

I

THE TRANSLATION OF OPERAS

There are some people who maintain that all translation of vocal music into other languages is barbarous, and that no opera ought ever to be performed except in the language to which it was written. This position is a perfectly logical one, and I can sympathise very cordially with it in theory; I would certainly say that for the detailed study and criticism of any opera a knowledge of it in the original language is indispensable. But for practical purposes translation is a necessity, if opera is to receive any popular encouragement. In France, Germany and Italy, as well as in other countries such as Holland, Sweden, Poland and Hungary, where the native language is not one that is commonly learned by foreigners, opera is regularly performed in the language of the people; it is therefore only commonsense that opera in England should be performed in English, at any rate in those theatres where opera is performed regularly throughout the season. I shall therefore assume that I need waste no more words this afternoon in defending the principle of opera in English. I must, however, make it quite clear to you that my paper deals solely with the translation of operas, and that it will not treat at all of the translations of any other kind of vocal music. It is necessary for me to mention this, because the conditions of opera require methods of translation which would often be quite inappropriate, or even utterly inadmissible, in such forms as oratorios and single songs. In these branches of music I have little experience as regards translation, and I do not intend to discuss them at all.

An opera is a play set to music, and the first business of a translator is to make the play intelligible to the audience. The translator ought always to consider that he is translating the work for that man in the audience who is seeing it for the first time; indeed, I hold strongly that the producer and conductor of every

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opera ought to perform it for that man's benefit, if not indeed for the man who is having (and I hope enjoying) his first experience of any opera. Clearness is therefore the first requisite of a translation; the plot must be made clear, and also its development. This means that the translator must himself have a perfectly clear notion of the plot, and this is sometimes a difficult thing to achieve. More than this, he must understand clearly just how each phrase of the libretto contributes to the development of the plot, or to the development of personality in the characters represented; he must also be musician enough to see how far the music itself, independently of the words, contributes to this development. A translator must necessarily know something of the language from which he is translating, but it is more important that he should have a good command of his own, and perhaps even more important still that he should have a sensitive understanding of music, an understanding based not merely on inborn musical feeling, but on scientific analytical knowledge.

It will be obvious, even at this early stage of my paper, that a literal translation of the original is neither necessary nor always desirable, even if it were possible to achieve. The translator has so many different conditions to fulfil that when one comes to practical work one is astonished to find how often a literal translation is actually the easiest and the most satisfactory.

Clearness demands the very simplest possible language. Even in a spoken play it is often hard to follow the words in detail, especially if the play is poetical; you may experiment on yourselves by going to hear some play of Shakespeare which is not very often acted. When words are sung they are still harder to follow; the translator must therefore give his audience every possible chance. This means that all unusual phrases or words must be studiously avoided, however beautiful or significant they may be. An opera libretto is not meant to be read as a poem, but to be heard on the stage as set to music; if the translator fears that his words may appear bald and commonplace he must remember that it is the musician's business to clothe them with beauty. He may comfort himself by a study of *Dido and Aeneas*; Tate's libretto is a by-word for comic effect, but as soon as it is heard on the stage with Purcell's music we lose all desire to laugh

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at it, and the oddest phrases are set by Purcell in such a way as to make them sound perfectly serious and often deeply moving.

The next thing required is that the words shall fit the music. This, I need hardly say, is the most difficult problem of translation. I shall deal later on in turn with the special difficulties of the English language and with those presented by various foreign languages. I shall also consider the special difficulties of different musical forms and styles. It is unnecessary to explain to such an audience as this what is meant by the 'words fitting the music'; the translator must try to give the impression that his words were those to which the music was originally composed. Now in many classical operas the composers have treated their original words very carelessly; one could cite cases where words are quite wrongly declaimed, or repeated in such a way as to become nonsensical. Here the translator ought certainly to do his best to improve on the original.

Thirdly, it is necessary that the English words should be suitable for singing. On this question there is much divergence of opinion. There are still many people who hold that English is an unmusical language, and they will go so far as to maintain that in singing it is necessary to pronounce English in a different way from that in which it is spoken. But I hope I may here adopt the point of view taken by the leading English singers and teachers, such as Mr Plunket Greene and Mr Walter Ford, who say that it is perfectly possible to sing English with the correct pronunciation and that is the duty of all English singers to cultivate a correct pronunciation. A translator, however, ought always to get his work carefully considered by an experienced singer, because there are many small difficulties which arise out of peculiar melodic lines, and it is hardly possible for an amateur singer to realise them; it must be remembered that there is a great difference between singing as I might do here just to illustrate a point in a lecture, and singing on the stage before an audience. On the other hand, a translator ought not to give way to the wishes of singers who think about nothing but vocal tone, and regard all words as meaningless.

No country has produced a more continuous stream of great poetry throughout several centuries than England, so there can

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be no doubt that English is a suitable language for poetry; and although the history of English drama shows a more variable level of excellence, I think we may still regard English as a good language for the theatre. We have also a long and distinguished history of English song; but in the setting of English poetry to music our standards have varied greatly from time to time. At the present day we are a good deal more sensitive to values of stress and quantity than our ancestors were, and a much higher standard is now required from a translator, corresponding to the standard which we require from any English composer of original songs or operas.

Translating operas from various foreign languages soon shows one how English has a far greater variety of rhythm than any other language. Other languages can often be set to music which is rhythmically very regular, with long successions of even notes, such as we find in hymn tunes; English resents this, and it is impossible to obtain a really satisfactory effect in English when the music is conspicuously even in rhythm. It may be tolerated in hymn tunes and other forms of popular music; but on the stage where every word has to contribute to dramatic effect this evenness becomes unnatural and dreary. For this reason Italian, Russian and Hungarian will generally translate into English more easily than French or German; as far as my experience goes, Italian is the language which most nearly approximates to our own, as far as rhythm is concerned. Whenever the music of an opera becomes irregular in rhythm, with frequent changes of time-values, English will always respond to it, for English has an extraordinary elasticity of pace. It is sometimes imagined that all foreigners speak more quickly than we do; I believe this is quite untrue. The natural pace of spoken English is as quick as, and possibly quicker than that of French or Italian; but the English gain time by the simple expedient of leaving out half their syllables. Our well-known English comic operas show us that rapid articulation is just as characteristic of English as it is of Italian; but whereas our singers will sometimes take the trouble to practise a patter-song until they can sing it easily, it does not often occur to them to take the same trouble over a recitative.

We pay the price of our rapidity and elasticity at the sacrifice of long vowels on which the singing voice can expand. We have a certain number of long vowels that can be sung to long notes,

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but they are much rarer in English than in other languages. And it is a curious thing that most of the poetical words in English, the words which are most highly charged with beautiful associations, are either devoid of long vowels altogether, or else present us with vowels which are uncomfortable to sing. The very word 'sing' is unsingable; 'music' and 'melody' are no better. Here are a few more English words beloved of poets, and all more or less unsingable, that is, unsingable to long sustained notes, or to high notes:

abominable, battle, brother, cherish, death, deity, divinity, dream, forest, horror, image, innocent, jealousy, king, kiss, lily, listen, love, mariner, melody, memory, minute, miserable, mother, murmur, mute, mystery, mystic, nymph, palace, passion, perish, plead, prison, queen, quiver, ravish, river, ship, sister, sleep, speech, spirit, sweet, terror, treacherous, wind, wither.

Another great difficulty of English is the scarcity of rhymes, especially of double rhymes. Translation soon teaches one what rhymes there are; and it is a curious fact that for one-syllable, or masculine, rhymes 'ay' is by far the commonest vowel – 'day', 'stay', 'play', 'say', etc. 'Ay' seems to be the commonest vowel sound in English, as 'ah' is in Italian or German; and I therefore think we ought to accept it as the characteristic sound of English, and the legitimate equivalent of the foreign 'ah'. Some singers think that translators ought always to provide exactly the same vowel sounds as in the original. If the translator carried this out consistently, the singers would be surprised at the results, that is, if they were intelligent enough to understand them. We should then have to reproduce exactly every French or German 'ü', which is impossible, though 'ee' is an approximation to it; and we could find approximations to the German 'ö' or French 'eu' if required. But as a matter of fact the singers who want vowels exactly reproduced are generally the sort of singers who know one or two famous Italian songs and nothing more; what they want is merely 'ahs' and Italian 'ohs'. If one did provide them with these, one would have to use English words that would inevitably give the whole song a much darker colour, because the English words which have the vowels 'ah' and 'aw' are in most cases words of sombre meaning: 'haunt', 'daunt', 'avaunt', 'appal', 'fall'.

Double rhymes are the despair of every English translator.

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Some critics say that it is quite unnecessary to have rhymed translations, and even a German conductor, Gustav Brecher, in his little brochure on *Opernübersetzungen*, thinks rhymes unnecessary in translating into German, a language in which double rhymes are fairly common. I cannot agree with this; if the original libretto is rhymed, the translation ought to be rhymed also, especially if the music responds to the rhymes. But in English it is not always necessary to have as many rhymes as in the original. Consider English as compared with Italian. In Italian double rhymes are so numerous as to be rather like depreciated paper money; they are in fact much commoner than single rhymes, because the normal accentuation of Italian words is on the penultimate. In English, double rhymes are so few that double rhymes often produce a comic effect; Byron's *Don Juan* and other narrative poems of his supply a good classical example from a great poet. Triple rhymes are sometimes possible in English, but almost only as a deliberately comic effect, as in the *Ingoldsby Legends*. In Italian triple rhymes are numerous enough for poems of 150 lines to be written entirely in triple rhymes, as in the *Arcadia* of Sannazzaro (1504). But single rhymes in Italian often produce the same sort of comic effect as double ones do in English, as in one of the sonnets of Casti.

The translator therefore has to consider carefully what the literary value of rhyme is in the original; in many cases double rhymes may be ignored, as for instance in stanzas where double rhymes and single ones alternate regularly, as in the metre of

Brief life is here our portion,
 Brief sorrow, short-lived care;
 The life that knows no ending,
 The tearless life, is there.

In *recitativo secco* double rhymes can generally be ignored altogether; but it is often useful to make the last two lines of a scene rhyme, as Shakespeare does, in order to give point to an exit.

I think that in opera a certain latitude as regards rhymes, especially double rhymes, is legitimate; in singing, rhymes may pass which would be condemned in printed poetry, although there is classical example for many of them, such as 'woman', 'common', 'human'. Still more latitude may be allowed in comic opera; but at the same time it is advisable to avoid strictly the facetious type of double rhyme employed in the *Ingoldsby*

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Legends and in Gilbert's libretti. These comic rhymes often depend for their humour on their unexpectedness or unnaturalness, and sometimes on a false accentuation too; such things are useless in opera, even in comic opera, because they are difficult for an audience to take in quickly; and even if they are taken in pretty quickly, they distract the audience's attention too much from the music. Another reason for avoiding them is that they produce an effect of anachronism; they suggest a type of humour which does not belong to the period or country of the opera.

In cases (rare in opera) where there is a long stretch of double-rhymed verse in an even metre, it is sometimes possible to drop rhyme altogether, and trust to rhythm alone to give form to the words, as in *Hiawatha*; but it is very seldom that this occurs.

Recitative is by far the easiest part of an opera to translate. It may be said at once that in general the difficulty of translation, throughout the whole course of an opera, varies inversely as the respect which the composer has shown to the original libretto. But recitative is the part of an opera in which the translator is most exposed; it is in recitative that one must be most careful not to say anything that may sound ridiculous, for in recitative there is some possibility of the words being clearly heard. The chief difficulty in recitative is that of literary style, and I shall speak more in detail about this point later on. Recitative is easy, because one need not think much about rhyme, nor even very much about what is easy to sing; recitative is not meant to be sung, it has to be spoken or declaimed. Singers are not always in agreement with the translator on this point, and I shall refer to this later on, when I come to speak of translation in rehearsal.

Recitative becomes more difficult as it approaches more nearly to song. As long as the function of it is to explain facts, we can allow ourselves some latitude in altering time-values of notes, though we must be careful not to destroy the general rhythmical form of the recitative, which is generally in some sort of free verse, at any rate in the older operas. But the moment recitative glides into song, we have to be ready to adopt the methods proper to the translation of song. The most tiresome sort of recitative is that in which there is continuous music in the orchestra, generally developing some theme, against which the characters

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speak in monotone, often in very even notes. This is unsuitable to English, which demands a certain variety of rhythm. Whenever a composer makes his recitative musically expressive, it can be translated more or less easily, but when the notes have no musical significance, and still more when there is orchestral music of some interest going on simultaneously, the situation becomes hopeless.

All opera, even modern opera, may be divided into recitative and air, although the two categories may be so mixed up as to occur within the same bar; the real distinction lies between passages which have to be quite definitely sung. In the older operas, such as those of Handel, Gluck and Mozart, the categories are kept quite separate. Here the air presents difficulties due to the musical form, and our chief difficulty is that produced by the repetition of words and phrases. I have never yet attempted to translate an entire opera of Handel, though I should like to try the experiment. The question that would arise at once is that of the *da capo*; should the same words be repeated, or should one try to write a new stanza, so as to minimise the repetition, which even without the *da capo* is apt to be wearisome to a modern audience? This repetition is not haphazard; it follows a regular rule, and the poets who wrote libretti for Handel and his contemporaries knew perfectly well that their words would be repeated. Handel and Mozart always repeat their words expressively; they certainly meant the words to gain force by repetition.¹ This is the basic principle of the old Italian aria. Later composers, such as Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti, and even the great Richard Wagner himself in his early opera *Das Liebesverbot*, repeat words regardless of expression, simply in order to spin out the music. There are cases in *Das Liebesverbot* where Wagner sets the same words twice over in the course of a song to two entirely different rhythmical schemes; the translator is forced to write new words, because the old ones will not fit. There are very bad cases in Smetana's *Bartered Bride*, where I think the translator would do well to write new verses for the repetitions.

In many airs the translator will do well to allow himself considerable freedom. Literal translation is often quite impos-

¹ In Dent's translation of *Deidamia*, the performance of which in 1955 led to the foundation of the Handel Opera Society, the words of the opening sections of *da capo* arias are repeated unchanged.

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sible; when an air (as often happens in old operas) is merely the expression of one emotion, or of two well-defined separate emotions, e.g., love, jealousy, rage, despair, grief, I see no reason why one should not write entirely new words, provided that they express the general emotion painted in the music. But the more formal the air, the more careful the translator must be not to damage the form by disregarding it in his words; in certain cases rhyme may be an integral feature and one that cannot possibly be ignored.

It is with ensemble that the translator's real difficulties begin. Here we have to reconcile recitative and air, for the music is continuous, and generally built up in some sort of symphonic form, although the words may be of intense dramatic importance. No items of an opera are more maddening to translate than ensembles, and in doing this work one learns to realize the greatness of Mozart, who keeps up the dramatic force of his ensembles almost to the end. As long as each character says something that has importance and is set to music so as to be clearly heard, all goes well, but when several voices are singing together and the music goes its own way as if it were a symphony, the translator is reduced to a state of demoralisation. He knows that on the stage his words will never be heard; why take the trouble to make sense of them? Rossini is a shocking offender in this respect and so is Auber.

In some ensembles characters are singing entirely different words simultaneously to a piece of music that is simply block harmony with a tune at the top. Here I think it is advisable to rewrite the words as far as possible so as to make all, or at least most of the characters, sing the same words; otherwise the words merely destroy each other. But wherever a character in an ensemble has a salient phrase, however short, which can stand out musically from the rest, then he must be given words that are dramatically significant. Berlioz, if I remember right, praises Spontini for making Julia, in the first act of *La vestale*, express her own private emotions in words while she is actually singing the melody of a hymn to Vesta with the chorus of virgins;² but on the stage this is useless; one cannot distinguish Julia's words

² I have been unable to locate this reference in Berlioz's writings. To do Spontini justice, he does also give Julia the words concerned when the chorus is silent.

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from those of the chorus, and what matters on the stage is the expression of the musical phrase, not that of the words.

In the conventional ensembles of the early nineteenth-century composers a stage is soon reached where the voices are singing phrases more suitable to the inferior instruments of a military band. The words are chopped up ruthlessly; the notes have no significance and merely fill up the harmony; the whole cast might just as well sing 'fa la la'. No task could be more thankless than that of the translator; even if he were a second Shakespeare, his words would never be heard. The best he can do is to keep an eye on the salient phrases, and on the occasional moments where the whole block of voices has some salient phrase, and do his best to give these moments significance.

Of all operatic conventions that of the chorus is the most unnatural. English musicians, trained more on oratorio than on opera, are often inclined to think that there is something morally ennobling about a chorus; but Wagner, like Handel, reduced his choruses to a minimum in the works of his maturity. The operatic chorus is a survival from the formal days of Lully and Purcell; in those days the chorus seldom sang more than what we might call the chorus to a song. In many cases the chorus merely repeats in harmony what has already been sung by a solo singer. On the stage the function of the chorus is decorative rather than dramatic. Handel makes it dramatic, but restricts it almost entirely to short acclamations.³ It is towards the end of the eighteenth century that the chorus reappears as a conspicuous feature of opera; and it was a long time before chorus singers were capable of singing anything that could not be easily learned by ear. The consequence of this is that in operas of the Rossini period, and even later, the words of choruses are peculiarly difficult to translate. The general habit of composers was to give the main tune to the orchestra, and let the chorus sing dull chords in block harmony. Even when they have something more interesting to sing they are often treated like instruments. They generally have to explain who they are and what their occupation is – 'if you want to know who we are, we are gentlemen of Japan'. In severely conventional opera this may

³ The chorus in all but the latest of Handel's operas consisted of the soloists as a group. See Winton Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria* (London, 1970), 133–4.