

Brennett, K. (2022). Adriana Şerban and Kelly Kar Yue Chan (eds) (2020). Opera in Translation: Unity and Diversity. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*, 37, 182-185.

<https://doi.org/10.26034/cm.jostrans.2022.110>

This article is publish under a *Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International* (CC BY):

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>



© Karen Bennett, 2022

Adriana Şerban and Kelly Kar Yue Chan (eds) (2020). *Opera in Translation: Unity and Diversity*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, pp. 369, 95,00€. e-Book ISBN: 9789027260789.

Opera is surely one of the most exciting genres for translation research. Not only is it exceptionally multimodal, fusing music, words and all the other semiotic modes available to the performing arts into an integrative whole (which Wagner famously called 'sung drama' or 'dramatic song'), most operas are also based upon prior works of literature, which opens them up to treatment as intersemiotic translations. And, of course, there is the conventional verbal translation of the libretto required whenever an opera is to be performed in another language, surtitles are to be used in theatres, or subtitles inserted into video recordings –all different skopoi and channels that bring their own challenges and creative possibilities.

Given this research potential, it is quite surprising that a wide-ranging volume about opera and translation has not been published before. Certainly, there have been books on related topics: on translating for singing (Apter and Herman 2016; Gorlée 2005; Low 2017); on the art of surtitling (Rędzioch-Korkuz 2016), and on the relationship between music and text more generally (Minors 2013; Desblache 2019). There have been articles in general translation journals about various aspects of the subject, as well as chapters in collected volumes on different themes. But book-length studies of this scope are noticeable by their absence.

This volume is therefore very welcome indeed. It makes a valiant attempt to do justice to its remit, covering all the translational aspects of opera from the verbal, cultural and intertextual to the intersemiotic, multimodal and theoretical, and as such is an absorbing read. It is divided into five sections ('Open perspectives', 'Across genres and media', 'Text and context', 'From text to stage' and 'Libretto translation revisited') into which sixteen essays are distributed somewhat randomly (since the logic of the groupings is not as transparent as the titles would seem to suggest): seven fairly conventional descriptive studies; four accounts of intersemiotic transformations; three that focus on the art of the translation practitioner; one chapter that could be classified as a 'translator study' following Chesterman (2009), and one that presents itself as a theoretical article, although it in fact devotes much of its attention to the analysis of a particular intercultural production.

The descriptive chapters comprise a series of case-studies of translations undertaken in specific sociocultural contexts, often comparative in nature. Hence, we have pieces about: the English versions of *Don Giovanni* by Mozart and Da Ponte (Degott); the English translations of the classical Chinese opera *The Peony Pavilion* (Ngai); the German translations of three Mozart/Da Ponte operas undertaken in the context of the Third Reich (Kaindl); five English translations of Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (Bozsik); a Turkish version of Strauss' *Die Fledermaus* (Soy and Şenol); two

English translations of Kvapil's *Rusalka* (Corness) and four multilingual operas from different times and places (Mateo). All except the last one concentrate on the verbal changes implemented when operas are transported to new cultural and linguistic environments, and mostly provide well-grounded culturalist explanations for the changes made. My personal favourites are Kaindl's account of the translations of Mozart's operas in Nazi Germany, figured as a 'war' waged on a series of different fronts (propagandistic, anti-semitic, internal struggles for power); and Mateo's study of multilingualism in libretti, which engages with some very pressing contemporary issues around the materiality of meaning and semiotics of unintelligibility.

Several of the descriptive studies are slightly disappointing with regards to the theoretical frameworks used, which in some cases have been around for so long that they seem a little hackneyed or outdated. Soy and Şenol, for example, revisit Polysystem Theory, Jakobson, even Nida; Corness rests his analysis on Catford's concept of translation shifts; while Ngai employs Venuti's notions of visibility and transparency. These all seem rather out of place in a volume which elsewhere offers excellent introductions to some very cutting-edge translation theory (I am thinking particularly of Wilson-deRoze's on multimodality, Vidal's on the 'outward turn', Mateo's on heterolingualism or Minors' on intercultural musicology). Even more perturbing are the prescriptive statements that abound in some of the descriptive chapters about 'biased', 'distorted' or 'erroneous' translations, as well as simplistic pronouncements about what a libretto translation 'should' be – revealing a theoretical naivety that we would not expect in such a conceptually sophisticated volume.

As for the intersemiotic studies, these are concerned first and foremost with the translational procedures required to adapt one art form into another: a Chinese opera into a film (Ng); plays by Shakespeare and Beckett into the Japanese operatic forms of Kabuki and Noh (Takebe); and Bizet's opera *Carmen* into the gender-reversal ballet *Car Man* (Vidal). I particularly enjoyed Danielle Thien's account of the development of Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly* out of a series of preceding texts, including not only the acknowledged sources (a short story and a play in English by John Luther Long and David Belasco respectively), but also an autobiographical French novel by Pierre Loti, which came to light after the music critic Pierre Lalo had watched the 1906 production of the opera and mentioned it in his review. Focusing on the protagonist's mode of speech as an index of otherness, Thien shows how the ironing-out, in the libretto, of the 'mispronunciations, odd vocabulary and awkward dialect' that figured in Long and Belasco's works helped Butterfly achieve the status of tragic operatic heroine with universal appeal.

As regards the practitioner studies, these are all highly accomplished, revealing a great depth of theoretical knowledge as well as practical experience. Judi Palmer's chapter on surtitling considers not only the

various aspects the professional must take into account when composing a surtitle script, but also offers a historical overview of surtitling, a discussion of audience expectations, and some examples of how selected scenes from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* might in practice be translated into English surtitles. Karen Wilson-deRoze, for her part, is concerned with the challenges involved in producing a singing translation of Wagner's *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung*, and explains in detail how Wagner's *Versmelodie* is constructed, before going on to analyse how four different translators (including herself) have approached the problem. Finally, Miquel Edo looks at intertextuality from the translator's perspective, discussing the extent to which intertextual elements in the libretto of Francesco Cilea's opera *Adriana Lecouvreur* deserve to be transferred into the translated version.

The chapter that I have categorised as a 'translator' study – Lucile Desblache's examination of W.H. Auden's 'musical poetics of translation' – is one of the strongest in the volume. Arguing that libretto translation was used by Auden as a way of reinterpreting values perceived as 'no longer relevant to post-Second World War Britain', it begins by surveying the poet's translational output before homing in on his 1956 version of *The Magic Flute* and his 1960 translation (with his collaborator Chester Kallmann) of *Don Giovanni*. Both are radical translations of the kind that only a translator that was a recognised artistic force in his own right could have got away with, since, in the first case, Auden actually adds new material to the original libretto (including a 'Postscript' addressed to the translators) and in the second displaces 'styles, forms, metres and rhetorical traditions' in a way that reveals 'confidence and virtuosity'. This is a chapter that will certainly be of interest to Auden specialists, as well as to the primary readership of translation scholars and musicologists.

I have left Helen Minors' chapter till last since this is, to my mind, the most interesting of all in theoretical terms. In keeping with contemporary developments in Translation Studies according to which translation is no longer limited to interlingual or even intersemiotic transfers but is present in all transformational processes (e.g. Blumczyński 2016; Robinson 2017; Gentzler 2017; Bassnett and Johnston 2019; Marais 2022 *forthcoming*), Minors begins by arguing that the interpretation of a musical text or performance by the *spectator* is itself an act of translation that requires active participation in the construction of meaning. She then goes on to discuss the notion of intercultural musicology, with reference to an avant-garde version of Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night's Dream* (*Sogni di una notte di mezza estate*, staged in August 2013 as part of the Sferisterio Macerata Opera Festival), which mixes different musical scores and different languages, as well as incorporating silent video footage and dynamic inter-titles. It is during the act of interpretation, she argues, that the various media are brought together in the imagination of the spectator and acquire the coherence necessary to become a meaningful whole.

Looking at the book generally, there are some technical issues that grate slightly – such as the lack of onomastic terms in the index, which meant that I was unable to locate and explore the many echoes and overlaps that arose between chapters, and the relentless homogeneity of style and structure from which all marks of individuation seem to have been forcefully erased (presumably to produce a textbook example of English academic discourse). But, overall, the book is a very welcome addition to the translation scholar's library, and will also be of relevance to anyone interested in the art of opera and the various translational manoeuvres implicit in its creation and dissemination.

References

- **Apter, Ronnie and Mark Herman** (2016). *Translating for Singing: The Theory, Art and Craft of Translating Lyrics*. London: Bloomsbury.
- **Bassnett, Susan and David Johnston** (2019). The Outward Turn in Translation Studies. *The Translator* 25(3), 181–88.
- **Blumczyński, Piotr** (2016). *Ubiquitous Translation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- **Chesterman, Andrew** (2009). The name and nature of Translator Studies. *Hermes - Journal of Language and Communication Studies* 42, 13–22.
- **Desblache, Lucile** (2019). *Music and Translation: New Mediations in the Digital Age*. Palgrave Studies in Translating and Interpreting. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- **Gentzler, Edwin** (2017). *Translation and Rewriting in the Age of Post-Translation Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.
- **Gorlée, Dinda Liesbeth** (2005). *Song and Significance: Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- **Low, Peter** (2017). *Translating Song: Lyrics and Texts*. London and New York: Routledge.
- **Marais, Kobus** (ed.) (2022, forthcoming). *Translation beyond Translation Studies*. London: Bloomsbury.
- **Minors, Helen Julia** (ed.) (2013). *Music, Text and Translation*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- **Rędzioch-Korkuz, Anna** (2016). *Opera Surtitling as a Special Case of Audiovisual Translation: Towards a Semiotic and Translation Based Framework for Opera Surtitling*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- **Robinson, Douglas** (2017). *Translationality: Essays in the Translational-Medical Humanities*. London and New York: Routledge.

Karen Bennett
NOVA University of Lisbon/CETAPS
 karen.bennett@netcabo.pt