

1 Introduction

Song in human culture

Here are four initial assumptions:

- Vocal music features in the cultural activity of every human society.
- Every song has a verbal as well as a musical dimension.
- A treasury of the world's great songs would include dozens of languages.
- Therefore translating song-lyrics is worth doing.

Music, one of humanity's great arts, is a very international activity. Although those who call it a "universal language" underestimate the differences between varieties, they are not totally wrong. Instrumental music certainly crosses national and linguistic borders, frequently and easily. But most of the music that people most love is vocal music, with or without accompanying instruments. Much of today's huge "music industry" concentrates on songs. And top billing, even when there are gifted instrumentalists, almost always goes to singers.

Almost everyone hears songs every day, at least in electronic form. Cafés and supermarkets pipe them into our ears. In the twenty-first century we have unprecedented access to recorded songs in many languages, from many places, from several past centuries. We can hear them on the radio, YouTube or similar sources; we can watch them on screens; we can read the lyrics online; we can sometimes download the notated music. This has meant a much better availability of different music styles and instruments and greater familiarity with the diversity of songs. In addition, many people walk around with a kind of mental playlist in their heads – an archive of dozens of songs that they can hum or whistle. And some people retain in their memory the lyrics of dozens of songs, or at least the first verse and chorus. Perhaps you, as you read this page, are simultaneously hearing "ear-worms" – song-tunes wriggling around in your brain whether you like it or not?

All cultures have songs, with words in their own languages: they sing old songs and they make new ones. Song involves people of all ages, towns and countryside, common people and the elite. Singing has often been part of human rituals, by itself or associated with dance and drama. Song can be secular, sacred, sentimental or satirical. Song is part of most people's cultural and linguistic identities, part of many cultural events – weddings, funerals, festivals. While we may associate song with some regions more than others (Italy? Wales?), the truth is that it is

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everywhere. Most peoples have songs that they hold dear, and many individuals can name “favourite songs”, songs which they consider special – highly memorable, sublimely beautiful, unusually moving, uplifting or profound. And the vast and varied corpus of valued song could be considered as a world heritage treasure.

There is the huge variety found in vocal music. The phrase “religious song”, for example, covers a vast range. Is there much in common between a Greek Orthodox chant, a five-part Latin Mass, a Handel oratorio with large orchestra, a Salvation Army chorus, an African-American Gospel song and a Christmas Carol piped into a supermarket? Yet those examples do not extend past the frontiers of Christianity – ethnographers could extend the list much further. Even the word “hymn” covers a multitude of sins.

Secular song is even broader: there are songs intended for the tavern or the salon, the cabaret or the music hall, the village fair, the recording studio, the opera house, the rock festival, even the nursery. There are glad songs and sad songs, solo songs and sing-alongs, dancing songs, marching songs, harvest songs, drinking songs, cabaret songs . . . Yet there is always something in common: the components of words, music and performance. Although the author of this book cannot claim familiarity with many kinds of song (few can), he does hope that his book will have wide relevance.

Vocal music is a way of expressing emotion, and has been at many times and in many places – intense and memorable emotion. It is also a way of telling and retelling stories, developing fictional characters, commenting on events, entertaining people and making fun of people. Usually, though not always, the songs’ owners value the words as well as the non-vocal elements. Real connoisseurs of the song genre care about the words: they wish for performances that do justice to the verbal component, that truly celebrate the marriage of words and music. (And they think that singers who perform good texts incomprehensibly ought to be forced to sit through ten witty songs played on a saxophone.)

Clearly, the verbal elements of this vocal music cannot cross linguistic borders as readily as the musical elements. This is regrettable and predictable. But it is not irremediable, since the skill of translators can come into play. Indeed translation has long played an important role in the field of music, albeit an often underrated one. (It is common, after all, in international fields of human activity – e.g. science, commerce – for translation to play an important and underrated role.) The main focus of this book is the interface between words and music.

And behind this small focus is a huge concern: one of the continuing problems facing humanity in the twenty-first century is animosity between nations, always compounded by cultural ignorance and usually linked to language differences. Empathy needs to be strengthened, everywhere. Perhaps we need to listen to each other’s songs more, both music and words.

Which came first, the words or the music?

Often we don’t know. One pattern is “words-first”: a musician takes a text by someone else – a text deemed good or promising or sacred – and “sets it” to

music, creating a melody inspired by its mood, rhythm and meaning. In these cases the pre-existing words often prompt particular choices of music: contrasts, melodic phrases, percussion, emotional effects of harmony. In nineteenth-century German Lieder, for example, the poems set to music help to explain the principal rhythm, the tempi and tempo-changes of each song, the ways the melody sometimes soars up or plunges down, and the often adventurous musical parts for piano or other instruments. To listen to such songs with no understanding of the words may therefore be puzzling and unsettling, since the words are a key to the music. In the case of a famous Italian aria, Monteverdi's "Lasciatemi morire", the second chord sounded so terribly dissonant that one British editor amended the bass-line in order to "correct it". Yet that striking dissonance was inspired by the character's cry of pain, meaning: "Let me die". The pre-existing words explained the unusual music – as the editor ought to have known.

Another pattern is "music-first", where a promising melody is the partial inspiration for the lyric. Would you have guessed that the Beatles' classic "Yesterday" began as a tune, for which the words were subsequently invented? And that the first phrase they thought of was "Scrambled Eggs"? Then there is a third pattern: a singer-songwriter develops the music and the lyric in tandem, zigzagging from one to the other. During the process both words and melody can be very fluid, until they come together.

For translators, fortunately, these patterns make little difference. We can approach the lyrics as finished artefacts, and try to make them serviceable in a new context.

Introductory questions and answers

What is this book about?

It's about translating, in the sense of the interlingual transfer of content, especially meaning, from one language to another. This is a relatively narrow definition, yet a normal one in the translating profession. The book will devote a lot of space to the forms of decision-making and problem-solving that all translators engage in: appreciating the original text in the context of its own language and culture, generating options in another language and choosing the optimal phrase to satisfy a specific purpose – with this difference that it looks at texts not often discussed in translation literature: song-lyrics. Song-lyric is a catch-all term for any text sung in any vocal music. This book asks frequent questions about the purpose of translating a song-lyric. Is the translation intended for reading on page or screen, for example, or for singing in the target language?

It is a "How-To" book. Unlike some past discussions of song-translations, its focus is not on describing and analysing how people in the past have translated and adapted vocal music, but on suggesting strategies and tactics for doing it well in the future. Yet these prescriptions cannot be dogmatic ones. Sometimes the prescription reads more like: "Here are some good questions to ask yourself." Whereas for the translation of official documents – or legal or scientific texts – there

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exist protocols and codes of ethics, there is nothing like an established “best practice” for song-texts. On the contrary, there has been a confusing freedom of practice and terminology in this area.

Who is this book for?

One group is students of translation. Not just those who have English as their first language – in the US, UK or elsewhere – but students who can read English, whether living in Europe, South America, India, China or elsewhere. Song-lyrics are not typical texts, in any language: they are creative, and often playful. Investigating their quirks may provide a fun alternative to the generally informative texts that you work on and may well help to enlarge your “box of tools” for solving translation problems.

The book is also aimed at the following: professional translators who sometimes encounter vocal texts; researchers into song or translation or inter-cultural exchange; singers and amateur wordsmiths interested in the challenge of translating songs; and fans of vocal music generally.

What kinds of song?

All kinds of songs in all languages – secular and sacred, sentimental and satirical, old songs in dead languages, new songs in dialect: the whole alphabet from A to Z (from air to zarzuela, through blues, carols, epithalamiums, folksongs, glees . . .). This may seem ambitious, yet it is justified, because all songs, despite the huge diversity of genres in many languages and cultures, always have a musical component and a verbal component. Wordless chants are not songs in the fullest sense: the beautiful *vocalises* of (say) Fauré, Rachmaninov and Villa-Lobos merely use the human voice as a melody instrument. Songs need voices singing words.

Optionally, songs may also involve musical instruments, and usually they do (e.g. one guitar). Optionally, they can be published in notation on a page; yet the “sheet music” is not really the music. Optionally, they may be accompanied by visual elements, ranging from simple gestures by the performers to elaborate video clips. Yet these visual things are adjuncts: they are not intrinsic to the songs. Although retailers may well choose to separate items into such categories as pop/hip-hop or gospel/jazz/blues etc., those are merely sub-genres.

From the standpoint of translating, two notable features about this genre are:

- the variety of specific purposes for which a translation might be sought (see chapter 3), and
- the very tight constraints imposed by one of these purposes, namely when the translation must itself be singable (see chapters 5 and 6).

Besides, although the term “song” is not used for extended vocal performances like musicals or operas, much of this book is applicable to those musical-verbal

hybrids – and to choral music as well, whether or not the choir item is obviously a song. This book is concerned not only with song-lyrics written as such and poems later set to music, but also with other kinds of text used in various forms of singing.

All good songs marry verbal communication to musical communication. The best are more than worthy to be carried and enhanced by music. Some people might argue that the song-lyrics in certain sub-genres are weak and not worth translating, and they are sometimes right; but this book prefers to concentrate on how to do it.

Its emphasis, admittedly, will be on songs where the words are relatively interesting, what jazz-singer Malcolm McNeill has called “songs with staying power”. But in all genres we can find strong, well-crafted songs with words that play and don’t plod. This book offers tools and questions that might help you to translate whatever song you wish to translate, whatever your motivation and whatever your purpose. The tools might not be helpful with every song, but the questions are likely to be useful.

Now a little disclaimer: while discussing translations and adaptations (chapter 7 will attempt to distinguish between these), this book will not examine “Replacement Texts”. These are cases where a song-tune has crossed a language-border and acquired *a new set of words having no connection with the original words and meanings*. This phenomenon is fairly common, both within languages and across languages. For example a sacred song may be given secular words or vice versa. The new texts are not “translations” because nothing verbal has been “carried over” (*übersetzt* in German), and therefore the resulting musico-verbal creation ought not to be called “the same song”. This practice of writing new words for existing tunes is a legitimate cultural phenomenon, but it is not translating or adapting.

It’s really about classical songs, highbrow stuff, isn’t it?

No. Chapter 3 concerns the situation where songs are performed in the SL, and this tends to happen more with highbrow songs. But this tendency is far from universal (for example pop songs are sung in English by Chinese or Brazilian groups). Conversely, chapters 5 and 6 concern the situation when songs are performed in the TL, and this tends to occur more with popular songs. Yet some classical songs are often sung in translation – e.g. those of Tchaikovsky – and this option ought to be used more. Besides, the dichotomy between highbrow and lowbrow, between “serious music” and “popular music”, is often exaggerated.

What do those acronyms mean? The first of many, no doubt!

Actually there are only four:

SL for source language, ST for source text,
TL for target language, TT for target text.

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These are used a great deal, admittedly. And there is a compelling reason: the book claims to be relevant to any language. Though it may seem at times to concern one language-pair, it aspires to discuss strategies and tactics that could be applied to translating in any direction between any pair of languages.

If it were just about translating in one direction from one particular language, I would be saying something like “the French text” and “the English text”, since there lies my greatest competence. But no, it attempts to have a much wider applicability, and for this reason it speaks of transforming a source text (ST) in a source language (SL) into a target text (TT) in a target language (TL).

Then why are so many of the examples in English?

It is sensible nowadays for an international book to be published in English. As a consequence, this is the one language understandable by every reader. Besides, the most widely diffused pop-music in recent decades has originated in the US and the UK.

But even the pages devoted to the specificities of English (as a SL and as a TL) are intended to highlight a general principle, namely that *every language has its particular features*, all of which could be explored in their own terms. Furthermore, the book is not meant only for native English-speakers. Many readers will have English as their second or third language. That is why the term “foreign language” will be avoided – foreign to whom?

So here’s a book trying to talk about general principles. We – author and readers – will need to remind ourselves that general principles cannot be based only on one or two languages or language-pairs.

Why are many of the examples chosen from the past?

Why not? A general principle can be illustrated from any time or place. Believe it or not, vocal music did exist before YouTube, and song-translating has been done for ages! Vocal music in English goes back centuries, and that of Shakespeare’s time is of high quality. Besides, this author prefers to limit the number of copyright permissions sought and to choose examples from the public domain. Actually, a few don’t come from real songs – but whether real lyrics or not, they are words and phrases of the kind one might encounter in translating songs.

But the music is more important than the words, isn’t it?

Generally speaking, yes. Most listeners focus on the music, at least on first encounter. There are many ways in which the musical dimension of a song can dominate the words – strong rhythms, percussive effects, instrumental riffs, striking harmonies, vocal timbres, changes in orchestration. The magic of good music is such that even if you can hear the words, the musical elements dominate. I might get some pleasure from (say) a Hungarian song whose words I don’t understand, whereas I wouldn’t watch a Hungarian movie unless there

are subtitles to convey the verbal dimension. In songs the music is more interesting, on average.

But plenty of songs are not average. Some have awful words that ought to be scrapped (national anthems, perhaps?); some are short and repetitive, accompanied by loud dance rhythms which make following the words difficult, and with a content dominated by clichés about dating and love; some are so weak that their success is due only to a charismatic performer. Conversely, many songs rely heavily on words, in order to tell stories or jokes; and the particular *frisson* of the most heart-breaking songs arises from the mysterious marriage of a verbal phrase and a musical one. Some have survived solely through their texts – such as the ancient Greek lyric poems whose music was lost long ago. Usually the words matter, at least to some extent, or at least they mattered to the creators – the songwriters, poets and composers in question. The relative importance of words and music is discussed below under the heading “Logocentric?”

Translating song lyrics is difficult!

OK, so nobody will use this book! After all, no one ever attempts mental challenges like jigsaws or cryptic crosswords or chess puzzles or Scrabble problems or fiendish Sudokus, do they? But consider the English proverb: “Calm seas don’t make good mariners.”

The vast field of song-translating

Translators are not “unsung heroes” – not if you consider how often their TTs are literally sung.

Many people associate a song with a particular performer – often a singer-songwriter – and this is normal enough. Yet the song is not simply that performance: it has a notional existence independent of any individual performance or recording. The same song can be sung at different pitches, with different accompanying instruments and somewhat different speeds. Can songs be sung in different languages? We know that they can be, because they are! Yes, songs are sung in translation, a lot of songs, very frequently. Translating is done, and is done successfully.

Consider major works of music theatre. Many Broadway musicals are adapted into various languages, including French, German and Swedish. Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* has been performed in Spanish and Catalan. *Fiddler on the Roof* has been performed in Hebrew. The rock opera *Evita*, originally in English, has been performed in Spanish and Portuguese. Conversely, the 1980 musical *Les Misérables* has had more performances in English than in the original French.

As for operas, dozens, if not hundreds have been sung in translation. It used to be common for Italian operas (Verdi, Rossini etc.) to be performed in German, French or English. Tchaikovsky’s *Evgeny Onegin* can still be heard in English and French. A few operas even had their first performances in translated versions, e.g. *Samson et Dalila* by Saint-Saëns. Nowadays, however, most translations of opera are done not for singing but for reading on surtitle or subtitle screens (see chapter 3).

Operas were often performed in translation.

This page (Figure 1.1) comes from a nineteenth-century British collection of arias, intended to help amateurs sing and play. It records on paper an aria by Gounod, with words by Barbier and Carré after the German of Goethe. In this piano-vocal score you see the French text underlaid to the tune and sandwiched between two singable versions into English and Italian, anonymous.

The English version is not so much a translation as an adaptation. And look at bar 6 – the English adds a syllable at the start (suppressing a slur) and then subtracts one (adding a slur not present in the French).

When all was young

(Quando a te Lieta)

(FAUST)

The musical score is for the aria 'Quando a te Lieta' from Gounod's opera 'Faust'. It is in the key of D major and 3/4 time, marked 'Andante'. The score consists of three systems. The first system shows the piano introduction with a dynamic marking of *p* and a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking. The second system begins with the vocal entry, marked *p*, with the English lyrics: 'When all was young and pleas-ant May— was' and the French lyrics: 'Si le bon - heur— à sou - ri - re t'in -'. The third system continues the vocal line with English lyrics: 'bloom - ing, I thy poor friend, took part with thee in play; Now that the' and French lyrics: '-vi - te Jo - yeux a - lors, je sens un doux é - moi, Si la dou-'. The piano accompaniment continues throughout, with a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking in the second system.

Figure 1.1 Faust, from a piano score of arias

And what of hit songs? It is common for a successful song to be “covered” several times, that is, re-recorded by another artist with modifications to the music and sometimes the words. This may seem strange, since the hit doubtless owed its success to an excellent performance, which the covers fail to match. Sometimes they disrespect the songs, annoy the original artists and breach copyright laws. But covers are numerous, and some of them, unsurprisingly, have been translations.

Thus a hit like Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah”, in addition to many covers in English, has been sung in several languages. Audiences are often not told that they are hearing a translation or adaptation. It is well known that some of the songs sung in English by ABBA were born in Swedish. But not everyone realises that several “Elvis Presley songs” were originally in Italian – e.g. “Surrender” (1960) began life as “Torna a Sorrento” (1902) – or that the original words to “My Way” (made famous by Sinatra) were in French “Comme d’habitude”. Similarly, “The Girl from Ipanema” began life in Brazilian Portuguese, as a song by Vinicius de Moraes and Tom Jobim.

QUIZ. Which of the following statements is not true?

The musical *Cats* has been adapted into several languages including Hungarian.

The French opera *Carmen* has been translated into Xhosa.

The “Hallelujah Chorus”, which uses phrases of the King James *Bible* (translated from Greek), was subsequently translated, with the help of Luther’s *Bible*, into the native language of the composer Händel.

The British hit “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” (1912) had travelled so far by 1915 that it was sung in New Zealand Māori as “He roa te wā ki Tipirere”.

The Elvis Presley song “Wooden Heart” has been translated into Latin as “Cor ligneum”.

The jaunty *chanson* “Aux Champs-Élysées”, a homage to the famous Paris avenue, originated as a British song: “Waterloo Road”.

Bob Dylan’s song “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” was a big hit in Israel in its Hebrew version.

“Pop Goes the Weasel” has been adapted into Modern Greek and sung on the BBC with English subtitles.

An adaptation of “Give Peace a Chance” (John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band) was a big hit at the Klingon Convention in 2017.

Many other performers in English have included translations or adaptations in their repertoire, for example Johnny Mercer, Rod McKuen, Scott Walker. Few people are aware that Pete Seeger’s famous “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” took some lines from the traditional Cossack folksong “Koloda-Duda”. Conversely, many songs are translated out of English. For example “La Quête”,

recognised in France as a “Jacques Brel song”, originated in an American musical, *The Man of La Mancha*. In recent decades, the vogue for US and British work means that many performers elsewhere chose to adapt it into Spanish, Russian or Chinese versions (or else to sing it in fractured English to audiences that maybe don’t care). Not a few popular performers sing or record in more than one language: Björk, Céline Dion, Mariah Carey . . . In Asia, meanwhile, singable translations are made from Persian into Arabic, from Bengali into Hindi, from Japanese into Korean.

Although making singable translations is not easy, it cannot be claimed that the difficulty has great deterrent value – indeed the fine but tricky French texts of Brassens and Brel have tempted many translators in many countries (Brassens 1992). In addition, non-singable translations have been made in their thousands, and dozens are made every day, for example through fansubbing (subtitling of videos by amateur fans).

Logocentric?

Do the words matter in the songs of David Bowie or Michael Jackson? Or those of Taylor Swift or Justin Bieber? Or Adele or Lorde or Ricky Martin or Tim Minchin or the Flight of the Conchords?

Questions of that kind are crude, because they seem to call for a yes/no answer. A more discerning question is “How important are the words in these songs, compared with the music?” But even this question calls for some sort of averaging (40% perhaps) across a large number of works. What the translator really needs to ask is a question focused on the individual case: “How important are the words of this particular song I am tackling?”

The term “logocentric” means word-centred (from the Greek *logos*). Some people use it to characterise the general view that in vocal music the words matter most, and use the term “musico-centric” for the contrary view. But this is altogether too simplistic, despite the airing it has had, for example in the Strauss opera *Capriccio*.

Instead we can apply the term “logocentric” to actual songs where the words matter more, and “musico-centric” to the others. An extreme case of a logocentric song is Noel Coward’s “Mrs Worthington” – which would be a good recitation piece without any music. An extremely musico-centric song is Rossini’s “Cat Duet” where the only word sung is “Miau” (is that Italian or French?). Between those extremes there lies a long continuum.

Here is the lyric of a song that is relatively logocentric:

Older Ladies by Donnalou Stevens (*reproduced by kind permission*)

Well, I ain’t 16, not a beauty queen.
My eyes are baggin’ and my skin is saggin’,
And if that’s the reason that you don’t love me,
Then maybe that’s not love.

Well I ain't 20 either and I don't care neither.
My hair is gray and I like it that way.
And if that's the reason that you don't love me,
Then maybe that's not love.

If you don't think I rock, well we ain't gonna roll.
If you don't think I hung the moon, my hot just turned to cold.
If you want a younger model, I wish you well, sweet pea.
'cause if you can't see what it is you have,
Then you ain't having me.

I got cellulite and achin' feet,
And my thighs kinda jiggle when I giggle or wiggle,
And if that's the reason that you don't love me,
Then maybe that's not love.

My tummy ain't tucked or liposucked.
It's a little poochy, but I still Hoochy Koochy,
And if that's the reason that you don't love me,
Then maybe that's not love.

See, I'm no longer desperate. I'll only have a man,
If he has the smarts to see how hot that I still am.
If you want a younger model, I wish you well, sweet pea.
If you can't see what it is you have,
Then you ain't having me.

Older ladies, older ladies, older ladies . . . are DIVINE!
Well I gotta chicken neck and I love it, by heck,
It makes a double chin whenever I grin,
And if that's the reason that you don't love me,
Then maybe that's not love.

I got saggy breasts that droop from my chest,
Pert near down all the way to my nest,
And if that's the reason that you don't love me,
Then maybe that's not love.

If you don't think I rock, well we ain't gonna roll.
If you don't think I hung the moon, my hot just turned to cold.
If you want a younger model, I wish you well, sweet pea.
'cause if you can't see what it is you've got,
You ain't getting me.

Older ladies, older ladies, older ladies . . . are DIVINE!
Older ladies, older ladies, older ladies . . . what are we ladies? We're DIVINE!

That song “went viral” in 2014–15, mostly because of the words. But the music is stylish too, the performance is lively . . . and the video puts icing on the cake. You can view it on YouTube (just Google “Donnalou Older Ladies”). Logocentric and well crafted, it surely merits translating, probably in a singable version.

Musico-centric songs tend to be more numerous and certainly have less difficulty in crossing language borders, because logocentric songs are too word-focused to be appreciated as pure melody. This distinction is useful because the songs most worth translating are logocentric ones, those that might be too shallow without the verbal dimension.

Near the musico-centric pole of the continuum lie Italian operatic arias: they may have very few words and repeat some phrases eight times in a number of acrobatic ways. Sometimes the words would be very trite without the melody; indeed Rossini once claimed he could make an aria out of a laundry list, presumably an Italian one. In the sacred repertoire, most settings of the Latin Benedictus or the Greek Kyrie emphasise the music much more than the words. The same could be said of many tango songs: the lyrics are subordinate, adjuncts to the emotional music.

Conversely, near the logocentric pole of the continuum lie the witty numbers of Ira Gershwin or Cole Porter (such as “Let’s Do It”), or Tom Lehrer or Stephen Sondheim. A notable logocentric translation out of French is “Master of the House” from *Les Misérables*. The French *chanson* tradition of singers like Edith Piaf and Léo Ferré tends towards the logocentric end of the continuum. Here’s one test: would you invite foreign visitors to listen to these songs if they could not understand the verbal dimension?

A clear case is satire. Nobody can appreciate satirical songs without grasping the words. They are what count most. And it follows that you can’t make good translations of satirical songs unless your strategy is focused on the words – their sense and their bite – even at the expense of their musical integrity.

Apart from satire, some other kinds of songs that are generally logocentric are:

- narrative songs – the story is carried by the words
- comic songs – music can aid jokes but cannot crack them
- dramatic songs – when events are happening, e.g. in a musical
- protest songs – music can aid a message but not state one
- dialogue songs – where one singer delivers words for two characters. Two traditional examples are “Where Have You Been, Billy Boy?” and “Soldier, Soldier, Will You Marry Me?”

In addition we can mention “first-person character songs”, dramatic monologues where the singer delivers the words of a fictional character: “I am” . . . the Devil, or the soldier Zangra, or Henry VIII, or a dying man, or a statue on a war memorial, or a teenager in New York, or a middle-aged lawyer, or a young soldier, or a meerkat, or a chimney, or a teapot or an ex-horse. Most of those examples come from Jacques Brel. Such songs need the audience to follow the words.

This variation applies even to songs from a single source: within a single show, such as *The Gondoliers* (Gilbert and Sullivan) we can find a melodious musico-centric song “Take a Pair of Sparkling Eyes” and a patter-song beginning “In enterprise of martial kind”, where the focus is clearly on the clever lyric – few listeners ignorant of English could enjoy the boring repeated music of that. So a single work has numbers ranging across the continuum.

Indeed even a single song may shift between logocentric and musico-centric sections. It often happens in Broadway musicals that a soloist’s “big melodic number” is preceded by an introduction which is much more wordy. This applies also to some songs that have repeated refrains: the verses (the varying stanzas) have more verbal content, whereas the repeated refrains add little to the meaning. A good example is Gershwin’s “It Ain’t Necessarily So”, where each verse is about a different *Bible* story.

We find a similar shift in traditional opera, where the big solo songs are called “arias”. These are the bits often performed and recorded as “opera highlights”. Arias typically focus on the music and the virtuosity of the singer, the number of acrobatic ways in which a phrase can be sung. Often the words would be very trite without the melody. Yet musico-centric arias often have preludes called “recitatives”, where the singer delivers a lot of words without very much melody. Thus Mozart’s “Se vuol ballare” is preceded by a recitative “Bravo signor padrone”, and Verdi’s aria “Ermani, involami” by a recitative “Surta è la notte”. Recitatives are scored lightly by the composer and sung in a kind of “half-speaking” technique. In an extreme case, “E la solita storia del pastore” (Cilea), the first 16 syllables of text are spoken at the same pitch – so it’s obviously not about the music! Recitatives may form lengthy dialogues, and at times they carry much of the opera’s storyline. They are much more logocentric than arias.

All this is relevant to translating, of course, particularly for singable translations where the constraints can lead to changes of meaning (see chapters 5 and 6). It explains the hybrid option chosen by some opera productions: they keep the pretty arias in Italian while presenting the recitatives in the language of the audience. This option certainly works well for a comic opera like Rossini’s *Barbiere di Siviglia*, where much of the humour lies in the recitatives. It makes excellent sense to use the TL for these wordy sections, whereas the case for keeping the arias in the original Italian is strong. And in general you should translate phrases in terms of *what those words are doing* at that point of the work, whether they are providing information, humour, emotion or whatever.

Recitatives are found also in oratorio, notably in Bach’s great works the *Matthäus-Passion* and the *Johannes-Passion*. Since the narrative sections are taken directly from the gospels, the tenor performing them is actually called the “Evangelist”. Here Bach’s music sets Luther’s *Bible* translation, but many performances outside Germany use a translation into the language of the audience – who are seen as the congregation of faithful come to hear again the Passion Story. A good example in English is the *St John Passion* published by Novello in 1999 (translation by Neil Jenkins).

You will be less motivated to translate a song-lyric if the words are not good and important. Here are some questions that may be relevant:

- Does the song tell a story? (e.g. the ballad “Polly Oliver”)
- Does the song tell verbal jokes?
- Does it use a rich vocabulary?
- Was the text written by a famous poet (e.g. *Cats* by Eliot)?
- Are there lots of different verses?
- Are the words sung with sincerity, as if the singer believed them?
- Are they audible over the percussion and other instruments?
- Are they clear enough to transcribe?
- Was it originally sung in the language of the audience?
- Will your target audience be interested in the combined musico-verbal effect?

Some Musical Terminology — and a Christmas Song!

Here is a vocal score for a four-part choir. “Ding Dong! Merrily” counts as sacred music, because of the words; yet the tune was first published as a secular French dance (1588).

This is a strophic song, because its three verses (or “strophes”) are each sung to the same music. **Strophic songs** differ from **through-composed songs**, in which every phrase has new music.

Many strophic songs have a **refrain** – the same words repeated at the end of each verse. With this song, unusually, the refrain is in a different language. The English words (by G. R. Woodward 1848–1934) include deliberate archaisms – “ye”, “sungen”. The Latin words are from Luke’s Gospel as translated out of Greek by Jerome, the patron saint of translators.

Another huge contrast between verse and refrain is that the English verse receives a **syllabic setting**, while the refrain uses **melisma**.

A melisma is when one syllable is sung to more than one note. The most common melismas have two or three notes, linked with curving marks called **slurs**. Here, however, the syllable GLO- has a very long melisma: in the top line it has more than 30 notes before the Latin word finally ends, with -RIA. Conversely, the English verses have no melismas at all: only one note per syllable (as is common in many simple songs).

This is a relatively **musico-centric** song, since the verses are merely quaint while the refrain is musically glorious. If you were asked to make a singable version of this, you should retain the Latin refrain and should probably treat the verses freely, reducing the archaism and richness of rhyme, yet striving to make it sound good in the TL.

DING DONG! MERRILY ON HIGH

Tune, *Branle de l'official*
from Thoinot Arbeau's *Orchesographt'e*, 1588
(C.W.)

1. Ding dong! mer-ri - ly on high in heav'n the bells are ring - ing:
2. E'en so here be - low, be - low, let stee - ple bells be swung - en,
3. Pray you, du - ti - ful - ly prime your Mat - in chime, ye ring - ers;

1. Ding dong! ve - ri - ly the sky is riv'n with An - gel sing - ing.
2. And *i - o, i - o, i - o*, by priest and peo - ple sung - en.
3. May you beau - ti - ful - ly rime your Eve - time Song, Ye sing - ers:

Glo -

- - - - - ri - a, Ho - san - na in ex - cel - sis!

G. R. Woodward

Figure 1.2 Christmas song – *Ding Dong!*

These are only indicative questions. But positive answers strengthen the case for translation, and too many negatives weaken it.

Clearly some songs lose a lot if performed instrumentally – without the words – or if sung in a language foreign to the audience. Purely instrumental renditions of popular songs will prove a failure if subtracting the words is too costly. This is particularly true of humour, which works best with quick impact and good timing. A good experiment would be to rehearse the old part-song by Niclas Piltz “Die Weiber mit den Flöhen” and then perform it twice, first to an audience with no understanding of the words, and then to an audience of Germans. Would the verbal dimension make a difference? Certainly, it means: “The women who have fleas”! But serious songs need their words too: some of them contain surprises (weird harmonies) and unexpected transitions (e.g. from slow to fast) which make very little sense in isolation from the text.

There are various ways of helping the verbal elements to cross language borders, and many translations don’t try to be singable (see chapter 3).

The distant origins of this book

Growing up in the English-speaking world, though distant from London and New York, I heard a lot of Anglo-American popular music. This was an age of radio and record players, before the Internet existed. A little jazz and Latin-American music was played, but nothing really Asian or African. Most of the vocal music was in English. Nobody told me that the words of “Fascination” (sung by Nat King Cole and others) were originally in French. I was also initiated, despite low birth and income, into the highbrow European music of earlier centuries, what was loosely called “classical music”.

Like other children, I was expected to learn songs. The tunes were fun, but some of the words struck me as archaic and obscure, especially those in nursery rhymes. Although my city was virtually monolingual, some songs were in strange languages: Latin, French, Maori, Scots. I soon preferred words that made sense, songs that were not just pretty tunes but that also “said something”.

At the church we attended, the hymns were all in English. Protestant Christianity has a strong tradition of using the language of the people (more so than Catholicism, Islam or Judaism). But I later learnt that some of them had originally been in Latin, German or Welsh. That was my first encounter with bad translations: “Stille Nacht/Silent Night” might be a nice carol, but hey, if the English solution was “round yon virgin” then there was something wrong with the question! Another puzzle was “The Lord’s my shepherd”: we sang – as some people still do – about “pastures green” and “the quiet waters by” (what do they buy?).

This text is an odd kind of translation: originating as an ancient Hebrew psalm, unrhymed, it had been put into good English by King James’s team in 1611 and then mangled by a Scottish wordsmith whose crazy strategy was to put the same words in the wrong order for the sake of iambic rhythms and perfect rhymes.

Then my sister starting singing lessons, from a teacher steeped in the European tradition dominated by Italy and Germany. Soon I heard some German songs being sung in English versions which didn't really work as English texts. Some other people agreed. I have subsequently met singers who refuse to ever sing translations of classical songs. "This needs to be heard in the original Italian," they said, "a translation can't ever satisfy." A few even argued that song-translating is impossible. This extreme view is not really tenable, but the ready availability of amateurish and incompetent song-translations explains how it arose.

Later my father obtained a recording with extracts from a well-translated operetta: *Orpheus in the Underworld* (Offenbach, as performed by the Sadler's Wells company). Here was an irreverent French pantomime about ancient gods, with English words that did work well: clever and humorous words which W. S. Gilbert himself could have been proud of. Whether this version was a close translation of the libretto I couldn't then judge, but it certainly fulfilled its function very well: it amused and delighted. It must have proceeded from good strategies well implemented.

Chapters to follow

Chapters 2 and 4 will focus on two constant aspects of translating: the "upstream problems" posed by the source texts and the "downstream problems" involved in creating the target text in the target language. These focus particularly, but not exclusively, on the specific genre of song-lyrics.

Chapters 3, 5 and 6 will concentrate on issues of *skopos*: the purpose which the ST is meant to fulfil. Chapter 3 concerns non-singable translations: a number of ways in which a TT may be linked to a song sung in the SL. Chapters 5 and 6 concern singable translation and propose the "pentathlon principle" as a practical tool for improving and evaluating this tricky task.

Chapter 7 focuses on adaptations, which have been common ways of carrying songs across language borders. They are sometimes called "free translations".

Exercises

This chapter printed the words of "Older Ladies" by Donnalou Stevens. Look at them again, and consider these groups of questions:

- (A) To what extent do you think its success was based on the lyric, the music or the video featuring Hillary Clinton and a chicken? Do you think it was more popular with women or men, with young people or older people? How much would it be enjoyed by people who understand little or no English?

- (B) How well do you understand it, really? Does “pert” mean “pert” or what? Does a “younger model” mean a new car, a live mannequin or what? Does the phrase “hung the moon” mean anything at all?
- (C) If you had to translate it into the other language you work with, what is the main thing you would not want to omit? Does the “I” mean the songwriter as an individual or as a type? Who is denoted by the “you”? Is it OK to translate “ladies” with the most common word for “women”? What TL word or expression would you choose for “sweet pea”, or “hot”, or “nest” or “Hoochy-Koochy”?
- (D) On top of those linguistic issues, there are cultural ones. The song comes from California, where a popular song-and-movie culture raves about youth and sex and feminine beauty. Given that background, what serious point is the song making about social norms? Could a translated or adapted version make a similar point in another cultural context?
- (E) One very tricky detail is a kind of pun. In the chorus, the words “older ladies” sound rather like “yodelaydeez”, and the vocal line suddenly leaps up in a sort of yodel – an imitation of Tyrolean Jodelmusik. This play on words is reinforced on the videoclip by images of people wearing Lederhosen in a meadow. Could you replicate that in another language? Or could you permit your TT to retain those two English words “older ladies”?
- (F) Do you have the skill and patience to translate the lyric?

Further reading

Of general relevance are two articles in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2001, London & New York, Macmillan): “Song” vol. XXIII, 704–716, and “Popular Music” vol. XX, 128–166.

Two major scholarly collections concerning vocal translation are: Gorlée, Dinda (ed) (2005) *Song and Significance: Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation*, Amsterdam & New York, Rodopi. This contains Dinda Gorlée’s own impressive article “Singing on the Breath of God”, concerning hymns and translation (pp. 17–101). She found that 20 per cent of the hymns in an 1871 Anglican collection were translations.

Minors, Helen Julia (ed) (2012) *Music, Text and Translation*. London, Bloomsbury.

Also very relevant is:

Apter, Ronnie & Herman, Mark (2016) *Translating for Singing – The Theory, Art and Craft of Translating Lyrics*, London, Bloomsbury.

References

“Brassens (1992)” refers to: *Traduire et interpréter Georges Brassens*: 91–112. This collective volume is nos 22/1–2 & 23/1 (1992–1993) of *Equivalences*, Bruxelles, Institut supérieur de traducteurs et interprètes: 91–112. The articles (some in English)

cite translations of Brassens songs into English, German, Swedish, Czech, Dutch, Italian etc.

For Jacques Brel, similarly, the website www.brelitude.net shows how dozens of Brel songs have been translated into dozens of languages. Clearly many performers loved the words of these songs and wanted their audiences to really understand them.