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From Sacred to Supernatural: The Tonal Semantics of the Trombone and the Representation of the Otherworldly in Classical Western Music

Do Sagrado ao Sobrenatural: A Semântica Tonal do Trombone e a Representação do Outro Mundo na Música Erudita Ocidental

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Abstract: This study examines the diachronic evolution of the trombone's tonal role in Classical Western music, tracing its shifting cultural associations from sacred liturgical contexts to supernatural operatic and symphonic signification. Addressing the instrument's ontological paradox– its functioning both as Vox Dei and later as a signifier of metaphysical authority– the research adopts a qualitative historical-musicological approach grounded in musical semiotics. Through the analytical examination of selected works by Monteverdi, Mozart, and Beethoven, the study interprets the trombone's function using parameters of register, orchestral isolation, harmonic context, and rhythmic profile. Rather than assuming a linear expressive transformation, the findings suggest that the instrument's sacred associations were recontextualized within theatrical and later symphonic environments. In these settings, the trombone emerges as a marked sonic presence capable of mediating between dramatic narrative and metaphysical imagination. Ultimately, the study argues that the trombone's evolving tonal identity reflects a continuity of cultural meaning shaped by changing theological and aesthetic frameworks, rather than a simple shift from sacred to infernal symbolism.

Keywords: trombone. musical semiotics. ombra. markedness. tonal meaning.

Resumo: Este estudo examina a evolução diacrônica do papel tonal do trombone na música erudita ocidental, traçando suas associações culturais mutáveis desde contextos litúrgicos sagrados até significações operísticas e sinfônicas de caráter sobrenatural. Abordando o paradoxo ontológico do instrumento, que funcionou tanto como Vox Dei quanto, posteriormente, como significante de autoridade metafísica, a pesquisa adota uma abordagem qualitativa, histórico-musicológica, fundamentada na semiótica musical. Por meio da análise de obras selecionadas de Monteverdi, Mozart e Beethoven, o estudo interpreta a função do trombone com base nos parâmetros de registro, isolamento orquestral, contexto harmônico e perfil rítmico. Em vez de assumir uma transformação expressiva linear, os resultados sugerem que as associações sagradas do instrumento foram recontextualizadas em ambientes teatrais e, posteriormente, sinfônicos. Nesses contextos, o trombone emerge como uma presença sonora marcada capaz de mediar entre a narrativa dramática e a imaginação metafísica. Em última análise, argumenta-se que a evolução da identidade tonal do trombone reflete uma continuidade de significado cultural moldada por mudanças nos quadros teológicos e estéticos, em vez de uma simples transição do sagrado para o infernal.

Palavras-chave: trombone. semiótica musical. ombra. marcação. significado tonal.

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1. Introduction

Few instruments in the history of Western classical music appear to have undergone a semiotic transformation comparable to the trombone, historically reinterpreted from the "Voice of God" (Vox Dei) to the "Harbinger of Damnation" (Infernal). The perception of musical instruments is rarely static; rather, it is continuously shaped by shifting cultural paradigms, aesthetic demands, and theological contexts. In this study, "tonal semantics" is defined as the process by which musical parameters such as timbre, register, harmony, and orchestration generate culturally and historically situated meanings within a musical discourse. Initially acquiring a sacred status in the church music of the Renaissance and early Baroque eras due to its acoustic resemblance to the human voice, the trombone's symbolic meaning underwent a fundamental reinterpretation with the rise of the operatic stage. While the 17th-century theorist Michael Praetorius stated that the instrument's dignity and vocal blending capabilities made it the most appropriate medium to praise God and the angels (Praetorius, 1619), by the 19th century, Hector Berlioz described the same instrument as possessing an "epic, menacing, and terrifying" timbre, utilizing it to tear open the gates of hell during dramatic climaxes (Berlioz, 1844).

This historical and aesthetic paradox suggests that the trombone operates not merely as a functional orchestral component, but rather as a powerful "semantic vehicle" carrying profound theological and cultural implications. Rather than representing a linear transformation from sacred to infernal meaning, the trombone's evolving cultural role can be understood as a process of semiotic recontextualization. Across different historical settings, the instrument did not lose its sacred associations but was re-coded within changing aesthetic and theological frameworks. This shift reflects not an intrinsic change in sound, but a reinterpretation of timbral meaning within new dramaturgical environments. The capacity of a single instrument

to evoke both divine grace and infernal terror highlights a complex duality that warrants deeper semiotic investigation.

A significant portion of trombone scholarship has historically tended to focus on its physical and organological development (Baines, 1993) or its performance practices within specific eras (Herbert, 2006; Guion, 2010). However, studies that holistically address the instrument's semiotic continuity from the "Sacred" to the "Supernatural" domains—particularly in relation to the concept of "The Sublime" and the Equale tradition (Guion, 2010)—have remained somewhat limited. Although researchers such as Noske (1977) and McClelland (2012) have deeply analyzed the trombone's semantic role in 18th-century opera and the works of Mozart, interpreting this role systematically as a theological evolution within the framework of "Topic Theory" remains comparatively under-theorized.

Therefore, the central thesis of this article posits that the trombone, historically recontextualized from its sacred Vox Humana (human voice) role in the church, adapted to the dramatic demands of opera, thereby becoming a potent semiotic tool that is understood to symbolize the underworld, divine judgment, and supernatural forces. It is argued that this evolution significantly influenced not only the instrument's musical function but also the cultural codes available to the listener's cognitive reception, though individual interpretations naturally varied according to their specific historical and cultural conditioning. Consequently, this study aims to demonstrate that the instrument functions as a "liminal sound"—the acoustic boundary between two worlds—by tracing its tonal shift from the *Vox Dei* identity to the *Ombra* (Shadow/Underworld) style, and ultimately to the "Apocalyptic Sublime" of the Romantic era.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study can be characterized as qualitative research situated within the discipline of historical musicology, employing musical

semiotics as an analytical framework to decipher the evolving tonal identity of the trombone. The research primarily focuses not on the technical development of the instrument, but rather on the evolution of the cultural and theological codes embedded in its timbre. Instead, it considers how listening conventions influence the cultural interpretation of instrumental timbre.

2.1. Data Collection

The data set for this research is derived from a comprehensive review of primary and secondary sources:

• Primary Sources: To comprehend the perception of the instrument in the 17th century, theoretical texts such as Michael Praetorius's Syntagma Musicum (1619) have been examined, alongside Hector Berlioz's Treatise on Instrumentation (1844) for 19th-century orchestration perspectives (Praetorius, 1619; Berlioz, 1844).

• Score Analysis: To trace the dramatic application of the trombone, the musical scores and structural properties of Monteverdi's L'Orfeo, Mozart's Don Giovanni and Requiem, and Beethoven's Drei Equale have been analyzed (Mozart, 1968; Beethoven, 1888). These specific works were selected not merely as canonical representative examples of their respective eras, but because they act as critical semiotic nodes where the trombone's cultural meaning underwent clear, paradigm-shifting transformations. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* established the instrument's initial theatrical association with the underworld; Mozart's works crystallized this association into the formalized *ombra* style and eschatological judgment; and Beethoven's *Drei Equale* effectively bridged this dramatic terror with the philosophical concept of the sublime. Therefore, they provide a cohesive analytical trajectory for tracing the instrument's diachronic evolution.

• Modern Literature: Historical surveys and stylistic analyses by authorities such as Trevor Herbert, David Guion, Clive McClelland,

and Frits Noske are considered to constitute the contemporary literature base of this study (Noske, 1977; Herbert, 2006; Guion, 2010; McClelland, 2012).

2.1.1. Analytical Procedure

To move beyond descriptive interpretation, this study adopts a focused analytical approach in examining selected musical works. The semiotic function of the trombone is evaluated through four recurring musical parameters:

- Register (low vs. middle placement of trombone lines)
- Orchestral Isolation (solo vs. integrated deployment)
- Harmonic Context (static vs. modulatory environments)
- Rhythmic Profile (homophonic vs. active textures)

Through these parameters, the trombone's presence is treated not merely as instrumentation, but as a structurally marked musical event within dramatic and liturgical contexts. While this analytical framework relies on observable musical parameters (register, harmony, isolation, rhythm), it must be acknowledged that musical semiotics inherently involves interpretive subjectivity. The mapping of physical sound onto metaphysical concepts is a qualitative exercise, and therefore, the findings should be understood as interpretive rather than universally deterministic. To mitigate this subjectivity, the present study cross-references score analysis with contemporaneous theoretical treatises (e.g., Praetorius, Berlioz) and established musicological frameworks (Topic Theory), ensuring that the semiotic readings remain anchored in the historical and cultural conventions of their time.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Semiotic Foundation

In interpreting the data, this study adopts a musical semiotic approach, treating music not merely as an acoustic phenomenon but as a cultural communication system. According to Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), the founder of general linguistics, a sign is a two-part structure: the Signifier (sound-image) and the Signified

(concept). While this relationship is widely considered arbitrary in spoken language, in the Western classical music tradition it becomes "conventionalized" over time through historical usage and cultural memory.

In his foundational work *Playing with Signs* (1991), musicologist V. Kofi Agawu divides musical semiosis (the meaning-making process) into two categories: (1) Introversive Semiosis, encompassing the internal structural relationships of music (e.g., tonic-dominant), and (2) Extroversive Semiosis, referring to music's references to the extramusical world, emotions, or social concepts (Agawu, 1991). The role of the trombone aligns perfectly with Agawu's definition of "Extroversive Semiosis". The physical sound of the trombone (the Signifier) can be argued to operate as a powerful semiotic agent triggering perceptions of "divine judgment", "death", or "hell" (the Signified) in the mind of an 18th-century listener. Within the scope of this study, the concept of "tonal semantics" is defined as the process by which specific timbral and acoustic properties of an instrument acquire stable extramusical meanings through historical and contextual usage. Building upon Agawu's (1991) category of extroversive semiosis and Monelle's (2000) theory of indexicality, tonal semantics here moves beyond traditional harmonic or pitch-based definitions of tonality. Instead, it examines how the sheer sound-image (Signifier) of the trombone functions as a culturally codified topic. It is the specific mechanism through which the instrument's physical resonance is translated into theological and supernatural signification, mediating between its acoustic reality and the listener's cognitive reception.

2.3. Analytical Tools: Topic Theory, Markedness, and Ombra

To systematically analyze this semantic shift, the study utilizes specific analytical tools developed by Raymond Monelle and Robert Hatten, along with stylistic definitions by Clive McClelland:

• Raymond Monelle and Indexicality: Elevating the "Topic Theory" established by Leonard Ratner (1980) to a level of cultural depth,

Monelle argues that musical topics are not merely compositional devices, but symbols pointing to social realities in the external world. According to Monelle (2000), a musical sign bears the weight of the cultural past it references. The moment the trombone timbre is heard it "indexes" its Vox Dei heritage and liturgical origins in Renaissance Venetian churches. Monelle's framework elucidates the mechanism by which the trombone's tone culturally crystallized into a "Supernatural Topic". In the present study, topic theory is not treated merely as a descriptive stylistic category, but as an analytical tool. The trombone's appearance is marked when introduced through registral depth, textural isolation, or harmonic suspension, thereby signaling a departure from the normative orchestral discourse. This broader semiotic understanding aligns with later developments in topic theory as outlined in Mirka (2014).

• Robert Hatten (Markedness and Troping): Hatten's theory clarifies why the entrance of the trombone into a piece is perceived as a "marked" (extraordinary) event that tears through the "unmarked" (ordinary) sonic texture of the orchestra. Furthermore, Hatten's (2004) concept of "Musical Troping" —the simultaneous use of two contrasting musical topics to yield a third, emergent meaning—is employed to explain paradoxes such as Mozart's Tuba Mirum. Within this framework, the trombone's entrance is read as a marked event that disrupts the prevailing musical texture and introduces a contrasting expressive domain.

• The Ombra (Shadow) Style: The stylistic pillar of the tonal analysis is the Ombra style, detailed by Clive McClelland. Characterized by slow tempi, minor modes, unexpected modulations, and, prominently, trombone use, this 18th-century operatic style serves as a musical vocabulary for depicting ghosts, oracles, and the underworld (McClelland, 2012). In analytical terms, the Ombra topic becomes legible through specific musical behaviors, including slow harmonic rhythm, low-register emphasis, and the strategic deployment of trombones as timbral agents of alterity.

While the trombone is frequently interpreted as a marker of the sacred or the infernal, alternative readings suggest that its semantic function may also be contingent upon historically situated listening practices. In this sense, the instrument's meaning is not fixed but negotiated within specific cultural and aesthetic contexts. This perspective does not negate dominant interpretations; rather, it situates them within a broader and more flexible interpretive framework.

3. The Historical and Semiotic Evolution of the Trombone

This evolution unfolded across multiple historical contexts in which the instrument's function was continuously renegotiated. Rather than replacing earlier meanings, later uses tended to coexist with inherited symbolic associations. The semiotic evolution of the trombone's timbral identity has been examined chronologically and thematically across distinct phases. These phases are believed to document the instrument's ontological transformation from the "Sacred" to the "Supernatural". As Campbell and Greated (1987) note in their acoustic analyses, the trombone's cylindrical bore structure and potent harmonic series endow it with a dual acoustic nature: a warmth akin to the human voice when played piano, and a metallic, piercing power (brassiness) when played forte. This acoustic duality appears to have found a direct semiotic corollary: the warm timbre is generally interpreted as having represented the "Sacred" (Vox Dei), while the brassy power is understood to have signified "Judgment" and "Hell".

To fully comprehend this dramatic shift in the trombone's semantic coding, it is essential to contextualize the instrument's historical usage within the broader framework of musical semiotics and topic theory. As Agawu (1991) and Monelle (2000) articulate, musical topics are conventionalized musical signs that evoke specific cultural or emotional associations for a given audience. The trombone was considered an established topic in the sacred before the 17th century. However, the transformation of its meaning can

be best analyzed through Robert Hatten's concept of markedness (Hatten, 1994). In the context of church music, the trombone was an "unmarked" entity; it was viewed as the standard, expected sonic reflection of the divine choir. Its presence is believed not to have disrupted the liturgical norm but rather to have sustained it (Boyd, 1973).

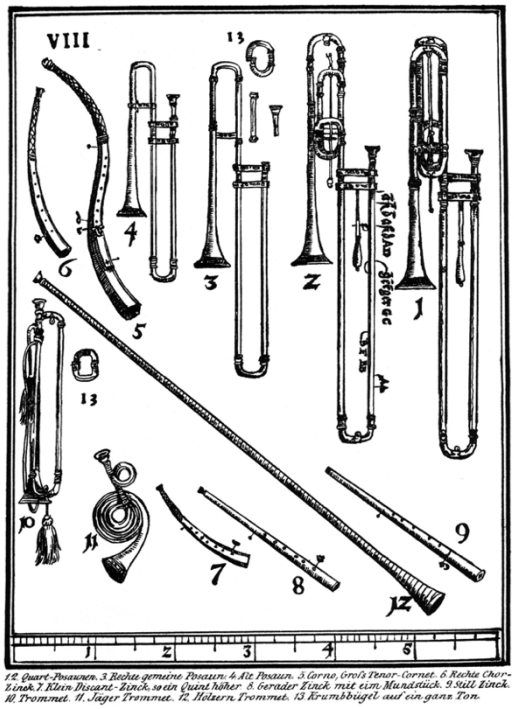
Conversely, when composers began placing the trombone in the secular theatre—an environment where it was historically absent, it is observed to have immediately become a structurally "marked" signifier. Hatten (1994) posits that marked musical events carry a narrower, more specific, and often more intense range of meaning. Stripped of its liturgical predictability, the trombone's dark, resonant timbre was re-contextualized to signify the extraordinary, the supernatural, and the terrifying. This semiotic displacement is what eventually allowed the instrument to become the primary sonic vehicle for the ombra (shadow) topic, which McClelland (2012) defines as a musical convention used to depict ghosts, demons, and the underworld in dramatic works. The semiotic journey of the trombone is, therefore, a prime example of how the physical acoustics of an instrument (Campbell; Greated, 1987) remain constant, while its cultural signification is radically inverted through marked theatrical usage.

3.1. Sacred Origins: "Vox Dei" and "Vox Humana" (Renaissance and Baroque)

During the 16th century, ecclesiastical authorities maintained strict reservations about the use of instrumental music in liturgy, fearing it would obscure the delivery of sacred texts. However, the trombone appears to be an exception to this restriction. The position of the trombone (historically known as the sackbut) in early music history was built upon its acoustic proximity to the human voice. This affinity positioned the instrument as a mediator between vocal sacred expression and instrumental sonority. In his monumental 1619 treatise Syntagma Musicum II, Michael Praetorius explicitly emphasized the sackbut's ability to blend

flawlessly with human voices and imitate vocal timbres (Vox Humana) (Praetorius, 1619). As Anthony Baines points out in his organological analyses, the sackbut's narrower bore size and less flared bell compared to modern counterparts made this mellow, vocal timbre possible (Baines, 1993). The physical appearance of these early instruments is thoroughly documented in Praetorius's contemporary engraving (see Figure 1).

Figure 1- Sackbut (trombone) illustration from Praetorius's "Syntagma Musicum" (1619).



Source: Michael Praetorius, Syntagma Musicum II: Theatrum Instrumentorum, 1620, Plate VIII. Wikimedia Commons (Public domain).

Furthermore, unlike other wind instruments of the era that were restricted to fixed pitches, the sackbut's telescopic slide mechanism allowed performers to adjust intonation microtonally. This structural flexibility was crucial for perfectly matching the pure intervals demanded by Renaissance choral polyphony (Herbert, 2006).

This acoustic characteristic gave rise to the tradition of trombones doubling vocal parts (colla parte) in liturgical choirs; rather than playing an independent melody, the instrument is observed to have supported the choral voices (Alto, Tenor, Bass), thereby enhancing the intelligibility of the divine word (Guion, 2010). In addition to its functional role within the liturgy, the visual presence of the sackbut also reinforced its symbolic association with sacred authority, particularly in ecclesiastical settings where instruments were rarely granted independent identity. This dual presence, both sonic and visual, helped stabilize the instrument's association with sacred space.

The compositional practices of the Venetian School provide the most concrete evidence of this integration. In works such as Giovanni Gabrieli's Symphoniae Sacrae (particularly In Ecclesiis), trombones were utilized not for solistic virtuosity, but as a voluminous reflection of divine majesty within the acoustics of St. Mark's Basilica (Arnold, 1979; Selfridge-Field, 1994). A similar "sacred" tradition persisted in 17th-century German Lutheran church music, and later in Moravian communities in America through the "Trombone Choir". In Moravian communities, the trombone choir was not merely a musical ensemble, but a liturgical organ that regulated the spiritual life of the congregation, announcing deaths and feast days (Moravian Music Foundation, 2015). Consequently, the instrument's initial semiotic coding was far from frightening; it could be interpreted as possessing an evangelizing, solemn, and sacred identity associated with the "Voice of Gabriel" (Vox Gabrieli).

3.2. The Semiotic Rupture: From the Sacred to the Underworld (Monteverdi to Gluck)

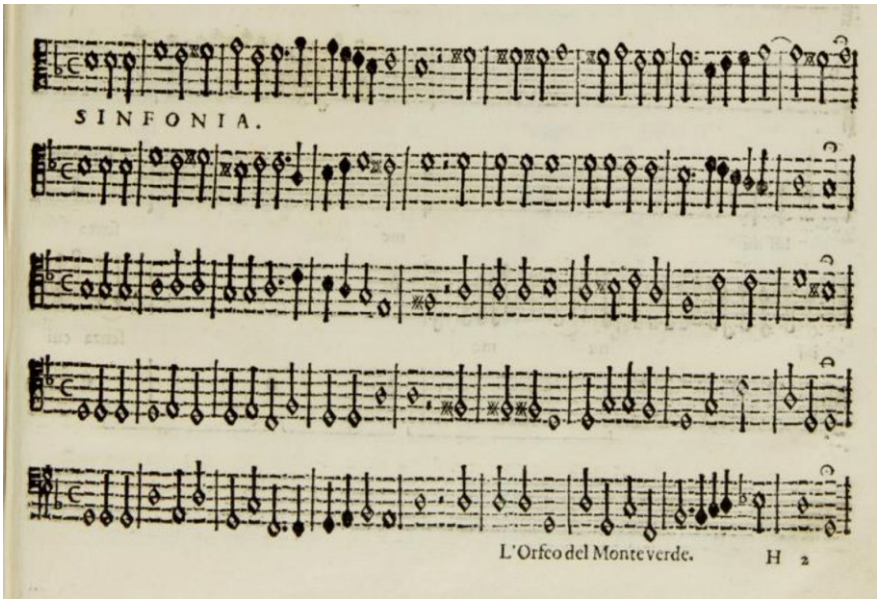
The most critical breaking point in the evolution of the trombone's meaning is thought to have occurred when the instrument was transposed from the church to the theatrical stage, namely, the opera. This transition is observed to have transformed the instrument's identity from the "divine" to the "infernal", arguably rendering it the voice of the underworld.

The definitive catalyst for this semiotic rupture can be traced to Claudio Monteverdi's L'Orfeo (1607). While earlier intermedi occasionally utilized brass for rustic or pastoral effects, Monteverdi is recognized as among the earliest composers to employ the trombone consistently in theatrical contexts associated with the underworld (Herbert, 2006). In Act III, as Orpheus descends into Hades, the pastoral soundscape of strings and recorders abruptly ceases. Monteverdi can be seen replacing it with a solemn, dark, and strictly homophonic ensemble of trombones, cornetts, and a regal (a buzzing reed organ). As detailed in contemporary historical analyses, this orchestration was not merely a matter of dramatic volume, but a calculated semiotic choice to create a stark, binary opposition between the "world of the living" and the "realm of the dead" (Guion, 2010). The dense, lower-register writing for the trombones in the Sinfonia that opens this act physically immerses the listener in the subterranean abyss, permanently linking the instrument's timbre to infernal majesty.

As demonstrated in the excerpt from the Sinfonia (see Figure 2), the trombones move in slow, deliberate, and archaic rhythmic values, mimicking the sacred polyphony of the church but repurposing it to convey the inescapable finality of death. The predominance of low-register writing and homophonic rhythmic texture reinforces the trombone's role as a marked sonic presence distinct from the surrounding pastoral sound world. This specific musical gesture laid the foundational groundwork for the ombra style (McClelland, 2012). Frits Noske (1977) points out that this association became so deeply ingrained in the operatic consciousness that, for the next two centuries, the mere visual presence of trombones in an opera pit immediately signaled to the audience that supernatural or macabre elements were about to unfold on stage. By severing the instrument from its heavenly origins (Vox Dei), Monteverdi initiated its rebirth as the harbinger

of mortality (Vox Mortis), a semantic coding later inherited and expanded upon by Gluck and Mozart.

Figure 2 - Excerpt from the Act III sinfonia of Monteverdi's "L'Orfeo" showing the trombone choir used for the underworld scene.



Source: C. Monteverdi, L'Orfeo (Ricciardo Amadino edition, 1609), Venice. IMSLP (Public domain).

This application appears to have been standardized in the 18th century by Christoph Willibald Gluck. In his operas Orfeo ed Euridice (1762) and Alceste (1767), Gluck is noted for using trombones exclusively in scenes featuring the dance of the Furies, the judgment of underworld deities, or the pronouncements of an Oracle (McClelland, 2012; Mirka, 2014). Here, contrary to the mellowness of Gabrieli's music, trombones were played with harsh accents and unison rhythms, creating a superhuman, emotionless, and terrifying timbre. As Guion and Herbert point out, the instrument that was the voice of God in the church is widely considered to have become the voice of "supernatural terror" and inevitable fate in the theater.

3.3. The Ombra Style and the Semiotic Zenith (Mozart and the Classical Era)

In the second half of the 18th century, this specific utilization of the trombone crystallized within a musical topic known as the "Ombra" (Shadow) style. According to Clive McClelland, the Ombra style is characterized by slow tempi, minor modes, syncopations, chromatic passing notes, and most definitely, the use of trombones; it is a musical vocabulary depicting ghosts and the apocalypse (McClelland, 2012). The exclusion of the trombone from standard Classical-era symphonies (by Haydn and early Mozart) demonstrates that it was treated as segregated from the "secular/everyday" orchestral texture, thereby securing a "marked" status in Robert Hatten's theoretical terms (Guion, 2010; Hatten, 1994). When the trombone was introduced within this marked context, it likely cued many listeners to a departure from the mundane world into a transcendent realm. However, it is essential to acknowledge that listening practices are historically contingent. Not every 18th-century listener may have interpreted this timbral shift strictly through a supernatural or metaphysical lens. Alternative semiotic readings might suggest that for certain audiences, or within varying regional traditions, the trombone primarily functioned as a structural marker of solemnity, gravity, or ceremonial weight, rather than an explicit invocation of the afterlife. Nevertheless, within the specific dramaturgical framework of the *ombra* style, its dominant semiotic trajectory clearly pointed toward the extraordinary.

Mozart is generally regarded as having brought this effect to its zenith in the famous "Commendatore Scene" at the finale of the opera Don Giovanni (1787). According to Noske's analysis, the trombones heard when the murdered Commendatore's statue arrives for dinner do not merely add sonic weight; they are "signifiers" representing the undeniable reality of "divine judgment"

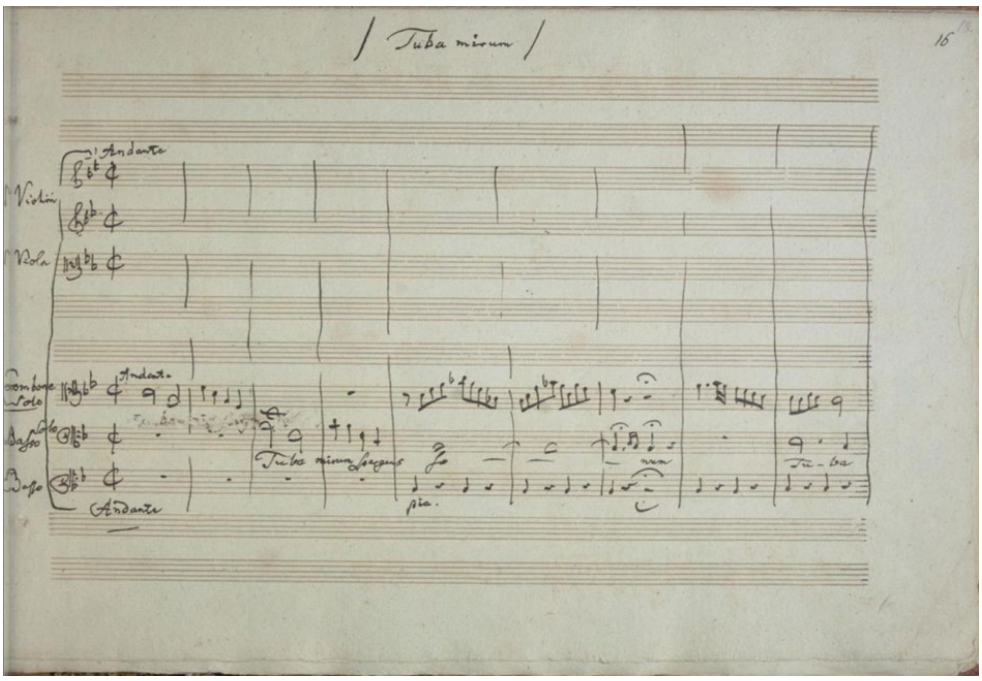
against Don Giovanni's earthly denial (Noske, 1977; Rushton, 2002). This dramatic deployment of timbral gesture reflects the type of expressive rhetoric discussed in Allanbrook (1983). The trombones enter in isolation from the broader orchestral texture, creating a timbral rupture that signals supernatural intrusion. Conversely, in Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute, 1791), Mozart employs the trombone in a different context, as an element of mystery and ritual. The trombone chords in the overture and Sarastro's scenes recall the instrument's ancient sacred/mystical roots, associating it with Masonic symbolism and the "Music of the Spheres" rather than with fear (Guion, 1996).

These contrasting applications within his theatrical repertoire are thought to reveal Mozart's profound understanding of the trombone's dual semiotic heritage. While Don Giovanni can be seen as exploiting the instrument's terrifying ombra characteristics, Die Zauberflöte appears to recalibrate its timbre toward a serene, celestial authority. Consequently, the trombone is observed functioning not as a monolithic signifier of doom but rather as a multifaceted symbol of the metaphysical realm. Yet, despite their philosophical depth, these operatic works ultimately remained tethered to the secular stage. A definitive return to the liturgical domain is generally considered necessary to fully unlock the instrument's ultimate theological weight.

However, the instrument's eschatological role is most distinctly observed in the Tuba Mirum section of Mozart's Requiem. Here, Mozart combines the terrifying timbre of the apocalyptic trumpet with a lyrical bass solo, arguably creating a new, hybrid layer of meaning a process Robert Hatten (2004) terms "Musical Troping" (see Figure 3). The lyrical middle-register placement of the trombone contrasts with the expected brilliance of apocalyptic imagery, reframing the harmonic context toward transcendence rather than terror. By doing so, he reinforced the instrument's

apocalyptic associations with a profound dimension of faith and divine mercy (Allanbrook, 1983; Keefe, 2012).

Figure 3 - Trombone solo excerpt from the autograph manuscript of Mozart's Requiem (Tuba Mirum).



Source: W. A. Mozart, Autograph Manuscript, Austrian National Library, IMSLP (Public domain).

3.4. Theological Context and "The Sublime" (The Romantic Rupture)

Approaching the Romantic era, the trombone's meaning was not restricted to fear but appears to have become intrinsically linked to the Kantian concept of "The Sublime". Ludwig van Beethoven's Drei Equale (1812) is often regarded as representing the purest distillation of this relationship. Rooted in the Equale tradition (pieces for equal-voiced instruments) and utilized in funeral rites, these works substantiate the trombone's connection to "dignified death" and "eternity" (Guion, 2010). By adopting this majestic and funereal tone, Beethoven and his successors utilized the trombone as a medium to convey humanity's insignificance before God and the majesty of death—in essence, to forge an experience of The Sublime. In this context, the transition of the trombone from

"Sacred" to "Terrifying" can be viewed not as a contradiction, but rather as a theological continuum.

Feeding on these theological roots, the trombone assumed an epic and apocalyptic character. In his Treatise on Instrumentation (1844), Hector Berlioz described the trombone as the "true head of the family of wind instruments... it has all the serious and powerful tones of sublime musical poetry" (Berlioz, 1844; Macdonald, 2002). With its inclusion in the symphonic texture in Beethoven's 5th and 9th Symphonies, this otherworldly instrument became an integral part of human struggle (Levy, 2017). This semantic weight reached its peak in Gustav Mahler's symphonies. According to Theodor Adorno's (1992) analysis, the use of the trombone in Mahler's chorales is a moment of breakthrough (Durchbruch). For instance, as in the "Resurrection" chorale of the 2nd Symphony, the trombones herald a resurrection beyond earthly suffering (Floros, 1993). The sustained harmonic support provided by the trombones contributes to their function as structural anchors rather than dramatic disruptors. Franz Liszt's works, such as Hosannah, are believed to have similarly ensured the continuity of this sacred-majestic lineage into the late 19th century (Liszt, 1983; Lindberg, 1991).

3.5. The Voice on the Threshold: Liminality and the Cultural Archetype

When the accumulated findings are interpreted on a broader philosophical plane, the trombone can be understood to operate not merely as an instrument bearing specific musical meanings, but rather as an acoustic metaphor for Western culture's relationship with the otherworld. The trombone can be positioned as a liminal (threshold) sound between the physical world and the metaphysical realm (life/death, human/divine). This state of "standing on the threshold" is thought to form the foundation of the instrument's semiotic power. Because it was encoded as an unearthly (sacred) timbre in the Venetian School, Monteverdi appears to have been able to invert this established expectation

and reposition it as the voice of hell, the other realm. Thus, the trombone can be interpreted not as the sound of daily life, but rather as the sound of fate, transformation, and that thin line where the veil between two worlds is lifted.

4. Conclusion

This study has sought to elucidate the diachronic evolution of the timbral roles the trombone has assumed in the history of Classical Western music, tracing its path from the liturgical atmosphere of the Venetian School to the uncanny depths of the operatic stage, and onward to the epic narratives of the Romantic symphony. The historical and semiotic analyses conducted throughout this research suggest that the trombone transcends being a mere acoustic sound source; arguably functioning as a living cultural signifier laden with layers of theological, dramatic, and philosophical meaning accumulated over centuries.

As demonstrated through Monteverdi's low-register underworld scoring, Mozart's marked orchestral ruptures in Don Giovanni, and Beethoven's structurally grounded Equale tradition, the trombone's evolving role reflects a continuity of metaphysical association rather than a simple shift in expressive function. This evolutionary process crystallized at three critical historical junctures, suggesting that the instrument's identity is not static but contextually reconstructed:

1. Ontological Foundation: The Construction of the Sacred (Vox Humana): During the Renaissance and Early Baroque periods, the instrument's acoustic proximity to the human voice is thought to have rendered it an extension of the "sacred" in church music and the earthly echo of Vox Dei (The Voice of God).
2. Semiotic Rupture: Descent into the Underworld (Infernal/Ombra): Initiated by Monteverdi's L'Orfeo and culminating in Mozart's Don Giovanni, this sacred identity appears to have been consciously inverted through aesthetic

intervention. The instrument is seen to have transformed from the voice of God into the undeniable sonic symbol of "divine judgment" and the "underworld".

3. Philosophical Synthesis: In the Romantic era (Beethoven, Berlioz, Mahler), these two opposing poles (the sacred and the infernal) are believed to have melted down under the concept of "The Sublime". The trombone is considered to have evolved into a philosophical voice representing not merely heaven or hell, but cosmic order, the apocalypse, and existential judgment.

In the final analysis, the position of the trombone in Western music functions as a "liminal" existence. It is generally interpreted as the sound of the boundary heard in the moments when the veil is lifted between the physical world and the metaphysical realm, between the living and the dead, between the stage and the afterlife. The history of the trombone reflects changing cultural responses to death, transcendence, and metaphysical authority as expressed through instrumental timbre. This study, therefore, frames the trombone not merely as an instrument of orchestration but as a recurring structural mediator between musical discourse and metaphysical imagination.

Based on the scope and findings of this study, the following perspectives are proposed for future research in the fields of timbral semantics and musicology:

- Modern Media and Film Scoring: Exploring how the trombone's historical legacy of "power" and "threat" shapes auditory codes in contemporary pop culture (e.g., The Imperial March in Star Wars) would be valuable for demonstrating the continuity of musical meaning.
- Psycho-Acoustic Perception Studies: Experimental research could determine how much of the "fear" or "awe" evoked by the trombone's timbre is a result of cultural conditioning versus pure acoustic response (neurological reactions to high harmonics or "brassiness").

- Wagner and Modernist Deconstructions: Investigating how Richard Wagner's use of the trombone in the Ring cycle transformed this theological coding into a secular mythology, and how 20th and 21st-century avant-garde composers consciously deconstructed or ironically employed this established archetype, is essential for understanding the transformation of semiotic codes in modern art.

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