

The Pitfalls of Musical Translation

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This paper focuses on the triangular links between a text in a given source language, its “translation” into music and an eventual retranslation into another language. As everybody knows, music is a language per se, with all the characteristics of an articulated language, its own syntax, grammar, even its own dialects and “regionalisms.” The bilateral link between a language and music is rather simple and can be summarized in the following principle: when a composer sets a text to music, it is always a one-way-only “translation”; this text cannot and should not eventually be retranslated into another language, there is no going back because music is the most constricting of all languages. Between two “normal” languages, like English or French for instance, solutions can always be found, even deficient ones if necessary, arrangements that are more or less satisfactory, one can compromise, adapt. It is not desirable to translate a text from Chinese into English and then from English into French but it can be done. However, once music has imposed its rules on a text, it becomes the main source language, with which it is impossible to cheat; everything must be literally respected: the musical words and sentences, the general form, the rhythm, the styles, the melodic, harmonic, tonal aspects... There are no possible arrangements or compromises, music comes first and dictates its rules, there are no choices other than to respect, literally, what the music says and hope that it will work or, if it does not, which is most often the case, abandon. And yet in some cases it is necessary to find a way to retranslate the same text. This is when translators are faced with real, at times unsolvable, problems because they are dealing with two source languages, one of which being Music that prevents any continuation to full triangulation. In this article, I will first analyze a few examples to show some of the main difficulties and then propose the solutions that allowed me to solve these problems in a satisfactory fashion.