

# Dissected Medium: How Lloyd Webber Split A Literary Chronotope into a Quintuple<sup>1</sup>

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This essay investigates the chronotope and media employed in Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986). As a complex, cohesive, and multi-layered art piece, it explores various themes through the unity of various artistic means that cross the borders of media and the initial literary chronotope built by Gaston Leroux in his novel *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra* (1910). The combination of different spatial dimensions on a single physical stage and recurring motifs gives viewers an immersive experience in the imaginary world of opera, where several styles of music, transforming set design, and costumes are employed to break the conventional medial borders and bend the chronotope as a unity of place and time. Eventually, five different medial layers (and art-dependent, style-backed, and historic chronotopes) get united in one place and at the same time into a coherent fabric of a new art piece.

Keywords: chronotope, media, *The Phantom of the Opera*, musical, theatre

## Introduction

Building upon modernist tendencies, postmodernism witnessed the rapid development of communication technologies that have significantly transformed the media landscape. The rise of digital media has disrupted traditional modes of communication and opened new opportunities for collaboration and creative solutions. The concepts of chronotope, media transformation, intermediality, and medial borders remain useful frameworks for understanding the changes in the media landscape and its impact on society. In this essay, I attempt to highlight how these concepts construct a lens for understanding the changes that have been brought by new forms of media synthesis in a specific contemporary artwork.

One of the brightest examples of challenging conventional borders and creating a new synthesis is *The Phantom of the Opera*: a novel, a musical, and a film. Each medium involved in this thread of linked artefacts offers different opportunities and toolkits. By transforming the story into various forms of media, medial modalities, *The Phantom of the Opera* displays how shifting from one creative mode to another not only changes the aesthetic characteristics of the literary story but also affects its meanings and brings new dimensions to the plot and its constituent elements.

In this regard, a medium is seen by modernity and post-modernity as a communicative tool (Elleström 2014: 2). It has a hierarchical system of medial modalities that comprises material aspects (i.e., the interface of the medium), sensorial elements of media perception, spatiotemporal constituents, and semiotic modes (Elleström 2010: 17-21). The multimodality of the medium makes it intricately linked to time, space, and their perception. The change in the medium's modality, i.e., its form of expression, tool of creation, or final product, establishes the media transformation, the crossing of a certain conventional border.

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Intermediality, both a product and a state of such crossing, a concept ‘in-between’ becomes a unity of ‘specific relations among dissimilar media products and general relations among different media types’ (Elleström 2017). In case the change is built at the intersection of time (*chronos*) and space (*topos*) in the narrative, there appears a chronotope, a concept introduced in Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings (Bakhtin 1981). When a story produced and documented by one medium gets adapted across other media, each adaptation creates a new temporal and spatial framework, its own chronotope supplementing the intermedial fabric. I argue that this process is a bending of the chronotope, as new adaptations make the initial chronotope multi-dimensional, creating an artistic multiverse of chronotopes for the same initial plot or fable.

As every medium has its unique story-telling functionality, each next adaptation adds new, supporting elements to the narrative, slightly (or sometimes significantly) bending it (as an intertextual text in a broad sense) as well. By embracing this process, writers (and other artists) make their narratives more dynamic, allowing for potential adaptation across various modes and forms of media while still maintaining the initial narratorial coherence. The conscious playing with (traditionally literary) chronotope for entertainment can be attributed to the postmodern society’s request for increased awareness of space, time, and history (Smethurst 2000: 36), as they become critical elements of self-awareness and self-reflexion of beholders, as the creative artefacts often bear double meanings and covert layers.

The original story of the love triangle between Phantom, Christine, and Raoul was set by Gaston Leroux, a French journalist, in 1910, in a novel entitled *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra*. Later, it was adapted into a silent film (1925, dir. Rupert Julian). This was followed by several other adaptations, including Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical that premiered in 1986. The musical version of *The Phantom of the Opera*, with its score and stage production, in turn, inspired another film adaptation (2004, dir. Joel Schumacher) and had an impact on contemporary theatre culture due to its success among the audience. The musical facilitated an entire circumventing industry around it, including merchandise and tourist attractions centred on the story. The theatrical staging also involved the setting of a specific new chronotope fit for the musical’s purposes, as well as the interplay of different media on a single stage. This adaptation experiment, the translation from a literary medium to a theatrical medium of modernity, created a box within a box, a ‘Russian doll’ of medial layers. Eventually, the approach to adaptation eradicated the initial boundaries between time, space, and media, producing a new synthetic staged piece.

Lloyd Webber’s choices of media-combination resulted in the most successful complex medial form for reaching a wider audience and expanding the story in the time of postmodernist demand (Steinby 2013a: 2). I do not argue that the literary artefact was a wrong choice of medium for the story, yet the multi-medial form employed by the composer opens up the world of the characters in a more publicly attractive (and ‘digestible’) way. Eventually, this choice builds a cultural fabric through more signifying forms and messages that overshadow the less signifying ones (Steinby 2013a: 3).

### **Lloyd Webber vs. Classical Chronotope of Bakhtin**

The musical *The Phantom of the Opera* follows Leroux’s novel and presents a compelling story of love, obsession, and tragedy. As a transition from ‘inherently temporal’ modernism-related topics of restlessness, striving, and Faustian soul into the postmodernist staged arts, it can be seen as a proper shift from time to space and, consequently, accentuation of specific special-temporal relations (Smethurst 2000: 36). Set in the fictional Paris Opéra House in the late nineteenth century, the musical tells the story of a talented but disfigured composer, the

Phantom, who becomes obsessed with a young soprano named Christine. As he manipulates her career and tries to win her heart, their relationship takes on dark twists and turns, ultimately leading to a dramatic opposition (and conflict) between Phantom and Christine's childhood friend (and prospective fiancé) Raoul.

In chronotope-related terms, the modernist element of the story is focused on the emphasis of 'individual angst', 'deterministic and materialist accounts of history', and 'aspiration of modern utopian thinkers' (Smethurst 2000: 40). In this case, the postmodernist part is represented by the Phantom, who embodies discreditation and can be associated with 'totalitarian regimes and prescriptive and elitist attitudes to art' (Smethurst 2000: 40). Consequently, the musical's chronotope becomes the junction, the cross-roads of the utopian and what Michel Foucault called 'heterotopia' (Smethurst 2000: 42). This opens the floor to the artwork's interpretation from the position of the 'institutionalised space', i.e., the theatre, the Phantom's prison-like basement, 'a space of the body', and 'epistemological place' (Smethurst 2000: 42).

It should be noted, though, that the traditional literary means of conveying these chronotopic elements through textual narration are replaced in the musical theatre by songs and actual spatial movement on stage. At the same time, the musical's space and time, unlike the novelistic fabric, definitely present an axiological side in addition to temporal and spatial dimensions: the chronotope possesses a specific value attached to it, as the perception of what is going on stage does not depend purely on the spectator's mind, the audience is shown specific things to digest as a group although they may evaluate individually what they perceive (Steinby 2013b: 108) and reflect on that later, after the final curtain falls.

While the *locus*, *topos* of the audience remains the same for several dozen years – they sit in Her Majesty's Theatre in the heart of the West End in London, the chronotope is fluid due to the axiological elements, brought forward by theatre as a complex medium. Each of the thirty-two songs, each action happens on the very same stage of the theatre, but due to a rapid change of decorations and moving prompts, the chronotope gets constantly bent (and challenged). One moment, viewers can see the front of the fictional theatre in Paris, the Paris Opéra House, both in ruins and in its prosperity; then, by a simple movement of a curtain, they are brought to its backstage.

The spectators do not move but are constantly given a feeling of movement, as if they are participants in a classic Rabelaisian or Chaucerian chronotope. The fake feeling of a classic road trip is supported through the other mechanised and time-specific spatial divisions that swiftly transform the *topos* into one, two, or more rooms, evidently blurring the classic chronotope and bending it (or rather, dissecting it into parallel 'roads'). The parallelisation is also achieved visually, by the movement on the stage: in addition to horizontal movement from *avant-scene* to backstage, between the rooms, from the theatre to the cemetery, the stage gets split vertically – the actors, for instance, move to the basement or onto the roof. The scene with the masquerade and the huge staircase, or Raoul jumping down into the water weave into one fabric both vertical and horizontal dimensions on the fictional stage, whereas the movement of the chandelier – at the beginning of the musical and during the Phantom's rage – connects the fictional stage with the real one, which expands the chronotope onto the viewers as well, incorporating them and the actual theatre's building into the world of a fictional art piece.

While the *locus* remains the same, the chronotope created gets extremely fluid, borderless, merging various stories into a single plot. *De facto*, though, it remains unchanged: if distracted from the storytelling by a fellow viewer or torn out in self-reflexion or by personal memories, associations, etc., the beholder will eventually remind themselves that it is still the stage within a theatre that became a borderless media of its own nature and right.

Another key element, both borderless and bordered, is the polyphony of the actual media, the music score. From the haunting melodies of *Angel of Music* and *Music of the Night* to the powerful duet of *All I Ask of You*, each song adds depth and emotion to the characters' journeys. At the same time, the use of recurring motifs (such as Christine's theme music or the Phantom's signature organ melody) throughout the score weaves together different parts of the story, creatively erasing the borders built between the layers of the artefact.

While the initial musical term 'polyphony' was transferred by Bakhtin to literary studies to speak of the chronotope and multi-modality of voices, the complexity of literary structures, here, in the musical, it should be reversed from a literary work back into the actual music piece. The polyphony of structure and score of *The Phantom of the Opera* helps to oppose the stories of key characters, draw the borders between the real world and the Phantom's imaginary world of the theatre, and contrast feelings and places. Besides, the polyphony also links the musical with the literary source and the literary traditions of German romanticists, who believed in the unity of musical works and literary works as being able to apply the same principles and traditions (Steinby 2013c: 37, 43).

In Bakhtin's terms, the stage should be seen as the 'road', an 'intersection of axes and fusion of indicators' uniting different elements, whilst the creator has already bent them to plunge his spectators into the imaginary world (Smethurst 2000: 45; Bakhtin 1981: 84). Every song and act brings new meanings, oppositions, they become very dialogised in terms of 'inherently social anti-monologic' modifications of already written, whilst the fictional stage and premises on the real stage as a social space represent a 'heterogeneous discursive everyday', which altogether forms a 'heteroglossic transactional' combination of various media – visual, auditory, and sensory – which form Bakhtin's 'market place' for the spectator (Smethurst 2000: 45; Bakhtin 1981: 84).

The 'freedom' of the stage actions is also open to new elements, which supports Bakhtinian dialogism and polyphony of the artwork, thus allowing the characters to 'acknowledge to each other the same position of an autonomous subject that they themselves occupy' (Steinby 2013c: 41). The same 'mutual acknowledgement' happens between the audience, readers, and performers, as they all participate in the same action happening in the same *locus* – they exchange emotions through applause, pauses, bows, as well as transitional elements of the musical's narration (e.g., chandelier), which unifies the fictional stage with the real stage.

### Quintuple of Chronotopic Layers

As the media (and their borders) in the musical are inherently linked to chronotope, they also are not fixed: their transitional nature supplements each other, as they evolve from one another. The fluidity between media allows for a dynamic and engaging experience for the audience: music enhances the emotional impact of dramatised scenes. At the same time, dances add a visual element that complements the music. Similarly, incorporation of the elements of classic theatre (e.g., musicalised dialogues or monologues) provides additional context to the story told.

The interplay between different medial forms makes Lloyd Webber's artefact distinctive and appealing: media empowered by him convey complex emotions and ideas in ways that traditional literary storytelling could not. Overall, in this regard, I counted five such interconnected medial layers and chronotopes.

***The material theatre:*** The *first layer* of media faced by the audience is the actual theatre: they all come to a specific building in London, with its specific decorations, spatial arrangement, history, and audio systems. It is the media manifested in the material form of a particular

architectural construction. It serves as a temporary capsule holding all other layers within itself. It is the first, larger, all-encompassing Russian doll.

**The musical performance:** The *second level* is the musical staged within the walls of this very building – Lloyd Webber’s *The Phantom of the Opera*. It has its musical acts, arranged into two parts with a short break. The musical itself is a multi-medial form, as it combines music, operatic singing, dancing, ballet (orchestrics), staged actions, prompts and decorations, and various spatial forms and elements. It is the layer of the intermedial fabric: it is linked inseparably to the literary source, a novel by Leroux, and several film adaptations that inspired the composer or were inspired by him. It is the layer that serves as a crossing-point, a junction for all other chronotopes, symbols, and messages.

**The fictional Paris:** The *third layer* is the fictional opera house and other locations in Paris: the cemetery, the auction house, the theatre’s premises that employ various architectural forms, as well as buildings, sculptures, massive decorative elements, and moving theatre boxes from which Raoul and Phantom watch the performances. The chandelier, for instance, is one of these moving elements that traverses from this layer to the first layer and then backwards. It is at this level that most actions happen, including the performances, rehearsals by ballet dancers, and the training of Christine by the Phantom. Here, the audience perceives the key songs by characters sung in a normal manner and witnesses the most vivid, noticeable bending of chronotope through the vertical and horizontal movement of various people with specific goals. At this level, the use of transgressing objects and ‘attention-grabbing elements’ is one of the tools to keep the viewers’ attention and interest (Karali 2020). It is also the layer of the narration closest to the initial literary text: Lloyd Webber visualises the textual actions and gives his characters music instead of dialogue or the narrator’s comments.

**The fictional opera:** The *fourth level* is also literature-based, although it is the layer of the fictional staged works in the Paris Opéra House. It is a deeper stage, as if the theatre’s subconsciousness that shares its darkest secrets. This chronotope covers the performances of *Hannibal* and *Il Muto* with failures arranged by the Phantom and the artistic triumphs of Christine. This level is charged with sarcasm; it is grotesque: key characters sing in an operatic manner and wear ridiculous, pompous dresses. In addition to staging and performance of fictional plays, it introduces the Phantom’s undervalued *Don Juan Triumphant*. Even though Lloyd Webber bases it on Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1788), he makes it too dark and too contemporary in contrast to the regular grotesque old-fashioned operas of the theatre of the nineteenth century. Later, the Phantom’s composition would facilitate separate fictional writings as well as composed melodies under the same name, enhancing the musical and its intermedial impact. Overall, it is a mockery of a grand operatic world soaked with extravagant habits: it serves as a plot-binding layer for the fictional theatre and the anti-climactic concept for spectators, who perceive it as an outdated box within another staged media (Schroeder 2002: 37).

**Symbolic/metamedial layer:** The *fifth layer* is rather symbolic and allusive. It includes various symbols that are scattered throughout the musical, such as the mask worn by the Phantom, the musical box with the monkey figurine, or the rose given to Christine. These symbols represent deeper meanings and themes, such as identity, love, obsession, and power. They tightly link the fictional world with the real audience and can be seen as transgressing objects as well (Karali 2020), building sporadic connection points for the various parallel roads the chronotopes take. Consequently, the use of symbolism enhances the complexity of the already multi-layered fabric by crossing the borders between the boxes of media and keeping the attention of the audience.

At the same time, the actual preparation and composing of the Phantom's masterpiece (played at the fourth level) happens at the third level, thus turning the fictional operatic piece into a chronotopic and medial link of this plexus of intermediality as well. Moreover, all levels relate to their own histories, arts, artistic epochs, and contexts. They form their own medial fabrics that cross at the same place at the same time due to the author's creative wish, building a chronotope of the in-betweenness, eradicating the borders and limitations of a traditional theatre. This is not a new thing for the theatre as an art and medium, yet, in my opinion, Lloyd Webber reaches the climax of media-transformation through a series of his Russian dolls that are different yet still united into a single souvenir piece.

Although the key unification comes through the music and its polyphony; this medium not only serves to enhance the emotional impact of each scene but also adds another aspect to the story, at the border of the first and second layers. Through song, characters express their deepest desires, fears, and motivations. They address the audience's feelings and emotions. Music also provides an 'affective dimension of meaning', as it 'casts a spell over the audience' who have to adapt to the mood of performers: this breaks the border between the two stages once again (Karali 2020). This 'valence dimension' also establishes a specific communication tool where the themes raised should resonate with each person present in the theatre's building (Karali 2020).

## Conclusion

Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* is a multi-layered artwork that explores various themes through various media. The musical is not only a visual spectacle but also a media-based character-driven story that explores complex relationships between individuals. This creates a fluid chronotope that takes place within a single stage. The use of different spatial dimensions and recurring motifs in both the story and score ties together various elements and gives viewers a full-scale immersion into the fictional world of the Phantom, Christine, and Raoul through polyphony and a specific chronotope.

This musical should be seen as a complex artwork that consists of distinct levels ranging from the physical setting and character dynamics to fictional staged works and symbolic elements. Lloyd Webber's creative vision weaves together five particular media-based layers and chronotopes into a cohesive whole, resulting in a complex yet harmonic piece of art. Supported by the initial literary artefact, each theatricalised level represents its unique history and context while also contributing to the overall narrative structure and linking the musical to additional artistic fragments. The exploration of key themes and articulate use of a range of styles of music, moving set design, and various costumes allow the musical to transcend time and place and, consequently, break the medial borders and build a new chronotope of in-betweenness.

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