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. But, as it is generally only tacitly admitted, and not really understood, among non musicians that music is an articulated language, let us first see why it is so before we approach the core of the matter.

Do You Speak Music?

The text's dependence on the music is quite paradoxical on many levels. Historically music does not come first but only second; every musician knows that vocal music derives from *la parole* as later instrumental music will from vocal music. Music, this universal language, has from the very beginnings of time adopted not only the structures of the *langue* (language) but also the characteristics of all the different national idioms, their general syntax, forms and rules, rhythm, intonation, melodic lines, accentuation and so on. Awareness of this begins only at the beginning of the 20th century, Zoltán Kodály being the first to understand it and inciting his friend Béla Bartók to reform his musical language to make it conform to Hungarian; thereafter all musical languages will be calqued on their own national linguistic structures. It is the beginning of what we call the national schools of music.

Let us look at just one among hundreds of reasons why music is an articulated language. A musical phrase is built exactly like a sentence with more or less lengthy pauses that correspond

to its structure, like a comma, a semi-colon, a colon, a period, a period at the end of a paragraph, and therefore an indent at the next paragraph. The simplest example is this one:

Yet, the sentence/phrase is generally divided in two equal parts:

The latter also, eventually:

Marks of punctuation point to a structural pause or the length of the note that has its exact equivalent in music:

From each of these graphs, here is the second one;

It is possible to translate musically the text's content and form, using many tools, harmony and tonality;

dynamics;

ambitus (i.e. the distance between the highest and the lowest note),

and many others because music is richer than speech. Each mode or tonality has also always had a "meaning"; in the Middle Ages:

"Character" of the Eight Church Modes
according to
Guido of Arezzo (995–1050), Adam of Fulda (1445–1505),

and Juan de Espinosa Medrano (1632–1688)

Name	Mode	D'Arezzo	Fulda	Espinosa
Dorian	I	serious	any feeling	happy, taming the passions
Hypodorian	II	sad	sad	serious and tearful
Phrygian	III	mystic	vehement	inciting anger
Hypophrygian	IV	harmonious	tender	inciting delights, tempering fierceness
Lydian	V	happy	happy	happy
Hypolydian	VI	devout	pious	tearful and pious
Mixolydian	VII	angelical	of youth	uniting pleasure and sadness
Hypomixolydian	VIII	perfect	of knowledge	very happy

or in the baroque era:

"Character" of the Tonalities in France in the Baroque Era

Tonalities	Charpentier	Rameau	Lavignac
C major	Cheerful and warlike	Liveliness, rejoicing	Simple, naïve, free, common
C minor	Gloomy and sad	Tenderness, lamentation	Somber, dramatic, violent
C♯ minor			Brutal, sinister, somber
D♭ major			Full of charm, placid, suave
D minor	Solemn and devout	Sweetness, sadness	Serious, concentrated
D major	Joyous, quarrelsome	Liveliness, rejoicing	Gay, brilliant, alert
E minor	Effeminate	Tenderness	
E major	Quarrelsome, shrill	Tender, gay or grand, magnificent	Brilliant, warm, joyous, sonorous, energetic
E♭ major	Cruel and hard		
E♭ minor	Horrible and hideous		
F major	Raging and quick-tempered	Storms, rages	Pastoral, rustic
F minor	Gloomy and plaintive	Tenderness, lament, dismal	Morose, sorrow, energetic
G♭ major			Soft, calm
G major	Sweetly, joyous	Songs tender and gay	Rustic, gay
G minor	Severe, magnificent	Tenderness, sweetness	Melancholy, suspicious
A♭ major			Soft, caressing, pompous

A*b* minor			Dismal, anguish, very somber
A minor	Tender and plaintive		Simple, naïve, sad, rustic
A major	Joyous and pastoral	Liveliness, rejoicing	Free, sonorous
B*b* major	Magnificent and	Storm, rages	Noble, elegant, gracious joyous
B*b* minor	Gloomy and terrible	Gloomy songs	Funereal or mysterious
B minor	Solitary and melancholy		Savage, somber, energetic
B major	Hard and plaintive		

Yet the composer cannot choose the modes as freely as we would words in a dictionary; for instance, if the text is sad, use the one tonality which better corresponds to this ethos, if it becomes joyous, then modulate into any tonality that expresses the opposite feeling. Once again music has its own rules and besides not everyone agrees on the meaning of each mode or tonality. Still, all of them have always been felt as having their particular character and it is interesting to note that Platon already stressed the ethical value of modes in *The Republic*, which is said to have been written between 384 and 377 A. D. This characteristic is not unique to western culture[1] as the meaning of each Indian *raga* or Arabic *maqām* is also codified[2].

The accentuation can be achieved through diverse means, not only rhythm. This issue is particularly interesting because it provides us with a first translation problem that will be impossible to solve if we want to change the language of the text set to music. Most languages

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[1] However, if we compare all the concepts of modes by the most important theoreticians from the Middle Ages (Gui d'Arezzo, Hermannus Contractus, Jean d'Afflighem otherwise known as Cotton the English, Jacques de Liège, etc.), as did Johannes Wolf in 1893 and Cathy Meyer in "The Eight Gregorian Modes on the Cluny Capitals" (1952), the contradictions are so obvious that it becomes uncertain whether the ethos has any real meaning in the Middle Ages. Without even referring to these well-known examples, it is enough to compare the opinions of two critics, Contractus and Frutolfus, for example, to each other on a particular emotion, and then with those expressed by Guido of Arezzo, Adam of Fulda, and Juan de Espinosa Medrano in the above table. Mode 2 (plagal protus, Hypodorian) is "mournful" for Frutolfus and "agreeable" for Contractus. What "mournful"" is for Contractus is mode 6 (plagal tritus, Hypolydian) while Frutolfus considers it as "voluptuous″, all this in complete contradiction with the above mentioned commentators.

[2] It goes without saying that the ragas and *maqāmāt* (pl. of *maqām*) have more in common with each other than they have with Greek modes. They are, however, the best equivalent to the latter in terms of emotional content. The Hindi/Urdu word *rag* is derived from the Sanskrit *rāga,* which means 'colour, or passion'. It is linked to the Sanskrit word *ranj,* which means 'to colour or to dye.' Therefore, as a general concept, *rag* may be thought of as an acoustic method of colouring the mind of the listener with 'any feeling or passion, especially love, affection, sympathy, desire, interest, motivation, joy, or delight.' The word is used in the literal sense of 'the act of dyeing,' and also 'color, hue, tint,' especially the colour red in the Sanskrit epics, and in the figurative sense of 'something that colours one's emotions.' A figurative sense of the word as 'passion, love, desire, delight' is also found in the *Mahābhārata*. Generally speaking, each *maqām* is said to evoke a specific emotion or set of emotions in the listener determined by the tone row and the nucleus, with different *maqāmāt* sharing the same tone row but differing in nucleus and thus emotion. *Maqām Rast* is said to evoke pride, power, soundness of mind, and masculinity; *maqām Bayati*: vitality, joy, and feminity; *Sikah*: love; *Saba*: sadness and pain; *Hijaz*: distant desert, and so on (see *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* for more information).

are accented in such a manner that almost each word is stressed and will be in any sentence, no matter its length. English, German, Italian, Spanish follow this model, so what is heard is Énglish, Gérman, Itálian, Spánish. However, there are no such stresses in French where the accents are not marked but very soft and are used to mark duration, not intensity. While a syllable can be drawn out, it is never accented. Figuratively these accents can be imagined as horizontal instead of vertical. And they disappear from the word, only to remain at the end of each semantic unit when the speaker pauses.

French Accentuation

J'ai descendu dans mon jardin pour y cueillir du romarin
[I went down to my garden to pick some rosemary]

J'**ai**.
J'ai descen**du**.
J'ai descendu dans mon jar**din**.
J'ai descendu dans mon jardin pour y cueillir du roma**rin**.

In this case the speaker would preferably choose two stresses to respect the verse form of a distich (two semantic units) as if there was a comma between the two lines:

J'ai descendu dans mon jar**din**
pour y cueillir du roma**rin.**

That's why French is so hard to pronounce for foreigners and why French music is different from, let's say, German music. For a French person German music may be unbearable because the first beat is felt as too strongly stressed and the same for the third within a four-beat measure. French music never has any such strong beats in the bass, only drawn out notes at the end of sentences, and very often a slur over the measure to cancel the strong beat and fit the music to the words.

So each language has its own character that music has to respect. In Hungarian, all words are stressed on the first syllable, so Hungarian music is opposed to western European music:

West-European music   **Hungarian music**

This is called prosody. The musician has to respect it. Therefore, it is impossible to retranslate a correctly prosodied text into another language.

To make a long story short, let us choose just one of the main difficulties one faces in retranslating a text already set to music: what we call in French *figuralisme* or *madrigalisme* (madrigalism), and in English 'word painting' (or 'tone painting' or 'text painting'), i.e. the musical technique of writing music that vividly illustrates the literal meaning of a song. It has always been done, well before the madrigal era or the *stile rappresentativo* in Italy at the beginning of the 17th century. For example, in Monteverdi's *concitato*, ascending scales would accompany

lyrics describing something that arises, like anger for instance, and the rhythm would then take the form of a Monteverdian special formula to "mean" (to "translate") anger, namely a division of one whole note into four groups of sixteenth notes; a general descending pattern would mean going down or being sad, depressed, losing strength, becoming old, nearing death. Old age and death would also require slowing the tempo and using a decrescendo, the word *death* itself could be "translated" by an abrupt fall in the melodic line, and/or a dramatic chord (dissonance); the chords would be major or minor depending of what "passion" they have to express; there would be different harmonic and melodic centres to direct the passage from one "passion" to another, each of them having its own ambitus; in opera the prophecy would always contain a augmented fifth, dramatic passages would always be enhanced by diminished sevenths and what we call in French *batteries*, i.e. harmonic tremolos instead of melodic trills, while it is very well-known that the love duo is always set in thirds and sixths, the young couple always being a soprano and a tenor, and the parents or any middle-aged people alto and bass. Each word may thus receive a musical translation.

Composers have always been very ingenious in their use of so-called "madrigalisms"—especially during the late 16th century. In the 17th century, an additional technique came to be, called musical rhetoric: for example, the word *sospiri* (sighs) would be translated by a succession of the same note punctuated by what is precisely called in French *des soupirs* (sighs), i.e. quarter rests, as in the famous *suspiratio* of Roman orators.

First Translation Attempts: First Difficulties

Tone painting goes at least as far back as Gregorian chant. Little musical cells corresponding to "melodic words" express not only emotive ideas such as joy or pain but also theological concepts. For instance, the pattern *fa-mi-sol-la*, which goes down and then up, signifies the humiliation and death of Christ and His resurrection into glory.

We find something very similar in the A formula (*ré-mi-sol-la*) of the Credo I.

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This first *incise*[3] is the translation of "unum deum". The next A formula is under the words "Jesum Christum"; then under "Patre natum", "Deum verum", "consubstantialem Patri" and finally "de Spiritu Sancto." Thus A represents the Holy Trinity: God, (the Father); Jesus Christ (the Son) and the Holy Spirit.

Looking at the official translation in English,

Beginning of Credo I

Credo in unum Deum,	I believe in one God,
Patrem omnipotentem,	the Father Almighty
factorem cœli et terrae,	Maker of heaven and earth,
visibilium omnium	of all things visible
et invisibilium.	and invisible:
Et in unum Dominum,	And in one Lord,
Jesum Christum,	Jesus Christ,
Filium Dei unigenitum,	the only-begotten Son of God,
et ex Patre natum	born of the Father
ante omnia saecula.	before all ages;
Deum de Deo,	God from God,
Lumen de Lumine,	Light from Light,
Deum verum de Deo vero,	true God from true God;
genitum non factum,	begotten, not made,
consubstantialem Patri;	consubstantial with the Father,
per quem omnia facta sunt.	by Whom all things were made;

it is immediately obvious that we have a problem in the eighth line where "Filium Dei unigenitum" is normally rendered by **"**the only-begotten Son of God" while it should be "Son of God the only-begotten" to fit the music.

But there are many other problems. First, there are six musical versions of the Credo and the pattern of formulas is slightly or completely different. Thus, we would need six different translations if our objective was to be able to follow text and music simultaneously.

Second problem: as the number of syllables is not respected, the English version will not correspond to the right number of notes. The formula *ré-mi-sol-la* includes four notes that correspond to the four Latin syllables of U-num De-um. But it is translated by one God, so the result is only two syllables for four notes. So how can one sing that?

"O-one Go-od"? Horrible! "O-o-one God"? Oh, my God! "One Go-o-od"? Jesus Christ! What else? It seems impossible! Oh, what about "one only God"? Would that fit? No, it would not; it sounds better, true, but the text is sacred, so it is not possible to add the word 'only.' A Latin text can be turned into an English text but not where music is involved.

Here is another example of word painting by Monteverdi:

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[3] An *incise* is a rhythmic unit of a few notes, namely the equivalent of what will later be called a musical motif or a musical cell.

Claudio Monteverdi
A Dio, Florida bella
Concertato
Sesto libro di madrigali
1614

A Dio, Florida bella, il cor piagato	Adieu, belle Floride, je te laisse en partant
Nel mio partir ti lascio, e porto meco	mon cœur blessé, et j'emporte avec moi
La memoria di te, si come seco	le souvenir de toi, comme le cerf transpercé
Cervo trafitto suol strale alato.	Porte avec lui la flèche ailée.
Caro mio Floro a Dio, l'amaro stato	Mon cher Florus adieu, qu'Amour nous console,
Consoli Amor del nostro viver cieco;	l'amer destin de nos vies sans lumière;
Che se 'l tuo cor mi resta, il mio vien teco,	Car si ton cœur reste auprès de moi, le mien
	t'accompagne,
Com'augellin che vola al cibo amato.	Comme l'oiseau qui vole vers la nourriture aimée.
Cosi sul Tebro a lo spuntar del Sole	Ainsi sur le Tibre au lever du soleil
Quinci e quindi confuso un suon s'udio	exquisément confus s'élevait le son
Di sospiri, di baci, e di parole:	de soupirs, de baisers, de paroles:
Ben mio, rimanti in pace: E tu, ben mio	Reste en paix, mon amour: et toi, mon bien-aimé,
Vattene in pace, e sia quel che'l ciel vuole.	va-t'en en paix, qu'il en soit comme veut le ciel.
A Dio Floro (dicean) Florida a Dio.	Adieu Florus (disaient-ils) Floride adieu.

Giambattista Marino

In this madrigal in *stile concertato*, the first thing we see in the music are the usual melismas[4] that are never missing under words like arrow (*lo strale, la flèchè*) or the verb to fly (*volar, voler*) during the whole baroque era, to imitate the flight.

Claudio Monteverdi
A Dio Florida bella

Flying Arrow

Flying Bird

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[4] A melisma is a group of notes sung to just one syllable. So melismatic music is the contrary of the syllabic music we saw in the Gregorian example, where we had one note per syllable.

The translator working on a text full of melismas should always begin replacing the word painting, thus beginning this way:

Claudio Monteverdi
A Dio, Florida bella
Concertato
Sesto libro di madrigali
1814

A Dio, Florida bella, il cor piagato	Adieu, belle Floride, je te laisse en partant
Nel mio partir ti lascio, e porto meco	mon cœur blessé, et j'emporte avec moi
La memoria di te, si come seco	le souvenir de toi, comme le cerf transpercé
Cervo trafitto suol strale alato.	Porte avec lui **the arrow** ailée.
Caro mio Floro a Dio, l'amaro stato	Mon cher Florus adieu, qu'Amour nous console,
Consoli Amor del nostro viver cieco;	l'amer destin de nos vies sans lumière;
Che se 'l tuo cor mi resta, il mio vien teco,	Car si ton cœur reste auprès de moi, le mien
	t'accompagne,
Com'augellin che vola al cibo amato.	Comme l'oiseau qui **is flying** vers la nourriture aimée.
Cosi sul Tebro a lo spuntar del Sole	Ainsi sur le Tibre au lever du soleil
Quinci e quindi confuso un suon s'udio	exquisément confus s'élevait le son
Di sospiri, di baci, e di parole:	de soupirs, de baisers, de paroles:
Ben mio, rimanti in pace: E tu, ben mio	Reste en paix, mon amour: et toi, mon bien-aimé,
Vattene in pace, e sia quel che'l ciel vuole.	va-t'en en paix, qu'il en soit comme veut le ciel.
A Dio Floro (dicean) Florida a Dio.	Adieu Florus (disaient-ils) Floride adieu.

Giambattista Marino

The translator's first priority must then absolutely be to leave each word in its place in the source text inasmuch as possible, especially since it is in general not a single word but almost every word in the text, which is subject to some kind of word painting. In the above sonnet, both tercets achieve this goal perfectly, on one hand because the French translator was obviously careful to strictly adhere to this principle, and on the other hand because this section of the text does not present any major difficulty from this perspective. In the quatrains, however, the sophisticated poetic style of Giovan Battista Marino, the leader of the Italian *manierismo*, forces the translator to undo the inversions he used in order to obtain the rhymes *meco/teco*, for example, which may seem poor but fit perfectly into the *concertato*'s spirit. "*Quinci e quindi*" (here and there) at the beginning of the first tercet's second line seem badly translated into *exquisément* (exquisitely), instead of *çà et là*; yet, it is the clearest, most developed and important example of word painting in the entire score. The music is composed in an imitative style with the same rythmo-melodic cells separated by rests and repeated over and over by switching quickly from one voice to another in order to translate "here and there", thus taking advantage of the acoustic space. This lack of respect from a translator who seems so conscious everywhere else of the problems he needs to solve is at first surprising but it is quickly understood that he has thought about it and made difficult yet deliberate decisions to address various problems that all require a different solution. He has sacrificed spatiality (here and there) to reinforce the term of *confuso*, and, since the impression of confusion is also rendered by the imitative style, this error probably appeared to him less serious. It seems that what he worried mostly about was to respect the total of eleven syllables in the Italian *endecasillabo* by using this four-syllable word. However, even if "here and there" and *confuso* express notions that are relatively close to each other, the word

exquisément introduces an idea that is new and alien to the source text. As in this case the total number of syllables has no importance, his choice was probably a bad one.

A look at two other examples will help in delving further into these problems. In Weelkes' *As Vesta was from Latmos hill descending,*

Thomas Weelkes
As Vesta Was from Latmos Hill Descending
1601

Lyrics	Word painting (Madrigalism)
As Vesta was from Latmos *hill descending*,	"hill" is always set with the highest note in the phrase; melodic line heard in descending scale
she spied a maiden queen the same *ascending*	ascending scale
attended on by *all the shepherds* swain,	all voices
to whom Diana's darlings came *running down* amain.	quickly descending scales in imitative polyphony
First *two by two*	sung by two voices
then *three by three together*	sung by three voices together: all six voices
leaving their goddess *all alone*, hasted thither	sung by solo voice
and *mingling* with the shepherds of her train	voices enter one at a time, mingling together
with *mirthful* tunes her presence entertain.	mirthful tunes, rhythm imitates laughter
Then sang the shepherds and nymphs of Diana,	all six voices in harmony
Long live fair Oriana!	Low voice begins with longa, continues with long sustained notes; longest phrase of piece.

how would any translator begin with the first lines? In French, "Hill descending" cannot be translated in any other way than *descendre de la colline* and "the same ascending" also beginning with the verb *monter*. But looking at the music:

Thomas Weelkes
As Vesta Was from Latmos Hill Descending
1601

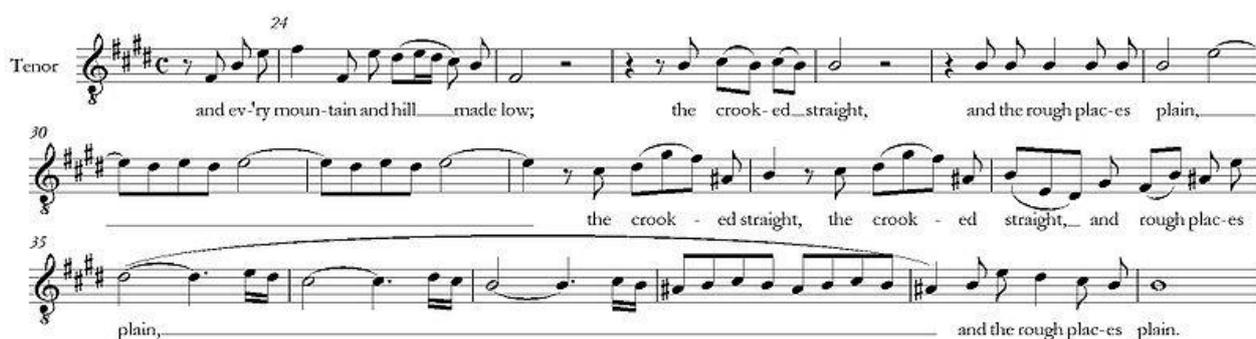from Lat – mos hill de - scend - - ing,

same a - scend - - - ing

we see that we must first get to the top of the hill before we can go down, so if we translate "hill descending" by *descendre de la colline*, the hill would be in the valley!

Same situation with this very well-known example, which occurs in Haendel's *Messiah*, where a tenor aria contains Haendel's setting of the text:

> *Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low;*
> *the crooked straight, and the rough places plain.* (Isaiah 40:4)

G. F. Haendel
Messiah
Tenor aria

Every valley shall be exalted,	Chaque vallée sera élevée,
and every mountain and hill made low;	et chaque montagne et colline, abaissée;
the crooked straight	ce qui est tordu sera redressé
and the rough places plain.	et les endroits rocailleux, aplanis.
(Isaiah 40:4)	(Isaïe, 40, 4)

The French translator has obviously taken great care to avoid moving words around and from this point of view the translation is absolutely correct and respectful of the English text and Haendel's musical adaptation (translation).

In Haendel's melody, the first word, "valley", is set on a low note, F sharp, which is the dominant of B major; "exalted" is a rising figure; the word "mountain" is set at the peak of the melody, which is also F sharp, and "hill" is a smaller mountain, while "low" is the same low note we had in the beginning because we're back in the valley again. "Crooked" is sung to a rapid figure of four different notes, just like a drawing because it is indeed a picture, it is word painting, while "straight" and "plain" are sung on a continuous single note, which is B, the tonic.

The general melodic line, the tonality, the rhythm, the ambitus, the implicit harmony, everything seems very well respected in this translation. It avoids the pitfall of changing the word order and translating "every mountain and hill made low" by *abaisser chaque montagne et colline*, i.e. putting the mountain down in the valley and the valley up the hill; and making the crooked straight and the straight crooked, and the rough plain and the plain rough[5]. So, for anyone who only reads this translation, it would certainly appear as a very good job. But the singer would

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[5] It is funny to notice that what the text says is precisely what we should avoid doing while the translator has to do what Haendel did and not what he said.

immediately refuse to sing it, saying that there is no way he can place this text under the music, the number of syllables not being the same in each language.

G. F. Haendel
Messiah
Tenor aria

Every valley shall be exalted,	Chaque vallée sera élevée,
and every mountain and hill made low;	et chaque montagne et colline, abaissée;
the crooked straight	ce qui est tordu sera redressé
and the rough places plain.	et les endroits rocailleux, aplanis.

Every valley shall be exalted, (8)	Que toute vallée soit comblée, (9)
and every mountain and hill made low; (9)	et toute montagne et toute colline abaissée; (13)
the crooked straight (4)	que les lieux accidentés se changent en plaine (12)
and the rough places plain. (6)	et les escarpements en large vallée. (11)
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Every valley shall be exalted, (8)	Il faudra él'ver chaqu' vallée, (8)
and every mountain and hill made low; (9)	et baisser chaqu' montagne et colline; (9)
the crooked straight (4)	le tordu droit (4)
and the rough places plain. (6)	et le rocailleux plat. (6)

The second version shown here is even worse. Yet it is an official translation. The third type would correspond to the source text but we are back to the problem of putting the mountain in the valley. So, nothing done. Or perhaps even nothing doing because the problem is still much more complicated: the prosody must also be right in both languages and since it is not, the translation will need to be adjusted to get the same stresses in the same places. The following example shows the accentuation in English and how the French version can be corrected.

G. F. Haendel
Messiah
Tenor aria

and ev'ry **moun**tain and **hi**…ll made **low**;
the **crook**…ed **straight**, and the **rough** places **plain**.

et chaqu' mon**ta**gne et co**lli..**ne aplan**ie**;
Le **tor**…du… **droit**, l'escar**pé** rendu **plat**.

Finally, it should be asked why one would even bother translating a text set to music in the first place. Why not just sing it in the original language? It would be better in all respects. Of course, this is what should always be done. But, in some cases, a translation is needed for those who do not understand the text when sung in Russian, for instance, and a good professional translator should make sure that his or her version is as close as possible to the source text. This is precisely what is required when the listener wishes to appreciate a Russian opera sitting at home in an easy chair, reading the text while listening to the music. In that case the translation would need to be done in such a way that it would correspond line for line, word for word, and word for note to the original text. But as I have argued above, it is sometimes so difficult, even with a small piece, that one wonders whether it is possible to realize that tour de force with an entire opera? Yes, in some cases at least it is possible, and it has been done, from Russian into French, for the opera *Aleko* by Rachmaninoff. But it requires a completely different translating technique and above all a new layout of the text.

A New Translation into French and Text Layout of a Russian Opera Libretto: *Aleko* by Rachmaninoff[6]

Synopsis

In a nutshell this opera in one act tells the story of Aleko, a Russian man who has abandoned the "chains of civilization" for Gipsy freedom and the love of Zemfira. But, while he wants freedom for himself he doesn't want to grant it to his young wife when she asks for it after falling in love with another man. He catches them together and kills them both. The Gipsies chase him from the camp.

Why a New French Translation of the Libretto?

The libretto was written by the famous theatre director and playwright Vladimir Nemirovitch-Dantschenko and based on the poem "Tsigany" (The Gipsies) by Pushkin. *Aleko* has already been translated several times but all extant translations of this opera are defective in the same way that most translated libretti are: the translators, almost never being musicians, only paid attention to the text without worrying about it coinciding with the music in order to make sure that, in each line, various parts of the sentence correspond as much as possible, "word per note", to the music. To translate without having the score at hand, therefore, causes serious mistranslations and semantic shifts, the music expressing what the text has not yet said or has already finished saying. As we saw, this defect always has catastrophic consequences in the translation of a 16ᵗʰ century madrigal where the figuralism of each detail is important and constant; it may be attenuated in a modern score but, since the musical phrase and its internal structure are always calculated from the textual sentence, this principle must be considered sacred.

On the other hand revising is always easier than translating since, in comparing all the versions, it is possible to adopt the best solution found by previous translators. All of those

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[6] A French version of this section was published in Buhler (111-125).

different solutions may also suggest a better one to the reviser and allow him or her to unify the text and to preserve its basic meaning. One version, for example, renders once the term *volya* by "will", a secondary meaning that is acceptable in another context but absolutely not in *Aleko* where this translation error amounts to a real betrayal since the work's entire formal and semantic structure rests on the opposition between the first meaning of this term—freedom— and the theme of destiny (*dolya*) in the rhyme *volya/dolya*.

Stage directions are deleted in some versions for various poor reasons: it is almost always due to an economic rationale according to which publishers prefer to invoke lack of space (whereas libretti published with CDs in three or even four face-to-face languages demonstrate that it is perfectly possible); sometimes it is due to carelessness or lack of understanding of the purpose of stage directions. Far from being simple annotations, stage directions form an integral part of the text, they *are* the text, and they provide more information, along with the lines sung by the characters, about the latters' psychology, as well as develop the plot, the atmosphere and the local colour, which is so important in operas influenced by verism. Furthermore stage directions are primordial not only for the stage director but for readers as a basis for their own interpretations. *Aleko* may be one of the very best examples of this absolute necessity not to amputate stage directions from the text: indeed, the initial one comes in large part from the first verse of Pushkin's rhyming poem whose text is also used for the first verse of the gipsies' chorus as in the following layout:

Pushkin:

Les tziganes, en troupe bruyante, traversent la Bessarabie. Aujourd'hui, ils *campent* sur la *rive d'un fleuve* dans leurs *tentes* déchirées.
Heureuses comme la liberté, telles sont leurs nuits,
et paisible leur sommeil sous les cieux ;
entre les roues de leurs charrettes
à demi recouvertes de tapis
des feux sont allumés ; les familles, formant un cercle, préparent le repas ; […] *Calmes travaux* des familles […] (my emphasis)

Nemirovitch-Dantchenko :

N° 1 Introduction

La rive d'un fleuve. Des tentes de toile blanche ou bariolée dispersées çà et là forment un cercle. A droite, sur l'avant-scène, la tente d'Aleko et de Zemfira. Au fond, des charrettes recouvertes de tapis. Des feux sont allumés, on cuit le repas dans des chaudrons. Ici et là, des groupes d'hommes, de femmes et d'enfants mangent ou préparent le repas. Tout le monde s'affaire, mais dans le calme. Derrière la rivière, une lune rougeâtre se lève.

N°2 Chœur

LES TZIGANES
Heureuses comme la liberté, telles sont nos nuits,
et paisible notre sommeil sous les cieux,

> entre les roues de nos charrettes
> à demi recouvertes de tapis.

To save space, and therefore money, has several other deplorable consequences. The text ends up visually tightened and compressed without tabulation nor breaks between the poem's verses. Yet, in the same way that a musical work is never independent of its form, the text's meaning suffers from modifications in its structure since it is the latter's role, as in all the arts, to render the former evident. Such structural changes interfere not only with readers' comprehension of the text's meaning but also with the artists' ability to first discover this meaning, as they should, through the analysis of the relation form/content, and then to convey it to the listeners through their art.

For those who have ever tried to follow an opera in progress, libretto in hand, it is obvious that it is almost always impossible. Why? Because, for economic reasons and a basic misunderstanding of the indissociable union between the text and the music, publishers, and consequently translators, arrange the text in such a way that lines sung by each character appear one below the other instead of side by side to respect their simultaneity. To follow this visual arrangement, libretto in hand, makes it difficult, even impossible, to grasp the unfolding of a coherent whole because the text presents as a succession what we hear simultaneously. This difficulty and its resulting incoherence discourage the public from pursuing their commendable desire to follow text and music together. Listeners then prefer to either read the text or listen to the music separately, or lose interest in the libretto, which is contrary to the union of the arts desired in opera and in the composer's work. To counter this situation the choice of a side-by-side arrangement in this new translation provides the listener with an immediate and sure comprehension of the link between text and music, with knowing what each character is singing at every moment and, above all, with a full appreciation of the way the composer reacts to each line of the text. The mostly ineffective adjuvants used in the customary stacked layout that tries to compensate for the consequences of its absurdity, such as the mention of *Together* and the curly brackets, become unnecessary and can be deleted from then on.

The following example demonstrates the serious consequences of the lack of respect for the form intended by the librettist and followed by the composer; it shows as well the unfortunate effect this poor choice has on the understanding of the characters' psychology and the meaning of the work. One of the published versions, admittedly one of the worst, presents the text of the final duo in N°8 in this way:

> LE JEUNE TZIGANE
> Viendras-tu me retrouver ?
> ZEMFIRA
> Lorsque la lune sera haute dans le ciel, viens, là-bas, derrière le tumulus.
> LE JEUNE TZIGANE
> Elle me trompera ! Elle ne viendra pas ! Dis-moi, viendras-tu me retrouver ?
> ZEMFIRA
> Sauve-toi, le voilà. Oui, mon bien-aimé, je viendrai.

The preoccupation of achieving a more faithful translation and a presentation that respects the unfolding of the action in the form intended by both the librettist and the composer result in the following:

LE JEUNE TZIGANE	ZEMFIRA
Dis-moi, viendras-tu me retrouver ?	
(bis)	
	Quand la lune sera haute...
	Là-bas, derrière le tertre, près de la tombe.
Elle se joue de moi, elle ne viendra pas !	
Dis-moi, viendras-tu me retrouver ?	
	Là-bas, derrière le tertre, près de la tombe.
Elle ne viendra pas.	
Aleko apparaît.	
Dis-moi, viendras-tu me retrouver ?	
	Fuis, le voilà ! Je viendrai, mon amour.

In the first example the allusion to the tomb is ignored by the translator, which in turn cancels out the announcement—so much more striking, fugitive and subtle that the usual prophecy in 19th century Italian opera—of the unavoidable dénouement; as a result the text's clear meaning (the apology of gipsy freedom) is contradicted by being anchored within the traditional 19th century bourgeois thematic of triangulation and the moral trap of love/duty in which this freedom of love is impossible and can only result in death. The second failing of the first version, even more serious, is the deletion of the stage direction of "*Aleko apparaît*," the other splendid prolepsis by Nemirovitch-Dantchenko in this fragment of his libretto. These two words alone change the meaning of the work and fully justify my previous assertion that stage directions are an integral part of the text along with the lines sung by the characters. Indeed, when Aleko appears and, (unseen by them ou hidden from them, comme rappel ou pour rendre plus clair, mais pas essentiel) catches the last lines of the dialogue between the young Gipsy and Zemfira, it is a crucial moment for the theatre audience and the libretto's reader because it alerts them to his upcoming vengeance and prompts them to understatnd it.

In this way a link is established with the rest of the plot, in spite of the use of the old form of *pezzo chiuso* that results in interrupting the action, an unfortunate effect, particularly in a love duo, which is indeed the most static moment in an opera adhering to this form. A the same time the spectator/reader notices that the young Gipsy most likely does not see Aleko appear but that Zemfira does and that her last line is also meant for him, not only as a provocation or a challenge to him but also as an affirmation of her freedom, a clear sign of her character's psychology.

This challenge constitutes the link with N° 9, the so-called scene by the cradle where Zemfira continues her provocation. If this link is not made understandable by an adequate layout, both scenes appear unrelated to the listener or perhaps only related by the principle of diametrical opposition between two scenes as different as possible, proned for so long by Verdi whose literary culture was lacking, at the expense of the credibility, the unity and the coherence of his opera libretti during his *années de galère*. The listener would then react like the musical critic of the *Moskovskie vedomosti* "who complained of a lack of coherence between the scenes and the

necessity of creating transitions between numbers" (Buhler 28) while blaming the composer, who is powerless, rather than the librettist.

The new text layout chosen for this translation has another major advantage. Readers, without having to look at the score, will notice, even without being fully conscious of it, the different treatment of the multi-voiced passages from N°4 and N°8 on one hand and from N°9 and N°13 on the other. As opposed to the former, the latter follow the principle of the "conversational" or "dialogue" duos, proned by Rousseau in his famous "Lettre sur la musique française," in which he complains that "duos are unnatural since nothing is less natural than to see two people speaking to each other over a certain amount of time, either to say the same thing or contradict each other, without even listening to each other nor answer each other" (291; my translation).

Two other less important innovations are perhaps worth mentioning briefly. In some cases, instead of the traditional indication of *Bis*, which is sometimes even forgotten, the text's repetition as it is in the score can underline, all the while respecting it, the intention of the librettist and the composer. In an opera influenced by verism like *Aleko*, the murder is the *climax* of the work. The translator must be extremely careful not to harm such an important moment in the drama in any way by obscuring the emphasis intended by the authors. The young Gipsy's death is presented in the following way in the deficient version quoted above:

ALEKO
Attends ! Où cours-tu si vite, beau garçon ? Reste couché !
(*Il le poignarde*).

ZEMFIRA
Aleko !

LE JEUNE TZIGANE
Je meurs !

In this insipid version the translator forgets not just the repetition of Zemfira's and the young Gipsy's lines included in the score, which he most likely has not consulted but also the stage direction indicating the exact moment of the young man's death. It is, therefore, necessary to put them back in, which is easily accomplished in the following way:

ALEKO
Halte-là !
Où cours-tu, beau jeune homme ?
Reste couché !

Il le poignarde.
                          ZEMFIRA
                          Aleko !

                                              LE JEUNE TZIGANE
                                              Je meurs !

                          ZEMFIRA
                          Aleko !

                                              LE JEUNE TZIGANE

<div align="center">Je meurs !</div>

<div align="center">*Il meurt.*</div>

The last remark about the new translation introduced here concerns the relation between a Russian text in verse (Pushkin and Nemirovitch-Dantchenko) and a French translation that must be in prose since any attempt at versification, even the most clever, would without fail cause the kind of defects this translation is trying to avoid. In some cases, however, a good translator owes it to himself to try and evoke the musicality that is so remarkable in Pushkin's verse and adds so much to the music through assonance, when such an attempt is not detrimental to the meaning. Among other possible examples, here are two traditional translations of the romance by the young Gipsy (N° 12), both presented in a compressed text that does not respect the verse form of the original. The second one is only mentioned in brackets when it is different from the first.

> Regarde, sous la voûte lointaine, la lune vogue en liberté (se promène, libre). Sur toute la nature, elle répand une lueur égale (En passant, elle verse une égale clarté sur la nature entière). Qui pourrait lui indiquer un point (lui montrer sa place) dans le ciel et lui dire : Arrête-toi-là ! Et qui pourrait dire au cœur d'une jeune fille : Tu ne dois en aimer qu'un, invariablement ! (garde le même amour, ne varie point !)

This is especially shocking: the minimum that we may ask of a translator is to respect at least the form of the original. The translation presented *infra* not only respects the verse form of the original but restores in the third line the « in passing » omitted by the first translator and recovers by the same token the spirit of the romance that had almost disappeared in those two prose translations whereas Rachmaninoff had scrupulously kept both the form and the spirit.

> Regarde, sous la voûte lointaine
> la lune librement se promène ;
> en passant, elle éclaire la nature entière
> d'une égale lumière.
>
> Qui pourrait lui indiquer une place dans le ciel,
> et lui dire: arrête-toi là ?
> Qui pourrait dire au cœur d'une jeune fille:
> n'aime qu'une fois et tiens-t'en là ? *(Bis)*

As a way to conclude I kindly invite all readers and professional translators, who have done me the favour of reading up to this point, to breathe a deep sigh of relief with me, not because my arguments—and your reading—are at an end but because, as the case of *Aleko* demonstrates, it is with a feeling of hope that we can provisionally stop here[7]. To retranslate a text set in music into another language may be a very difficult task but it is not always a desperate one. Still, I would like to take advantage of this "conclusion" to make a last recommendation to those who feel brave enough to attempt it, reminding all readers of what professional translators know so well and is contrary to what the general public often imagines,

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[7] There is never any real conclusion to any mind task. According to what is generally perceived as a mere joke instead of the profound truth it really is, a conclusion is just the place where, while superbly ignoring how little has been achieved, one is too tired to go on thinking.

i. e. that a translator's most essential quality is not to have a perfect grasp of the source language, nor even the target language, but to really master the field to which belongs the text that he or she is about to translate. And that is where the proverbial rub is, as is shown by the terrible mistranlations quoted in this paper: To dare translate from such a technical language as Music requires none other than a musician, and not just any musician, but a composer or a musicologist. Yet this very specialized musician also has to be a professional translator and that is where I would like to remind both groups of the virtues of cooperation because very qualified musicologists/translators are regrettably rare. However, if cooperation is impossible or does not work, there are still other possibilities, as we saw, such as always choosing to sing the piece in its original language while adding, if necessary, a brief summary of the work in the readers' and listeners' language. So, I insist, better not try than produce a bad translation. Monteverdi, Mozart, Schubert, Rachmaninov, those musicians of genius, please do not harm them, treat them well.

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