emotional expression of romantic music. Stokes (2006:76) stating that semiotics literally means the science of signs. In this study, using a literature review, the researcher will conduct a literature review to explore in greater depth the concepts of musical semiotics, musical symbolism, and various theories related to emotional expression in romantic classical music. In addition, the literature discusses the distinctive musical symbolism in the context of classical music works, detailing how composers use symbols to convey meaning and emotional expression.

Understanding in literature may involve exploring theories related to emotional expression in romantic classical music. Meiliawati (2023:76) expressing that expression is the communication of something from one person to another. Studies of musicology and famous composers can help identify the perspectives and strategies that will be used to achieve emotional expression through the medium of music. In addition, this literature review discusses the development of music over time and how semiotics influences the interpretation and understanding of musical works.

In addition, the literature includes various specialized studies related to classical music works that will be the focus of the research and can open up previous interpretive perspectives that provide a more in-depth theoretical basis for the semiotic analysis that will be carried out on these works.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Romantic Era

Romantic songs, or songs of love, are a type of music that tends to express or convey feelings of love, longing, and warmth. According to Taher (2009:3) the term romantic in music is used to classify music that emerged in the 19th century. Some of the characteristics of romantic songs are:

- a. Strong emotional expression
- b. Beautiful and captivating melodies
- c. Sentimental lyrics
- d. Supporting instruments
- e. Influenced by the classical genre

Romantic songs are a powerful means of conveying the emotional aspects of human life. The lyrics and beauty of these songs have made them famous in various musical contexts. Romantic era music (1820–1900) was characterized by greater emotional expression and structural freedom compared to the Classical era. Its distinctive features include the use of long, expressive melodies, more complex harmonies, and extreme dynamics that create a dramatic effect. In addition, the development of orchestral techniques was also significant: the number of instruments increased, the sound colors became more varied, and woodwind and brass instruments were given many solo roles. This expanded the expressive spectrum, allowing the music to convey sentimental, heroic, and even tragic moods (Djahwasi & Saidon, 2021).

Another distinctive feature is the emergence of program music, which are instrumental works that depict specific stories, ideas, or landscapes. This marks the close relationship between music and literature, visual arts, and philosophy in the 19th century. Composers also explored remote modulation, tempo freedom through rubato, and the use of leitmotifs in opera (e.g., Wagner) to signify specific characters or ideas. These characteristics collectively make Romantic music rich in subjective, personal, and imaginative nuances, differing from the formal balance of the Classical era (Dahlhaus, 1989; Bonds, 2014).

2. Simbol Musik

Lantowa et al (2020:3) stating that semiotics is the study of signs, where meaning arises when there is a relationship between the signifier and the signified. In the context of music, signs or symbols represent musical elements such as staves, notation, keys, tempo markings, dynamics, and expression. These symbols serve to convey information to musicians about how a piece or composition should be played.

One of the basic symbols is the staff, which consists of five lines as a container for writing notation. Notation itself acts as a musical symbol that guides musicians in reading notes. In addition, a scale is an arrangement of notes of varying pitches with specific intervals, ending on the octave note (Sujana, 1990:49). Other important symbols are musical keys such as G, F, and C, which indicate the position of notes on the staff or space.

In addition, there are also tempo markings that indicate the speed of the song's rhythm. Nurokhim (2020:31) explains that tempo can be measured with a metronome or keyboard. Some tempo symbols, such as *ritardando* (*rit.*), instruct musicians to gradually slow down the tempo. Similarly, dynamic markings serve to indicate the loudness or softness of the sound in music. Dynamics are a means for composers to convey the feelings contained in a composition, whether cheerful, sad, flat, or even aggressive (Nurokhim, 2020:38).

Another element is expression marks, which help composers describe certain characters or moods in their works so that listeners can grasp the emotional intent being conveyed. Similarly, ligatures or legato are connecting lines between two or more notes of the same pitch, indicating that these notes should be played as a single musical phrase.

Thus, musical symbols can be understood as a notation language that allows composers and musicians to convey instructions and expressions in musical works. Over time, more and more additional symbols have been created to communicate various nuances of interpretation. To analyze musical symbols as a whole, a complete block notation score from the beginning to the end of the song is required, as it reflects all the signs that form the musical meaning of a work.

3. Cultural History

Kleden (2004:364) states that historical refers to cultural values as something that is formed and created over time, and looks at the objective conditions that give it its form or other forms. Cultural history refers to the understanding and interpretation of cultural aspects in a historical context.

This involves analyzing the meaning of cultural values, norms, and expressions that have developed over time. By understanding cultural history, it is possible to analyze in greater depth the evolution of ideas and actions that shape a group's worldview. Thus, a cultural-historical approach can provide deeper insight into the complex interaction between history and culture in the form of human civilization.

The song “O Mio Babbino Caro” is a work by Giacomo Puccini that was first performed in 1918 at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Several aspects that need to be considered in order to understand the historical and cultural context are as follows:

a. Classical Romantic Verismo Period

Giacomo Puccini was a composer from the Romantic Verismo period in opera history. This musical style tends to explore human emotions in a more realistic way. The Classical period, spanning from 1730 to 1820, was characterized by clear musical structure, balanced expression, and symmetrical orchestration. Composers such as Mozart and Haydn, Giacomo Puccini created works that advanced the sonata-allegro, rondo, and minuet.

As time went on, around 1820, the Romantic Period emerged, emphasizing personal expression and deep emotions. Composers such as Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms illustrated this change through the use of more complex harmonies, dramatic contrasts, and exploration on a larger scale. Both Classical and Romantic periods made substantial contributions to Western musical heritage with their distinct characteristics and approaches.

b. Originating from Italy

O Mio Babbino Caro was composed by Giacomo Puccini, a composer from Italy. Its musical elements reflect the heritage of Italian romantic classical music. The beautiful melodies and emphasis on vocal ability in this work reflect Italy's rich vocal tradition.

c. Social Change

In the early 20th century, Italy underwent significant social and political changes. This opera, despite being set in the 14th century, can be considered part of a cultural narrative that celebrates the beauty of Italy and the continuity of its classical music tradition.

Considering this historical and cultural context, “O Mio Babbino Caro” can be regarded as a work of art that reflects the spirit and desires of Italian society during that period by combining the beauty of classical and romantic music.

4. Symbolic Analysis of the Work “O Mio Babbino Caro”

In this case, the researcher will attempt to analyze the musical symbols in the classical song “O Mio Babbino Caro” composed by Giacomo Puccini. Giacomo Puccini was an Italian composer known for his operas. Some of Giacomo Puccini's operas are La Boheme, Tosca, Madama Butterfly, and O mio Babbino Caro. His musical works are often considered the best operas of Italian opera art in the 1st century and early 20th century. Puccini is considered one of the most important opera composers in the history of Italian classical music. The work is analyzed using a semiotic approach that opens the door to an in-depth analysis of the emotional expression contained in the composition.

Through a semiotic understanding, musical elements become signs that can be deciphered to explore the meaning and reveal the richness of emotion conveyed by the song. Musical interpretations can vary between individuals, and semiotics provides a framework for analyzing how music communicates and can influence its listeners. In addition, through the complete song score, researchers will be able to analyze and understand the musical symbols used. Below, I will present the musical score for the song “O Mio Babino Caro”.

O mio babbino caro
Gianni Schicchi (1918) G. Puccini

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system shows the beginning of the piece with a voice line and piano accompaniment. The piano part starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic and includes a *poco rit.* marking. The second system begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 120 and a piano (*p*) dynamic with a *dolce* marking. The lyrics "O mio babbino caro" are written under the voice line in the second system.

Figure 1. Sheet music for O Mio Babbino Caro 1

The soft and romantic melody has become an iconic sound that communicates longing and love. In the context of semiotic analysis, this melody is considered a vocal symbol that reflects deep feelings. Each phrase in the harmony conveys a different intensity of emotion and forms a narrative framework that takes the listener on an emotional journey.

In addition, the beat or rhythm and tempo changes in the “O Mio Babino Caro” section serve as indices that signal changes in emotional dynamics. The changing rhythm of the song supports changes in the song's narrative and creates a tension that stirs the listener's feelings. The dynamics in this part of the score convey the meaning of the song, transporting the listener to an emotionally expressive atmosphere.

A song is considered successfully performed when the musician is able to play it and carry the audience away into the story. Many musicians are skilled at playing music, but not many are able to convey the meaning of the song. Symbols in music are not just decorations, but have meaning and significance. In the song “O Mio Babino Caro” there are many symbols that musicians must understand.

In the song “O Mio Babino Caro,” there is a clear 6/8 symbol, which means that musicians must play according to that tempo. There is also a *pp* symbol, which means that musicians must play pianissimo, or very softly. This approach not only details musical symbols in isolation but also helps connect them in a context that forms a deeper narrative.

The image displays three systems of sheet music for the aria "O Mio Babbino Caro" by Giacomo Puccini. Each system consists of a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment (Pno.).

- System 1 (Measures 19-21):** The vocal line begins with the lyrics "ma per but-tar - mi in Ar - no! Mi strag - go e mi tor -". The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the bass clef and chords in the treble clef.
- System 2 (Measures 22-24):** The vocal line continues with "men - to! O Di - - o, vor - rei mo -". The piano accompaniment includes a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking and a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking in the bass clef.
- System 3 (Measures 25-27):** The vocal line concludes with "rie! Bab - bo, pie - tà pie -". The piano accompaniment features a *rfz* (ritardando) marking in the bass clef.

Figure 2. Sheet music for O Mio Babbino Caro 3

The notation of the bars is the main symbol in singing the song, and the harmony chosen by Giacomo Puccini also brings a strong musical atmosphere. Changes in chords can create deep nuances that can describe a variety of feelings. Then the varying dynamics add a very expressive dimension where alternating strength and softness convey a message of very complex emotions.

Figure 3. Sheet music for O Mio Babbino Caro 4

In this section, there is a fermata sign that requires musicians to extend the duration. By applying semiotics, we can provide a deeper interpretation of each sign and symbol in this composition. The shift from one meaning to another in a single musical element becomes a semiotic journey that gives a holistic impression of emotional expression.

Thus, the song “O Mio Babbino Caro” is proof of how semiotics has become a powerful tool in analyzing and understanding emotional expression in the context of classical music. Through semiotic interpretation, this song becomes a complex emotional journey that involves the listener in a more profound experience.

CONCLUSION

Through a semiotic perspective, music can be considered a universal language because it uses signs to convey meaning. Musical notation, melody, lyrics, and harmony are semiotic tools that form the message in a musical work of art. Musical notation is the main symbol in singing a song, and the harmony chosen by Giacomo Puccini also brings a strong musical atmosphere. Changes in chords can create deep nuances that can describe a variety of feelings. Then, varying dynamics add a very expressive dimension where alternating strength and softness convey a message of very complex emotions. Music is not just a series of sounds but can also be a means of acknowledging human expression. In Giacomo Puccini's work entitled “O Mio Babbino,” the meaning is successfully conveyed through symbols, with the musicians working together to form a beautiful musical unity. Considering its history and culture, “O Mio Babbino Caro” can be considered a work of art that reflects the spirit and desires of Italian society during that period by combining the beauty of classical and romantic music.

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