

Małgorzata Grajter

Applying Translation Theory to Musicological Research

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Applying Translation Theory to Musicological Research

 Springer

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*To the memory of my Grandparents,
Krystyna, Zdzisław and Maria*

Foreword

Małgorzata Grajter presents here a monograph resulting from her many years of devoted research on the issue of applying translation theory to musicological research. This represents an unusually inspiring, challenging, and rich study of the problem of how musical discourse can be interpreted in the light of translation theory. A truly creative aspect here is, of course, that whereas the concept of translation most often refers to verbal texts and hence is thought to belong to the area of linguistics, here it is applied to non-verbal phenomena, of which music is an example *par excellence*. Yet when we start to ponder music as such, namely, music as a process and a form of communication, we easily come to the intuitive conclusion that all music is, in fact, translation. As Grajter observes in connection with something Luciano Berio said, music history is, all things considered, a history of translation.

Naturally, then, we must start *ab ovo*, i.e., with a definition of the concept of translation itself. The easiest way to specify this is to see it as a bipolar issue: there is a **source** text and a **target** text, i.e., a text which is translated or transformed or transducted into something else. In fact, we are here also surprisingly close to the basic definition of narrativity: it is a process in which x becomes y, something different, *tout simplement*. Nevertheless, the translation may concern a sign, a text, a language, a culture... and this is quite easily interpreted in musical terms, as a musical sign, musical text, i.e., work, composition, musical language or style and musical culture. We are therefore immediately brought to the core and foundation of all musicological discussion.

Let us distinguish nine different points whereby Grajter's approach expands to cover the whole field of musical research.

- (1) First, musical signs. It was as early as 1973 that the Swedish musicologist Ingmar Bengtsson, in his groundbreaking study *Musikvetenskap. en översikt (Musicology, an Overview—*which to my knowledge was not translated into English and was readable and much used only in the Swedish-speaking Nordic countries in their academic curricula) saw music as a communication chain along which musical signs were transformed, or as we rather say here, translated into always-new substances.

To begin with, there might be a musical idea in the mind of a composer. We may call this a φ -sign (phenomenon), which is translated into a score, into notes, i.e., n-signs. Busoni said that this was the very first of all arrangements. The notes are read by a performer, and again something physical, visual, or graphic is translated into phii-signs. The performer then translates these signs into gestures, i.e., g-signs (Thomas A. Sebeok's notion). Through these signs he meets an instrument which he uses, again, to bring about sounding signs, i.e., ph-signs (physical), which can be acoustically measured if one likes. These ph-signs reach the ear of a listener and so again they turn into something 'cognitive', i.e., φ -signs—phenomenal, experienced signs. A music critic may write an overview and again translate φ -signs—into verbal signs. If the review is read by someone in the communication chain, this creates feedback, or, to use biosemiotic metalanguage, *Merken* becomes *Wirken* (Jakob von Uexküll).

This complex process seems to have no center at all, no privileged place of the real 'musical', i.e., musical object, as Pierre Schaeffer once put it. The nature of musical translations has been portrayed in a congenial manner by Marcel Proust in his famous passage of a concert at the Parisian salon of Madame Verdurin, in his novel *The Prisoner*, one of the volumes in the series *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Music exists there in the physical behavior of the performers of the Vinteuil Sonata, the fictive composer's septetto, or in the minds of the listeners, who do not understand anything of it, albeit they pretend, or in the aesthetics of the work, in the sound quality of music, in the impressions it evokes, the synaesthetic signs it stimulates, or in the process of the creation of the work as a reconstruction from the composer's manuscripts. All this can, fully reasonably, be called translation.

- (2) In addition, the representation issue in music is the same as that of how something extramusical and non-musical is translated into musical discourse, which brings into play all of the problems involved in Leonard B. Meyer's embodied and referential meanings, as well as the historic phenomenon of musical hermeneutics, even in the extreme manifestations presented by Arnold Schering.
- (3) After all, is there anything like the authentic 'translation' in music when we perform a piece from earlier periods? Where is the limit of such music, for which we need as Charles Rosen's 'historical sympathy', i.e., do we need to search for codes with which to help us translate it for our understanding? Some interpreters say: there are no limits. For instance, Pablo Casals said that Johann Sebastian Bach's music is universal and so we are entitled to use all our musical skills to produce a lively performance of it. There is no such thing as a *Werktreu* interpretation, i.e., a translation as something which refuses to add any new qualities to the performance. The whole problem of authenticity is thus essentially of a translational nature. If translation is a process between two texts—source and target—there is no such thing as 'source' in the true sense. Think, for instance, of Wagner's operas. Cosima believed in the maintenance of the authentic style, but this was a perfect paradox since there never existed anything like an 'authentic Wagner style', for the quite simple reason that he himself continually changed his advice and interpretation from day to day in Bayreuth.

- (4) Some, such as Andrew Chesterman, say that translation is a normative issue, although for him norms are not empirical categories: people follow them intuitively. So, too, do we instinctively feel the difference between a successful translation and one that is a failure. The language of a translator can be felt to be artificial and false. The whole culture is included here. One modern theory of ethnomusicology has it that music is culture, and nothing but culture, and that we do not even need any notes. The opposite view, in the classical European tradition, argues that everything is in the score, so we repeat: score, score, score... like the famous Finnish teacher of the star orchestral conductor Jorma Panula.
- (5) We come close to the case of a translation as a fake and forgery, to use Umberto Eco's terms. Some translation is done into a language which no one is really speaking; it is hypercorrect, and the phenomenon is called in translation theories 'translationism'. Much of the discussion around translation moves in this field of the uncertainty/certainty of the translation, as Grajter's many illustrative examples show.
- (6) Moreover, it is often the case that a good deal of cultural knowledge is needed, for instance, to translate quite literally the indications of a composer in the score, not only the Italian ones (like *allegro*, *adagio*, *lento*, *presto*, *rallentando*, *ritardando*, *sotto voce*, *diminuendo*, *quasi parlando*, etc.—although even they are not automatic but need interpretation, i.e., a secondary translation) but, say, German: *durchaus phantastisch*, *rasch*, *mäßig bewegt*, or French: *très calme*, *en dehors*. Musical discourse is surrounded by verbal discourse in all its phases. The idea of absolute music is seldom fulfilled as such.
- (7) This statement brings us to the field of arrangements, *Bearbeitungen*, which is an important aspect in Małgorzata Grajter's study. Busoni arranged Bach *Inventions* for his pupils by adding performance signs, so trying to translate what Bach in fact meant... or then quite overtly in piano pieces like the piano arrangement of *Chaconne*, which is a new piece altogether. Brahms did the same but decided to keep it only for the left hand. Moreover, arrangements of orchestral pieces represent special cases of translations; Liszt 'translated' all Beethoven's symphonies onto piano—and did succeed indeed in rendering the original orchestral sound thereby. This did not happen in his Wagner arrangements perhaps, except in *Isolde's Liebestod*, whereas he also translated his symphonic poems for piano. The essential point in Liszt, however, is not in the sound or phii-signs and technical virtuosic signs, i.e., special g-signs, but in the aesthetics behind them. If this is forgotten, his arrangements may sound quite terrible.
- (8) Ultimately, what is whole music analysis itself but a translation of the music into another metalanguage, which should reveal its deeper essence. An extreme case of this is Schenker who believed in translating all music into his *Urlinie* and bass line. He thought that composing was, after all, a kind of translation from the *Ursatz* into more and more phenomenal fields and levels of musical message. However, he could be criticized on the basis that his translation was nothing but a reduction of music into some more abstract categories. After all, as we know there are two kinds of analysis: either the **prescriptive**, which means that we can produce similar message or similar types of messages as

the original from the results of the analysis—like in the idea of generative grammars originating from Chomsky and brought to music by many scholars in the 1980s especially; or the **descriptive**, i.e., there is no intention to get back to the original in this ‘translation’ of music, as is often found in the analysis of a structuralist inspiration, for instance, when applying the Paris School semiotic square or *parcours generatif* to music. These efforts often deal with more or less ambiguous areas of musical semantics. However, the semiotic square brings a kind of order, albeit a fictional one (!), to the empirical cases of music which may otherwise remain a chaotic universe of musical signs.

- (9) We may look at the translation process in the framework of some new semiotic theories, for instance, existential semiotics. Then translation is a process from presign to act sign, and from act sign to postsign. Or from exosigns to endosigns (again, close to biosemiotic issues).

Nevertheless, in the canonical form of the so-called ‘zemic’ model there is a movement from one mode of being to others, altogether four in number, as was once the case in the aforementioned semiotic square. Thus, we proceed from *Moi1*, i.e., the physical kinetic form of music, to *Moi2*, its articulation into an ‘actor’, person, i.e., individual composer and his style, and furthermore into *Soi2*, i.e., social practices, genres, forms, classes, etc. and, ultimately, to *Soi1*, i.e., aesthetics or abstract ideas; or, if you like, reversing things stepwise, from *Soi1*, i.e., abstract norms, (the ones Lévi-Strauss described as intelligible) stepwise to *Moi1*, i.e., the sensible, sensuous, physical qualities. However, are these transformations translations? Yes, in the sense that one mode becomes another one, but always preserving something from the previous phase. So, one mode serves as the source and the next mode as the target. Here we note that, if the case is purely that of becoming something different compared to the starting point, the ‘original’, then it would not be called a translation.

Consequently, we can see how Małgorzata Grajter’s study is surrounded by all kind of ‘mysteries’ of music, its most essential and perpetually unresolved problems. Her book is very coherently divided into four sections: (1) concepts of translation history; (2) conceptual content of translation itself; (3) concrete musical cases; and (4) analytic practice in the fields of intramusical, intermusical, and extramusical issues, as she puts it.

Thus, we have here at last one very serious academic study which discusses the core phenomena of all musical communication with a high musical and scientific expertise. And even if one refuses to accept the idea that music is a communication, as some do, Grajter’s research does not lose its value in elucidating the essential problems of any musical activity, history, and aesthetics.

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music might be and resulted in my participation in the conference entitled *Multi-modal Translation in the Arts* (May 2023), which brought many new reflections into this book.

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Introduction

In the 2009 edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* Roger Ellis and Liz Oakley-Brown mentioned an example of Arthur Coleridge's English translation of Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Egmont* (Ellis and Oakley-Brown 2009: 345), which contains piano transcriptions of Ludwig van Beethoven and Franz Schubert's music inspired by the drama, and additionally features a reproduction of an engraving portraying Egmont's dream. The combination of linguistic translation with musical arrangement (Goethe 1868) makes the parallel between them quite obvious: both are renditions, or equivalents of the original work, and both serve the purpose of its distribution and dissemination among those recipients who would not be able to engage with the work otherwise (Example 1). Additionally, the frontispiece depicts one of the key scenes of the drama (Egmont falling asleep), which is also a form of translation—an intersemiotic one, as Roman Jakobson would call it. Based on this example, one can not only observe how the content is reinterpreted or reproduced in different media, but also how these media unite in a synergetic entity, creating new levels of meaning.

The first impulse which made me think of drawing a parallel between music and translation came from the listening experience: a jazz version of the songs of Polish big beat group Skaldowie recorded by Wojciech Gogolewski—a Łódź-born jazz pianist—and his jazz trio, sounded very much like a musical equivalent to translation: the tunes, the harmonies were all recognizable, yet transformed and recreated in the new musical genre. The term *musical translation*, which I started to introduce from then on, alongside my very first attempts to apply research tools derived from translation studies, has proved to be an efficient remedy for the terminological chaos in the field: the rather unfortunate, yet widely accepted terms *transcription*, *arrangement*, *Bearbeitung*, etc., each of them having a slightly different range of meaning, have mostly been used interchangeably, causing a great deal of semantic confusion. During the course of my research, it became clear that the applicability of the term *translation* in music does not limit itself to the phenomenon of arrangement as traditionally understood but can also be employed in reference to musical performance in both Classical and popular music (cover songs). Furthermore, the term should also

MELODRAMA

Poco sostenuto

P sotto voce

Sweet Sleep!
Thou comest
like a pure joy.

Unasked for,
unsought by prayer.

Vivace

thou unravest the knots
of intense thought
and blendest together
images of joy

and sorrow.

Tempo primo

the tide of secret inner harmonies
flows on unheeded.

and mantled in the sweet delirious visions

più moto

we die away in forgetfulness and cease to be.

a tempo

pp

(He goes to sleep,
the music continues.)

Example 1 An excerpt from Ludwig van Beethoven’s incidental music to Goethe’s *Egmont* set for piano, as published alongside Arthur Coleridge’s translation of the play

encompass all these circumstances in which music translates, or is translated, into other sign systems.

These observations also coincided with my personal experiences in linguistic translation. As a Polish-born musicologist working on foreign composers (predominantly Ludwig van Beethoven) and studying a significant amount of foreign-language

musicological literature, I was constantly confronted with the necessity of translating foreign texts and authors into my native language. Conversely, as I entered the international community of researchers, I needed to translate *myself* in order to make my study comprehensible. Quite paradoxically, being a native speaker of a language as internationally obscure as Polish, and the constant need to translate texts into, or from, several foreign languages over the years, has put me in the privileged position of being able to gain some empirical knowledge about linguistic translation. But probably this experience is shared by most of us humans functioning in the globalized world: whether we are aware of it or not, we translate all sorts of things and are surrounded with translated texts on a daily basis.

The Goal and Method of the Study

One of the principal goals of this study is to allow the new methodologies derived from translation theories to permeate the research into musical works, which usually exist in multiple versions and undergo numerous transformations. However, before turning to the specific examples of practical application of these methodologies, it also seems necessary to define the scope of the proposed term *musical translation*, i.e., to determine what translation and translating might imply for music as a semiotic system. As Lucile Desblache points out, ‘music is transcultural by nature’ (Desblache 2018: 309). Therefore, for most translation scholars the phrase ‘translating music’ implies translation of the lyrics or libretti, or whatever linguistic texts that accompany the music. Music, by definition, does not seem to need any translation in the sense of ‘being made understandable’, since it needs no ‘comprehension’: it is understood intuitively by everyone through their emotional response to it (cf. Cooke 1959). This and other common beliefs regarding music and translation can be easily debunked, as observed by Helen Julia Minors (2021: 174–177). If one considers, for instance, the Deaf community, then it becomes clear that hearing-impaired people *do* need some translation of music, which they cannot experience in the ‘normal’ way, into other systems which they understand, e.g., verbal language or sign language. But even for people without hearing impairment music is not exclusively a hearing experience; it is also a visual, tactile, and kinaesthetic experience (cf. Minors 2023: 14). Therefore, it also seemed necessary for this study to identify the ways in which music can interact with other semiotic systems. There is also, of course, the ongoing controversy within translation studies as to whether the term *translation* should be limited to translating between languages. Loosening the tight scope of the term—following its etymology, as proposed in Chap. 1 of the present book—would certainly allow music to find a firm place in translation theory.

As for the general methodological approach to this complex subject taken by the author, it is situated at the intersection of the conceptual and empirical models of research (Pérez-González 2014: 141) and confronts the theoretical conceptualization of translation (and translation in music) with practice—in our case, musical practice. It seemed crucial to give voice to the composers and performers who shared their