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## SYNCRETIC STRATEGIES OF REPRESENTATION OF TRANSCENDENCE IN PUCCINI'S "NESSUN DORMA"

### SEMIOTICS OF VOCAL MUSIC: ISSUES AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

The intrinsic challenges associated with the semiotic analysis of syncretic texts constructed around sung words inherently embody a question defined by its complexity. In this case, the term “complexity” carries a polysemy that pertains not only to its connotation of difficulty but also to Edgar Morin’s definition of the term. Morin views complexity as a system marked by the “extreme quantity of interactions and interferences among a very large number of units” (Morin 2001, 51–52). Traditional musicology, in its analytical practice, seeks to encompass its subjects through multiple approaches, involving the study of form, rhythm, harmony, and historic context, among many other perspectives. Equally broad is the spectrum of approaches employed in the analysis of verbal discourse. Here, Greimassian semiotics and its study of meaning construction in texts are complemented by the studies on polyphony proposed by Bakhtin and systematized and expanded upon by Authier-Revuz, as much as the discourse analysis by Maingueneau and Ducrot, among other approaches.

Within the diverse strands of musical semiotics, a synthesis between linguistics and musicology is outlined in the twentieth century by Nicolas Ruwet, a thread that continues in the works of Nattiez. Furthermore, it is essential to highlight the Greimassian line of inquiry pursued by scholars such as Eero Tarasti and Márta Grábocz. In alignment with Peircean semiotics, the studies

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on topics and tropes by Raymond Monelle, Robert Hatten, and Mieczysław Tomaszewski also warrant attention.

Concerning the peculiarities of song semiotics, Luiz Tatit's work still stands today, nearly thirty years after the first edition of his book *Song Semiotics: Melody and Lyrics* (Tatit 1994), as a significant advancement in the study of song syncretism. One of the main features of Tatit's analytical model is that it integrates the linguistic concepts of syllable from Ferdinand de Saussure, Louis Hjelmslev, and Claude Zilberberg, applying this synthesis to the analysis of the relations between the musical elements of a song and the categories of content that they express. Despite a schematic division relating the musical elements to categories of expression and the lyrics to categories of content, Tatit's model successfully offers a strongly consistent conceptual and methodological apparatus to approach song analysis, facilitating advanced discussions that view the song not merely as sung poetry or music with lyrics but as a cohesive entity where verbal and musical elements are intricately intertwined, and whose ensemble respond to a Greimassian generative path of meaning, melting together into a complex syncretic text with specificities that surpass the simple addition of its musical and verbal features. Nonetheless, Tatit's theoretical rigor is such that, having focused his analytical practice on a restricted corpus of media-produced Brazilian popular songs spanning approximately a century, the author does not propose the generalization of his theoretical model beyond the limits of that repertoire, leaving aside both classical music and international mediatic songs.

The object to be analyzed in the subsequent sections of this article surpasses the boundaries proposed by Tatit, not only because it pertains to a work within the realm of classical music but also due to its complex multinational origins. In the aria "Nessun Dorma" of his opera *Turandot*, the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini intentionally employed rich thematic material of Chinese origin.

Puccini could have chosen other paths as well. After all, the narrative upon which the opera is based originates from a tale from the medieval Persian empire, in which the Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi penned, in the waning years of the twelfth century, the profoundly philosophical story from which *Turandot* historically derives. In Nizami's original, the loves of the protagonist, Prince Bahram Gur, can be interpreted as a metaphor for spiritual quest. The story told by the fourth of the prince's seven wives, about a Russian princess of extraordinary beauty and intelligence who would only marry the one capable of solving her riddles (Nizami 2015, 158–74), is ultimately the

source that inspired the tale of Turandot. Consequently, the character that Puccini endeavored to portray using Chinese musical material actually originates in Persian medieval literature—and as a Russian princess. Nonetheless, there is no evidence to suggest that Puccini might be directly acquainted with Nizami's work through any of its then-few translations into Western languages.

Nearly half a millennium after Nizami's *Haft Paykar* emerged—literally translated as *The Seven Portraits* but more commonly rendered as *The Seven Princesses*—the story found its way to the Western world through the efforts of Pétis de la Croix, a contemporary of Antoine Galland, the celebrated translator of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Presenting his work *Les mille et un jours* (*The One Thousand and One Days*) as a collection of tales translated from Persian, Turkish, and Arabic, it was Pétis de la Croix (1826, 226–393) who set his version of the narrative in China, titling that chapter “Histoire du prince Calaf et de la princesse de la Chine” (The Story of Prince Calaf and the Princess of China). He originally named the princess “Tourandocte”, which in Persian means “daughter of Turan” (a region in Central Asia inhabited by various Turkic tribes). A woman of Uighur origin—geographically part of Chinese Xinjiang but ethnolinguistically belonging to the Turkic group—might perfectly well be qualified, through Persian eyes, simultaneously as a “princess of China” and a “daughter of Turan”.

While the riddles posed by Nizami's princess to her suitors were essentially aimed at ensuring a man of the due stature for the royal household and metaphorically represented a process of spiritual ascent, the character crafted by de la Croix in the early 18th century was motivated solely by vanity. However, it was from the 1762 work of the Italian author Carlo Gozzi that Puccini inherited the conception of the Chinese princess as driven by resentment towards men (Gozzi 2020, 84).

Another aspect worthy of exploration—this time through the lens of Eero Tarasti's existential semiotics—revolves around the problematic of transcendence. Tarasti, drawing chiefly from the philosophies of Hegel and Heidegger, defines transcendence as the dialectical interplay between *being* and *non-being* within an individual's relationship with his existential condition—the *Dasein*, defined by the connections between the self and the objects around it (Tarasti 2000, 11). According to Tarasti, transcendence unfolds through two distinct acts.

In the first one, *negation* takes place—a semantic voidance that compels the individual to acknowledge *Nothingness* and the existential emptiness within their existence, rendering it seemingly meaningless. Emerging from

this state of *negation*, the individual, upon confronting *Dasein* anew, reinterprets it from an entirely novel perspective. Many of the former values are desemanticized, demonstrating that their previous sense of meaning was indeed rooted in the realm of *appearance* rather than *being*. However, those elements retaining their value are infused with fresh content, enriched by a novel existential experience. Thus, the second act of transcendence unfolds as the earlier framework of *negation* undergoes inversion, immersing the individual in a realm of *Plenitude* full of meanings that surpass the confines of subjective condition—a process Tarasti terms *affirmation* (30–31).

Thus, a question arises that traditional musicology rarely confronts: taking into account the importance, in the work of Nizami, of a sense of transcendence that sets love and the overcoming of obstacles as an initiatory journey and a metaphor for spiritual ascent, would its successive adaptations—in particular, the libretto by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni used by Puccini—have emptied the text of such a transcendental dimension? And, if not, what strategies in the syncretic text would favor the generation of meaning of transcendence? To address these questions, we will analyze “Nessun Dorma” in the light of the conceptual and analytical framework of musicology, French semiotics, and the existential semiotics of Eero Tarasti.

#### MEANING IN “NESSUN DORMA”: HOMOLOGIES BETWEEN FIGURES OF EXPRESSION AND CATEGORIES OF CONTENT

The first two sentences of the tenor’s part in “Nessun Dorma” (Let No One Sleep) raise three substantial questions. The first pertains to the issue of the relationship between melodic leaps and emotional intensification in the song’s discourse. The second concerns the role of harmony in the process of construction of meaning. The third extends the same inquiry regarding orchestration.

The musical score is for the first two sentences of the tenor's part in "Nessun Dorma". It features a full orchestral accompaniment. The Calaf part (Tenor) has the lyrics: "Nes sundor - mal... Nes sundor - mal... Tu pu-re\_ò prin-ci-pes". The score includes various dynamics such as *pp*, *p*, and *ppp*. There are circled notes in the woodwinds and harp, and red "(D) S" markings in the Trombone and Harp parts. The score is in 4/4 time and starts at measure 52.

Figure 1. First two sentences of the tenor's part in "Nessun Dorma"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All the musical examples in this article were transcribed by the author.

Let us consider the first question. The entire first phrase articulates the words *nessun dorma* on D3, and its subsequent, maintaining the same rhythmic configuration, repeats this with D2. An initial interpretation of the octave leap might align with Luiz Tatit's concept of *intensification of the passionate expression*—a process characterized by the tensive investment of the melodic contour in terms of expanding its range and durations, besides its usual exploration of its higher register (Tatit 1998, 119). In such a regime, Tatit sees the valorization of the pathemic pathways related to the alternation between conjunction and disjunction of the subject with his objects of value (Tatit 1996, 22). The alternation of octaves allows also its homologation with other contrasting categories of the plane of content, such as directing the discourse to an external addressee—like the herald giving a warning to the citizens of the kingdom—or to an internal addressee—thereby assuming the structure of a soliloquy, intrinsic to the aria that comes immediately afterwards.

Another perspective of interest would be to consider the octave leap as a Schenkerian change of register—which, as Felix Salzer emphasizes, would favor the generation of an entire trajectory to bridge the sudden gap in the structure of the piece (Salzer 1952, 12). Such a path, extending Salzer's reasoning to its fullest implications, could even correspond to the entirety of the aria that follows.

Addressing the second question, it's essential to note that despite Puccini's use of the G major key signature, the aria predominantly resolves in D major (see figure 2). Thus, in the initial passage, the pentad that tensions the G major chord—which functions as the subdominant—would correspond to a D major chord augmented with a minor seventh and minor ninth in fourth inversion (see figure 1), constituting an individual dominant of the G major chord. Regarding the harmonic structure and the ensuing nuanced effects of meaning, there are some important considerations to be made.

One of them is the articulation of modalities of being in an opposition similar to *being* vs. *appearing*. The tonal center *is* D, but it *does-not-seem-to-be* so, embodying the verdictive modality of *secrecy*. Likewise, the contrasting chord with G *is* an altered D major, an individual dominant over the I degree—but, due to its inversion and voicing, it *does-not-appear-to-be* so. Let us examine the compatibility of the musical construction with the development of the linguistic component, as proposed by Luiz Tatit (1998, 121). The verbal dimension of the text shows the actor of the enunciation, Calaf, rejoicing that no one will be able to unravel a *secret*—the enigma he proposed to Turandot, which corresponds to discovering his name. “But my mystery is hidden within

me, and no one will unveil my name," the character sings triumphantly (see figure 3)—precisely at the moment when a plagal cadence finally resolves the subdominant chord, G major, to the tonic D major, revealing the main tonality. Thus, it is possible to identify a chain of semi-symbolic relations associating categories of expression—in this case, figures of expression of harmonic nature—with categories of content. In both phrases, the dissonant chord falls on *nessun*, precisely accentuating the semantic element of negation and consequently the fact that “no one” would be capable of unraveling the *secret*.

The harmonic configuration mentioned above deserves a more detailed examination concerning its additional points of incidence. Always in contrast with the subdominant chord (G major), the enharmonic tension chord falls on the bolded points of the lyrics (figures 1 and 3):

Tu pure, o **Principessa**,  
nella tua **fredda** stanza,  
guardi le stelle  
che tremano **d'amore**  
e **di speranza**.

You too, oh, **Princess**,  
in your **cold** chamber,  
gaze at the stars  
that tremble **with love**  
and **hope**.

The image displays a musical score for the first strophe and beginning of the first refrain of "Nessun Dorma" from Puccini's opera Turandot. The score is arranged for a full orchestra and vocal soloists. The vocal parts include Tenor 1 & 2, Bass 1 & 2, and a Chorus. The instrumental parts include Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, Trumpet, Trombone, Violin, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabasso. The score is annotated with a detailed harmonic analysis. A blue box highlights a "Plagal Cadence" consisting of the chords D7b9/Eb and G. A green box highlights a "Subdom. Tonic" consisting of the chords ppp D7b9/Eb and G. The lyrics in Italian are: "Tu pu re, o\_pu\_m, ci, pes, sa, nel la tua fred, da stan, za, guar, di le stel, le chi tre ma no d'a mo, re e di spe ran, za! Ma il mio mis te ro è chi so in". The score includes various dynamic markings such as *pp*, *ppp*, *mf*, and *mfz*, and performance instructions like *pizz.* and *arco*.

Figure 2. First strophe of “Nessun Dorma” and beginning of the first refrain



In the plot of *Turandot*, all the suitors vying for the princess had to undergo a test involving deciphering three riddles. Failure meant execution, while success promised marriage to the princess. The protagonist, Calaf, was the only one capable of solving them. However, upon winning the contest, he sees Turandot pleading with her father to annul their betrothal. In response, Calaf presents the princess with a challenge akin to his own: she must learn his name by dawn. Should she succeed, she would be released from her vow, and his life would be in her hands. Otherwise, they would marry.

A crucial interpretative key for the use of enharmony in this passage becomes apparent when we consider the three questions posed by Turandot in the test for her suitor. The first riddle asks what is born each night and dies every dawn. Calaf answers: *hope*. The second inquires what flickers like fire, *trembling*, red, burning, and sometimes cooling as it vanishes. The protagonist replies: *blood*. Finally, the last conundrum: What, even when frozen, could make him burn, and if accepted him as a servant, would make him a king? He exclaims promptly: *Turandot*. It is noteworthy that the elements on which the enharmonic chord falls essentially correspond to the recapitulation of this journey, from the last to the first stage. Thus, the invocation to the *princess* corresponds to the third question; the chilling *cold* and the stars *trembling with love* constitute elements from the second; and *hope* answers the first of the riddles. Thus, in the syncretic enunciation, a relationship of semi-symbolism is constructed between the incidence of the enharmonic chord in the plane of expression and the isotopic journey at the discursive level, corresponding at the narrative level to values related to *secrecy*. The structural character of this procedure in the syncretic text is confirmed by its recurrence in the stanza following the section in D major:

Ed **il mio** bacio  
scioglierà **il silenzio**  
che **ti fa** mia!

And **my** kiss  
will dissolve **the silence**  
That **makes you** mine!

The image displays a full orchestral score for the second strophe of the opera "Nessun Dorma". The score is arranged in a standard format with multiple staves for different instruments and voices. The instruments listed on the left include Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Trumpet, Cymbal, Harp, and Chorus. The vocal parts are labeled as "Voces" (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and "Voces" (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass). The lyrics are written in Italian: "Ed il mio bacio scioglierà il silenzio che ti fa mia". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics (p, mp, pp, ppp), articulation (pizz., arco), and phrasing slurs. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is written in a clear, professional font, with the lyrics in a larger font size for readability.

Figure 3. Second strophe of “Nessun Dorma”

However, the protagonist now announces that his **kiss** will dissolve the **silence** (also in the sense of the absence of a response to the riddle) from which she had become a “hostage” (“which **makes you** mine”). This marks the beginning of Turandot’s journey of submission to Calaf. Alone with Turandot, he kisses her. Following the **kiss**, two secrets are unveiled, shattering the **silence**: Turandot admits that, despite her contempt for him as for all the other suitors, she also felt, from the very first moment, an attraction to him that frightened her. Calaf, in turn, discloses his name to her, placing his fate in her hands, and trusting that the love he felt for her was reciprocated. Now in a position of power and capable of condemning her suitor to death, Turandot finds herself consumed by love for him, irrevocably becoming “**his**”. Presented in the direct order, this passage, rather than revisiting, anticipates the three episodes of the narrative that precede the final pragmatic sanction.

Having examined the second question, let us move on to the third and final one, regarding the role of orchestration. The tensile accentuation in the opening passage with the two *nessun dorma* phrases, emphasized by the enharmonic pentad, occurs in tandem with the use of woodwinds—precisely and exclusively within those chords (see figure 1). In *Tu pure, o principessa, nella tua fredda stanza*, instead of the woodwinds, we observe the harmonic accents marked by the harp and celesta. In *guardi le stelle*, only the woodwinds are heard; in *tremono d’amore*, woodwinds and harp/celesta; and in *di speranza*, only the harp/celesta (figure 1). This demonstrates that the orchestration amplifies the intensity and specificity of the moments where the enharmonic pentad occurs. Yet, the function of the timbral expression figure is not limited solely to a tensile accent. The princess, in the solitude and *interiority* of her room, is associated with the use of the harp/celesta, whereas the stars trembling with love and the *exteriority* they represent are marked by the woodwinds. Thus, a homology is established through a new semi-symbolic relationship, intertwining the discursive categories of *interiority* vs. *exteriority* with the timbral elements articulated by Puccini’s orchestration.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS:  
TRANSCENDENCE IN “NESSUN DORMA”

After the sequence characterized by the alternation between subdominant chords and their altered dominants, a certain polarization centers around the G major chord. As previously mentioned, this creates a nuanced effect, making

the G chord sound like it might be the aria's tonic rather than its subdominant. These harmonic tools are ultimately articulated with the modalities of being, producing the effect of meaning of the G chord *seeming-but-not-being* the tonal center, while a *being-but-not-seeming* modal configuration presents D major as the tonic in the veridical category of *secrecy*. The category of *secret*, however, constitutes a pivotal element in the framework of the discussed text: three secrets must be unraveled by Turandot's suitors to earn the right to her hand—a task for which they pay with their lives upon failure—and Turandot must discover her mysterious suitor's name within a few hours—a secret Liu will sacrifice her life to protect. The plagal cadence, resolving to the D major chord as the tonic, symbolizes an *anagnorisis*, thereby semantically linked to the revelation of a secret (refer to figures 2 and 4). This structure permeates the verbal dimension of the text: at this point, the speaker boasts to be the sole possessor of the key to a mystery that the entire city will spend the night attempting to unravel.

In his delusions of omnipotence, the protagonist fails to see that his arrogance will cost him Liu and all she embodies: unconditional love, which Turandot was incapable of; selfless devotion, foreign to the many suitors who viewed Turandot merely as a means to ascend to royalty; and the bridge to his origins, reconstructed by Liu when she rescued Calaf's father and made possible his reunion with his son. Liu's suicide, therefore, emerges as a catastrophe that symbolizes the obliteration of all the prince valued before being overtaken by his passion for Turandot. Thus, the maid's sacrifice marks the stage of the transcendence process corresponding to the *negation*, leading to what can be defined as the *collapse of the old order* (see figure 6). This process of negation is underscored by the dominant chord (A major) conspicuously occurring on the *no, no* in the phrase *il nome mio nessun saprà, no, no* (*my name, no one will never know, no, no*), as illustrated in figure 4:

The image displays a musical score for the refrain of "Nessun Dorma" from Puccini's opera. The score includes staves for Flute, Oboe I & II, English Horn, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet, Bassoon I & II, Contrabass, Horn I & II, Horn III & IV, Trumpet, Trombone, and Chorus. The lyrics are: "Ma il mio mis - te - ro è chiu - so in me il no - me mio nes - sun sa - pra! No, no, sul - la tua boc - ca lo di -".

Harmonic analysis annotations are provided throughout the score:

- ANAGNORISIS** (in a red box) is placed above the first staff, corresponding to the key signature change to D major.
- NEGATION** (in a red box) is placed above the second staff, corresponding to the key signature change to A major.
- Chord symbols are written in various colors: **D** (blue), **G** (green), **Bm** (blue), **E<sup>m</sup>** (green), **D<sup>F#</sup>** (blue), **A** (red), **E<sup>7</sup>(b9)/B** (red), **A/C#** (red), **F#m/A** (blue), **A<sup>7</sup>/G** (blue), and **D<sup>F#</sup>** (blue).
- Functional labels are placed below the score: **Tonic** (green) under the first staff, **S** (green) and **Tp** (green) under the second staff, **Sr** (green) under the third staff, and **D** (blue) under the fourth staff.
- Dynamic markings include *p*, *mf*, and *mp*.

Figure 4. Part B (refrain) of “Nessun Dorma”

However, Tarasti asserts that the completeness of transcendence is only achieved once its two stages are fulfilled. The following *affirmation* stage is indeed distinctly detectable in the triumphant conclusion of the aria, when Calaf announces boldly: *All'alba vincerò! Vincerò! Vincerò!* (At dawn, I will win! I will win! I will win!).

The image displays a page of a musical score for the opera *Turandot*, specifically the final verses of the aria "Nessun Dorma". The score is arranged in a standard format with multiple staves for various instruments and a vocal line. The instruments listed include Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Fagotto, Trombe, Tromboni, Tuba, Timpani, Tamburi, and Contrabbasso. The vocal part is for the character Calaf. The score is annotated with musical analysis, including chord progressions (T, Sr, D, Sr, A, G) and dynamic markings (p, pp, f, ff). The lyrics are written below the vocal line: "Dì: lo più, o no! ... bel Timon ta le stel ... bel Al-Jal ha vin-es-no!". The score is divided into sections labeled [R] and [B].

Figure 5. Final verses of “Nessun Dorma”

The triumphant prince emerges not merely as a solver of riddles but also as one who has moved beyond the structural confines of *secrecy* itself. Thus, he confidently shares his most important secret with Turandot, thereby demonstrating that he has fulfilled his greatest aspirations: to tame the princess and win her seemingly unattainable heart. She too experiences transcendence. First, she undergoes *negation*, when she feels she has lost her honor and freedom by succumbing to her desire for Calaf. Later, she passes through *affirmation*: previously incapable of demonstrating any signs of attachment or empathy, she finally humanizes herself and transcends her vanity and cruelty. She then finally materializes as a woman capable of two acts previously inconceivable to her. The first is *to forgive*—as in the final scene, when she mirrors Liu and saves Calaf's life by refusing to reveal the prince's true name. The second is *to love*—first physically, as revealed by her heaving bosom under Calaf's kiss; then emotionally, as she confesses her affection to him.

Thus, simultaneously with the final *Vincerò*, the concluding plagal cadence is ultimately accomplished, culminating in its association with the veridical modality of *truth* by means of the chord that finally *is-and-appears-to-be* the D major tonic. With it, the *ascent of a new order* is achieved, homologated in the syncretic text to the triad of the Platonic ideal: the *Good* (love), the *Beauty* (Turandot), and the *Truth*. The latter is conveyed not only through the harmonic resolution, but also the unveiling of all the secrets and riddles that are revealed, as well as the final restoration of Calaf to *kingship*—an essential attribute that had been usurped from his father, Timur.

Therefore, it becomes clear that "Nessun dorma" transcends being a simple aria: it embodies the synthesis and quintessence of the opera to which it belongs. This opera, akin to Nizami's original tale, can be also read as a representation of transcendence—a challenging theme that Puccini managed to translate and express with vigor and dramatic intensity in a different time, culture, and semiotics. Thus, the composer seals his extraordinary artistic journey with *Turandot*, his final work—and, to many of his admirers, also his masterpiece.

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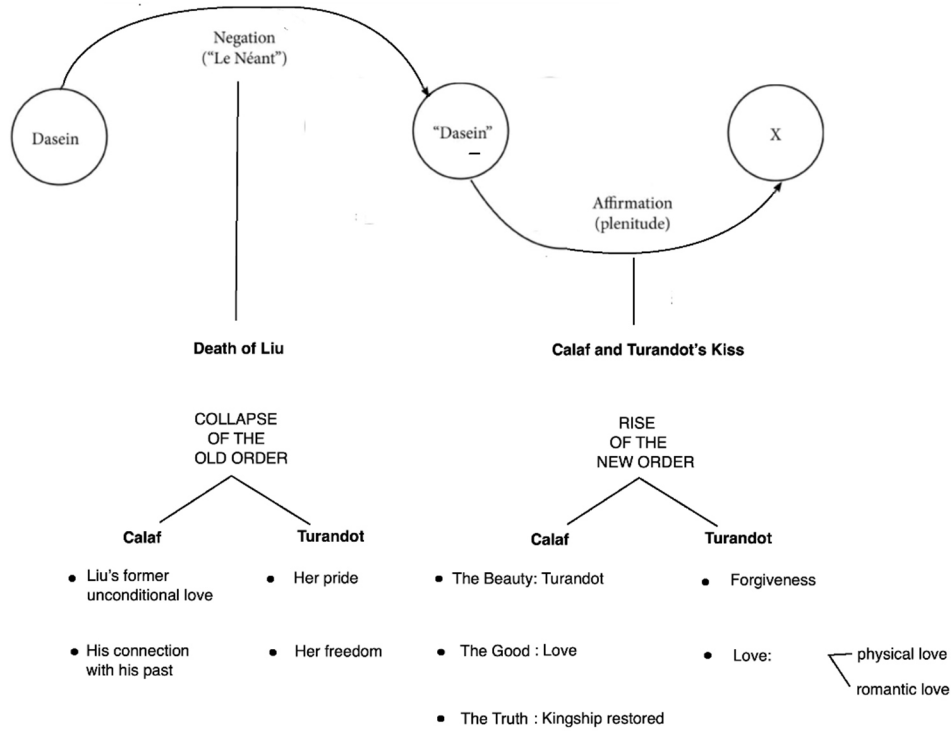


Figure 6. Eero Tarasti's (2016, 111) model of transcendence through negation and affirmation adapted to the analysis of the characters Calaf and Turandot

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IN PUCCINI'S "NESSUN DORMA"

Summary

The present article aims to discuss the construction of the effect of meaning of *transcendence* in Puccini's "Nessun Dorma". Methodologically, the research draws upon Eero Tarasti's existential semiotics, Luiz Tatit's song semiotics, the Greimassian analytical framework and traditional musicological resources. By analyzing the aria's melodic, harmonic, and orchestral dimensions, the study reveals how some musical elements establish homologies with categories of content related to *secrecy* and *transcendence*. The findings detail how the syncretic text is structured by the intertwining of verbal and musical elements and highlight the aria's role in symbolizing the unfolding of secrets and the protagonist's journey, ultimately conducting to a synthesis materialized by the Platonic triad of the *Good*, the *Beauty*, and the *Truth*. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of syncretic texts, demonstrating "Nessun Dorma" as a quintessential example of thematic and musical transcendence.

**Keywords:** semiotics; musicology; Puccini; Nessun Dorma; song analysis