



Book Review

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Opera in translation: Unity and diversity.
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This collection, edited by Adriana Şerban and Kelly Kar Yue Chan, was published as part of the Benjamins Translation Library series and may be situated among other publications which focus on the field of translation and music, including the monograph by Desblache (2019), the volume edited by Franzon et al. (2021) or the more practical guide by Low (2017). However, this book is far more specific, and addresses the interplay between translation and opera. Though still considered an elitist form of entertainment (p. 1), opera has recently enjoyed an increase in popularity, mainly thanks to translation, which underlines the pertinence of the publication.

The book contains sixteen contributions, written by scholars who have previously published on translation and opera, including Marta Mateo, Judi Palmer, Lucile Desblache and Klaus Kaindl, as well as practicing translators, interpreters and theoreticians from different linguistic, theoretical and cultural backgrounds. This diversity adds to the merit of the publication, as the contributions bring together global perspectives, often moving beyond the opera genre. The collection instantiates the interdisciplinary character of current translation research and provides illuminating and original insights into opera translation, exemplified by various translation modes, such as singable translation, surtitling and prose translation. The book both presents more lyrics-oriented research and highlights the importance of non-linguistic signs and the concept of semiotic integrity, which reconciles different aesthetics and traditions. The chapters are divided into five thematic sections, starting with a semiotics-oriented perspective, moving on through non-operatic genres to historical-descriptive analyses and the integrity of words and music, and finishing with text-based research.

The opening section (*Open perspectives*) contains three articles, loosely connected by the common thread of collaborative work, though the first two contributions seem to concentrate more on the semiotic complexity of opera translation. By bringing to the fore the question of several source (or rather intermediary) texts, Helen Julia Minors understands translation as a unifying intercultural act aimed at integrating texts and engaging spectators, who are also expected to translate the work (p. 21). Using the term 'translation' in a broad sense, she seems to advocate claims made by translation semioticians that culture, in general, is in a continual process of total intersemiotic translation (Torop, 2000, p. 96). Questioning the recent tendency of displaying longer and denser surtitles, Judi Palmer concentrates on the semiotic integrity of the

operatic work and the production context. She argues that “over-titling” is generally unnecessary, but at the same time, it is challenging to provide a universal recipe for surtitling (though she does provide a list of general instructions on p. 44), as each surtitling event should be analysed against its full semiotic background. It is worth noting that this is the only chapter solely devoted to surtitling. This underrepresentation of surtitling may be considered a shortcoming, since this is one of the leading modes of translation in live opera nowadays and has been researched from a number of vantage points. The problem is signalled by the editors, who lament the fact that the volume does not address media accessibility, of which surtitling is an example (p. 6). The closing chapter of this section by Lucile Desblache discusses W.H. Auden with reference to his libretti translations. Desblache argues that his poetics of translation was founded on more contemporary approaches of rewriting and manipulating as well as collaborative work, which he exercised with his partner Chester Kallman.

The following section (*Across genres and media*) is devoted to a discussion of non-operatic artistic forms, all of which are founded on operatic hypotexts. The key idea is the potential of intersemiotic translation to establish new genres, and reconcile contrasting aesthetics exemplified by, e.g. Oriental symbolism and Western realism, by building a creative bridge between them. This reasoning is visible in the contributions by Kenny Ng and Yoshiko Takebe, both of whom present a dual East-West perspective. The contribution by M^a Carmen África Vidal Claramonte demonstrates a relatively recent understanding of the term ‘translation’: the author follows “the new post-positivist approaches” (p. 96) and views translation as a post-translation or rewriting, i.e. “translation in constant movement” against traditional binaries. The case discussed is a ballet founded on a creative subversion of genders and “a re-vision and re-relating of different genres and different works” (p. 106). The author arrives at what she sees as an “inconclusive conclusion” that the case is an example of translation that does not intend to “achieve equivalence in the sense of the prescriptivist theories of the 1960s”, but rather a *new* instance of translation that may open up promising research avenues. Applying the term ‘translation’ to a case which other scholars may classify as an adaptation or a hybrid creation may be questioned here: this is probably not what Gambier (2016, p. 902) has in mind when he hopes to make the term ‘translation’ meaningful again. Still, this broad understanding is in line with the contributor’s perspective of dissolution of rigid borders and binaries. It also exemplifies another potential shortcoming of the publication, which is somehow excused by the editors. Expanding the understanding of central terms to almost all possible forms of artistic creativity results in terminological chaos and ambiguity leading to no meaning, which is a fact recognised by the editors. However, they regard this terminological variety to be complementary, “valid and, indeed, necessary if an encompassing view is to be achieved” (p. 3).

In contrast, the contributions in the following section (*Text and context*) are written within a more conventional descriptive-explanatory framework and reveal the importance of non-linguistic factors. This is evident in the contribution by Pierre Degott, who presents a comparative analysis of several singable translations of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, all of which “depart, each in its own way, from the original version” (p. 155). Even though Degott does not concentrate on the issue of singability, he explains the observed differences between translations by moving beyond linguistics, to include questions of temporal and social contexts, poetics of translators and target audience profiles. The conclusions confirm the importance of functionalist approaches, which Low (2017) indicates as the most viable in the case of singable translation. The impact of the translator is highlighted by the other contributors in the section:

Cindy Ngai aims to trace the translator's voice by analysing three different prose translations of the Chinese opera *The Peony Pavilion* and the accompanying paratexts, concentrating on prefaces and introductions. They serve as a valuable piece of information helping the researcher reconstruct the translator's strategy, as the translators frequently made their standpoint explicit. Along the same lines, Klaus Kaindl presents the historical context of the Third Reich, addressing the question of the translator's role and translation politics from the point of view of Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus. Kaindl discusses in detail the need for creating new translations of three operas composed by Mozart and proves that those translations served as a political tool used to "eliminate the customary Jewish translations" and to fit the ideological norm of the Reich (p. 177). What is interesting is the habitus of the translator, which allowed him to cleverly reconcile both goals and produce a translation, which, according to Kaindl, is free from ideological charges. The literary approach is adopted by Danielle Thien, who examines French and English translations of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, and aims to challenge the belief that altering the sense of the libretto is fine as long as it follows the musical notation. She concludes that such changes may frequently shape the way in which singers interpret operatic characters, which she illustrates with clichéd images of Butterfly.

The following section (*From text to stage*) is meant as a natural supplement to the previous one, as it aims to emphasise the word-music interplay rather than the socio-cultural context of translation. Karen Wilson-deRoze examines the challenge of translating Wagner's operas, which exemplify the "word-tone intersemiosis", understood as the actual relationship between words and music in creating meaning (p. 244). Acknowledging the great challenge of Wagnerian rhymes and alliterative verse, Wilson-deRoze highlights the significance of the intention of the composer and his stylistic choices and argues that deeming the word-tone synthesis irrelevant (although justified if we prioritise the audience) is a great loss. The contribution by Gyöngyvér Bozsik aims to continue the discussion on word-music relationships by providing examples of singable translations, but in fact, Bozsik analyses singable versions (with examples of spoken passages) and surtitles, frequently switching between both modes, which makes the reasoning in the chapter slightly chaotic. The final contribution, by Özlem Şahin Soy and Merve Şenol, takes the reader not only to the lighter genre of operetta, but also to the problem of the reception of a translated work. The authors stress the importance of adapting strategies, e.g. aimed at rendering humour and creating naturalness, which render translated libretti more accessible to a wider audience, thus catering for popularity rather than the original musico-semantic match.

The final section (*Libretto translation revisited*) focuses on translating libretti, presenting various translation modes. For instance, Patrick John Corness's analysis indicates constraint-driven differences between a singable and a prose translation. The author juxtaposes the need to follow the musical notation against the need to give precedence to content over style (p. 311), which he illustrates with semantic and stylistic shifts explained by the contrasting skopoi. The question of different audiences, circumstances and goals is echoed by Miquel Edo, who argues that in the case of contemporary audiences there is a tendency to modernise the original libretto and avoid intertextual references that frequently carry the archaic flavour. In other words, the strategy preferred by readers and critics is the strategy of "naturalising," consisting in "avoiding any enigmatic or puzzling solutions" (pp. 323-324). The volume closes with a contribution by Marta Mateo, who discusses multilingual libretti by analysing translations published as CD inserts and DVD subtitles. She lists several factors that are common to multilingual operas, including the

hybrid nature of translation, the role and degree of heteroglossia or its intertextuality (pp. 342-343). In her conclusions Mateo underlines the complex nature of meaning in opera, which may be additionally challenged by meaningful multilingualism, though the latter is not always rendered in translation in a consistent manner.

Despite minor shortcomings, such as the terminological variety, which at points may be misleading, or the underrepresentation of surtitling, the volume is a significant publication deserving attention and readership, as it addresses the relatively neglected area of opera translation. It demonstrates that opera translation need not be limited to singability, but, as any translation type, can be analysed within theoretical frameworks of translation studies, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, sociology, musicology and others. The volume shows that a genre considered elitist and hermetic may contribute to moving translation outside the corset of linguistic equivalence and pose a number of pertinent translation research questions, including the construction of meaning in hybrid art forms, the concept of text, and the growing need for collaborative translation or for questioning traditional binaries.

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