


Book Review

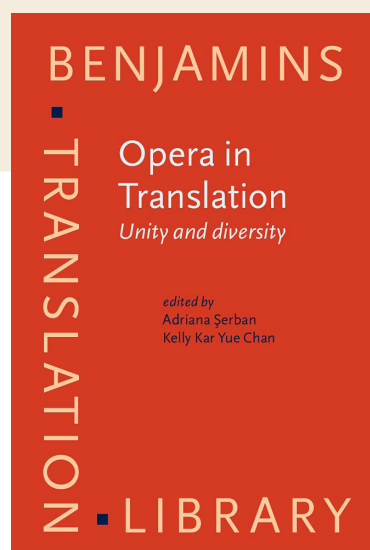
Adriana Șerban and Kelly Kar Yue Chan, eds. *Opera in Translation: Unity and Diversity*

Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 2020, 369 pp. Print version:
ISBN 9789027207500, electronic version: ISBN 9789027260789.

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The edited volume *Opera in Translation: Unity and Diversity*, published by John Benjamins in 2020, can be viewed—at least through the eyes of all opera aficionados and interdisciplinary scholars connected with musical theater—as a logical and much-awaited continuation of both theoretical and more pragmatically oriented research on the ever-growing topic of translating operas (and artworks within musical theater in general). This topic was already addressed by Klaus Kaindl's seminal 1995 volume *Die Oper als Textgestalt* (Opera as a Text Form)—limited, however, to the German-speaking world—followed by Dinda L. Gorlée's work *Song and Significance: Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation* (2005) published a decade later, Helen Julia Minors's *Music, Text and Translation* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), and most recently Lucile Desblache's *Music and Translation: New Mediations in the Digital Age* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). As the editors Adriana Șerban and Kelly Kar Yue Chan point out in the introduction, *Opera in Translation* tackles the complex and sometimes overwhelmingly multifaceted challenges of translating operas, which are essentially multimodal artworks in musical theater, encompassing various modes (i.e., semiotic systems), such as the literary text (de facto the libretto), music, visual imagery (set, costumes, and lighting), conceptual direction, and so on. Moreover, the plethora of interdisciplinary approaches presented in the book—ranging from comparative analysis, critical method, deconstruction, and intersemiotic approaches to translation and adaptation—reflect the truly intercultural and inherently intertextual position of opera as an artistic form that has been in (and at times also out of) favor



among world-wide audiences for centuries and is still enjoying an internationally acknowledged elitist status as, to quote the poet, librettist, and libretto translator W. H. Auden, “the last refuge of the High style.” In an attempt to address various issues, either theoretical or entirely technical in nature, in the process of conveying meaning across linguistic and cultural borders as well as various artistic configurations, the book consists of five major topic sections. These are titled “Open Perspectives,” “Across Genres and Media,” “Text and Context,” “From Text to Stage,” and “Libretto Translation Revisited,” featuring sixteen articles by seventeen authors of various expertise and background in translation studies, exhibiting a professional provenance closely linked to opera production.

The first section starts with the article “Opera and Intercultural Musicology as Modes of Translation” by Helen Julia Minors, examining the outcome of the interplay of various linguistic and musical factors in preparing an intercultural operatic production of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for the 2013 Sfisterio Macerata Opera Festival under the new title *Sogni d’una notte di mezza estate*. Despite somewhat inconsistent and sometimes confusing use of terminology (with unclear delineation between concepts like mode, media, genre, etc.), Minors’s contribution proves its relevance in focusing on the musicocentric perspective because music (to quote Nicholas Cook) “has become a metonym for social interaction” and also a shared medium (in the sensorial sense), in which the “pan-European” fairies find their natural habitat. Moreover, in the case of *Sogni*, music is utilized to speak across media and languages, whereas the role of intercultural musicology is to “embrace the cultural other” (Cook 2012).

The second article in this section, by Judi Palmer, explores the reasons for the increase in the quantity of text displayed (in the form of surtitles), a trend of excessive verbosity that has somewhat overridden the multi-semiotic balance of opera performances. Palmer argues that surtitles need to be put into a pertinent perspective due to the inherent multimodality of musical theater works; therefore, primarily to avoid unnecessary multiplication of information, surtitlers should consider every aspect of the production when deciding how much information is required to optimize audience engagement with the action on stage. Palmer’s conclusion is thus in favor of “less surtitles, more experience,” opting for more active opera-going habits of contemporary audiences worldwide.

In her article, Lucile Desblache focuses on W. H. Auden’s translation “poetics,” which has not been always aligned with the overall *skopos* of musical performance, often straying from the original idea endorsed by either the librettist or composer. Auden and Kallman’s collaborative work in libretto translation—or, more specifically, libretto cultural and poetic adaption, with their 1957 rendition of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* as

an exemplified case of a rewritten and recontextualized source text—raises questions even today: namely, how far can the translator or librettist go in transmuting, rewriting, or even, as Desblache puts it, counter-writing the source text, without sacrificing his or her own poetic stance?

The second section, “Across Genres and Media,” also consists of three contributions, starting with Kenny K. K. Ng’s article on intersemiotic translation of Mei Lanfang’s operatic artistry into Fei Mu’s 1948 opera film *A Wedding in the Dream* (*Shengsi hen*), which was incidentally China’s first color film. The study examines specific modes of both the symbolism of the Beijing opera at the time (now elevated to the Chinese opera) and cinematic narrative. The synthesis of both media can thus be understood in terms of intermediality, as a specific type of intersemiotic translation, although the opera film fails to preserve the aura of Mei Lanfang’s performance due to technical deficiencies of early color film in spite of Fei Mu’s creative camerawork and his introduction of the moving camera. Furthermore, to achieve satisfying artistic results, the opera film would require consistent employment of editing techniques and advanced cinematography, and therefore a less loyal representation of theatricality.

The next article, by María Carmen África Vidal Claramonte, takes on Matthew Bourne’s ballet *The Car Man* as an example of post-translation (Gentzler 2017), as a hermeneutic rewriting of Bizet’s opera *Carmen* that entails the use of a new epistemology that facilitates the dissolving binarisms and gives way to new questions of race, gender, and power. This new epistemology that favors “fluid borders” and “liquid definitions” over “true-false” binarisms is significantly transforming translation studies as well by redefining the relationship between the source text and translation. As the author argues, invoking Jorge Luis Borges, Bourne’s *The Car Man* completes the original (Bizet’s opera *Carmen*) through intertextuality and the iconoclasm of heteronormativity. In this sense, *Carmen* can be viewed as a late nineteenth-century negation of male sexual supremacy. As the author argues, Bourne’s choreographic reconfiguration can be seen from the new post-structuralist epistemology as a post-translation that can break down barriers and leads to new forms of creativity.

Yet another challenge in intercultural translation is discussed in Yoshiko Takebe’s article, which investigates how the aesthetic similarity of different art forms, such as Western European drama (Shakespeare and Beckett) and the traditional Japanese operatic forms of Kabuki and Noh theater, determine the outcome of such a translation. Moreover, in these particular instances of intersemiotic translation of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and *The Comedy of Errors* and Beckett’s *Footfalls* into forms of Kabuki, Kyogen, and Noh, respectively, the reader is easily convinced of the enhanced sensorial potential of these configurations, which not only have the positive effect of making

canonical works of Western theater more accessible to Japanese audiences, but also bear a transformative cognitive moment for the Western spectator in terms of “rediscovering” the essence of the work in question.

The third part of the edited volume, “Text and Context,” provides valuable insights regarding translation through a diachronic, intercultural, and ideological perspective. Pierre Degott’s contribution on various English translations of Da Ponte’s libretto for Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni* accentuates the conformist domestication strategy of cultural appropriation that is exhibited in all versions analyzed. Although the translations discussed reveal significant discrepancies in style and semantics, Degott points out the similarities between translation strategies that rely heavily on the expectations of the target audience (late Victorian society, London suburban audiences, the middle class, and the current language of contemporary listeners), the only exception being Auden-Kallman’s rewriting of the original entirely through an English cultural and poetic perspective. Despite Degott’s appreciation of the “richness and profundity of the original work” (pp. 155–156), which is reflected in the translations discussed, the causality between the poetic quality of the translations and their reception remains unclear.

Another case study of various English translations, by Cindy S. B. Ngai, focuses on the voice of the translator in the case of the Chinese opera *The Peony Pavilion*. Following Venuti’s concept of the translator’s voice and Herman’s notion of the translator’s visibility, the author observes a number of differences between translations by Cyril Birch (1980), Guanqian Zhang (1994), and Rongpei Wang (2000). Although he is greatly admired for his cultural sensitivity, Birch’s predominant strategy relied on naturalizing and preserving the poetic quality (i.e., the rhyme and comedic effect of the original) while being oblivious to certain ideological features of the source text. Zhang’s translation also demonstrates a strong focus on the recreation of rhyme, which occasionally affects the accuracy of the meaning conveyed. Moreover, as pointed out by Ngai, “a number of allusions are euphemized, or over-translated” (p. 171). Although Wang’s intention in preserving all “the splendor and beauty” of the Chinese play in the English translation resembles Birch’s domestication strategy, it differs in style, which can be described as contemporary colloquial English. Nevertheless, Wang’s translation is stylistically inconsistent because he resorted to euphemisms to avoid the vulgar vocabulary of the source text.

The last two articles in this section, by Klaus Kaindl and Danielle Thien, take a closer look at how ideology and cultural preconceptions influence the perception of imagery in the source text and, consequently, the translation practice in question. More specifically, Kaindl’s acute historical exegesis, drawing on Bourdieu’s field theory, points out various front lines of the so-called translation war during the Third Reich, whose sole

purpose was to eradicate ideologically incompatible translations of Mozart operas by Jewish authors, Hermann Levi being the most prominent figure. According to Kaindl, much of Levi's groundbreaking work was "smuggled" into Georg Schünemann's later translations, which—unlike those by Siegfried Anheisser, a fervent voice of Nazi ideology—were popular among musicians, impresarios, and audiences alike. The most important finding of Kaindl's study is that Schünemann's translations were indeed made during the Nazi regime, although they cannot be considered Nazi texts in an ideological sense. The intense political context of that time, however, succeeded in excluding the name of Hermann Levi (in the Latin sense of *damnatio memoriae*) as the main source of Schünemann's recombination of existing translations.

In contrast to Kaindl's focus on the habitus of translation practice in Nazi Germany, Danielle Thien's contribution discusses the cultural migration of Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*; namely, its libretto in translation. Her study challenges the idea that manipulation of the meaning of a libretto is acceptable as long as the word prosody fits the music. As noted by Thien, the genesis of the *Madama Butterfly* libretto itself has undergone severe transformations in relation to (rather poor and semantically inaccurate) Italian translations of Long's short play and Belasco's play. Moreover, the perception of the archetype of the Asian woman, embodied by Cio-Cio San, is altered in both early English and French translations by Rosette Helen Elkin and Paul Ferrier. Using Lance Hewson's approach to literary translation criticism, Thien argues that both translators transmuted the portrayal of Butterfly according to the general perception of the Asian female archetype by English and French society at the time. As a consequence, the translations by Elkin and Ferrier also redefined the perception of the white Western male, as personified in the role of Benjamin F. Pinkerton, rendering him a more likeable figure. Both translations, Thien concludes, can thus be understood as ideological adaptations of the original Italian libretto.

The next-to-last set of articles, titled "From Text to Stage," addresses the complex nature and difficult task of intersemiotic translation, which ideally serves as an efficient vessel of musical performance without being bereft of its poetic value and intertextual associations. Gyöngyvér Bozsik's contribution investigates a number of contextual and musical aspects in a case study of five English translations of Béla Bartók's one-act opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. The libretto, written by the composer's friend Béla Balázs, is an exemplified instance of artistic incorporation of Hungarian folk ballads with distinct prosodic features, which in itself poses a great translation challenge. Furthermore, Bartók's rhythmic patterns accentuated the naturalness of Hungarian speech, thus "intensifying natural intonation into music" (quoting Zoltán Kodály, p. 222). The Hungarian recitative style has thus become a quintessence of Bartók's opera

that should be preserved in translation. Bozsik's comparative analysis of five English translations reveals a number of discrepancies with regard to the original, either in style or meaning. To determine which translation strategy is best suited, the plethora of Bozsik's choice criteria seems rather disadvantageous because it obscures the clarity of comparison, for example, of sung translations only. As a compromise between meaning, poetics, and performance, Bozsik concludes that Hassall's translation—although it takes the greatest liberty in terms of text manipulation—seems to be the best option for reflecting the atmosphere of the original so far.

An identical attempt at recreating the musical and poetic essence of Wagner's music dramas *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* was taken by Karen Wilson-deRoze. She analyzed three English translations of both music dramas by Frederick Jameson, Andrew Porter, and Jeremy Sams. In addition, she provided her own translation (as the practical element of her dissertation), which relies heavily on the Gestalt principle of opera as multimodal totality, and especially on intersemiosis between Wagner's poetry and music, as imbued in *Versmelodie*. Moreover, Wilson-deRoze argues that, in order to recreate the essence of Wagner's multimodal artistry, the translator needs to focus on the prosodic foreground, in Wagner's case the alliteration (*Stabreim*), which seems to be the most significant aesthetic feature, as well as on the interplay between words and music. And yet, despite the high percentage of recreated rhymes by Wilson-deRoze, the question of the artistic significance of such translation remains open in terms of its reception and the actual resonance of the sung text.

The final contribution in the fourth section, by Özlem Şahin Soy and Merve Şenol, examines Aydin Gün's translation of Johann Strauss Jr.'s operetta *Die Fledermaus* into Turkish (under the title *Yarasa*), drawing on Peter Low's pentathlon principle. As pointed out by the authors, operetta has found its place in the musical "polysystem" of Turkey and has become a symbol of Turkey's Westernization process. In contrast to its "lighter character" in Europe and the West, operetta is still regarded as an elite genre in Turkey, "addressing an educated, cultivated, and more affluent audience" (p. 272). The analysis of Gün's early translation and its later revision through the pentathlon principles shows that the early version lacks singability and naturalness because it is a more source text-oriented translation. Later revisions, the most recent by Murat Atak, however, reveal a greater focus on contemporary cultural trends, targeting a broader audience of operetta lovers.

Patrick John Corness, the author of the first contribution in the last section of the book, "Libretto Translation Revisited," discusses manifold discrepancies between two English translations of Jaroslav Kvapil's libretto for *Rusalka*, the first translation being Daphne Rusbridge's 1954 sung version in verse, and the second the 1998 prose

rendition by Paula Kennedy. Taking into account semantic and stylistic shifts, Corness criticizes both translation approaches in terms of their *skopos*. According to the author, Kennedy's prose translation renders the meaning closely with occasional "lapses" into explicitation, which has its semantic value in enabling listeners to simultaneously follow the sung performance in Czech. Although the prose translation by definition does not aspire to render the full stylistic and prosodic qualities of Kvapil's source text, it does present the reader with "occasional poetic enhancements" (p. 311). In contrast, Daphne Rusbridge's singing translation evinces various difficulties because some important semantic components and stylistic characteristics of Kvapil's libretto are either omitted or distorted, compromising the reception of specific cultural features. Under such circumstances, the creation of a new singing version is to be expected; moreover, as the author suggests, the overall poetic quality of Kvapil's text calls for a lyrical (but non-singing) English translation.

Miquel Edo's article provides the reader with a rare take on intertextuality in nineteenth-century Italian librettos, taking a closer look at two scenes from Francesco Cilea's opera *Adriana Lecouvreur*. As is generally acknowledged, intertextuality can operate at two levels at least; that is, at the macro- and micro-levels, the latter commonly being understood as allusion. Edo's question of whether such allusions and "ungrammaticalities" should be translated at all is soon replaced by the imperative of contemporary audiences and the ever-increasing need to understand and be informed. Edo proposes several techniques that may prove successful in terms of conveying the allusion or the unknown context from the source culture to the target audience: to avoid "strangeness" of the source text, the translator can resort to either naturalization or compensation of the source culture allusion with the most appropriate allusion from the target culture. Edo mentions other strategies that are also applicable to opera libretto translation, such as internal marking and recreation ("creative construction of a passage" by means of a mix of authentic and non-authentic material, p. 331). The third modality that is left out from the scope of the article is archaizing translation, which was often in use until the Second World War. Nevertheless, due to significant social and cultural changes, the translator's choice regarding the most pertinent translation strategy is nowadays permeated by often conflicting views and binarisms (e.g., archaization/modernization or domestication/foreignization) that need to be reconciled in order to achieve the desired reception of the target audience. In this sense, intertextuality is always an agent of flexible temporality and cultural mobility, a cohesive force that can bring together literary tradition with new translation practices.

In addition to intertextuality, the edited volume's final article, by Marta Mateo, investigates the relationship between the multilingual condition (heteroglossia) in opera and translation; namely, which translation strategies turn out to be most effective in

conveying the intended effect by the librettist and composer. Furthermore, the author also analyzes the translation strategies used in subtitling and CD booklets containing multilingual libretti. The analysis of a sample of five operas (Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*, Vivaldi's *Orlando Furioso*, Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, and Janáček's *Věc Makropulos*) revealed several relevant findings: in CD inserts, the translation strategies seem more diverse in comparison to DVD subtitles, which exhibit great similarity. As a result, the prevalent approach in subtitling shows a tendency toward domestication, and therefore toward dissolving multilingualism. In addition, the compensation technique was adopted in some cases. Mateo concludes that the *degree* of heteroglossia does not seem to be a determining factor, and the same is true for the specific language in its relation to the translation strategy. Finally, regarding the sung or spoken nature of the multilingual passages, a certain preference in preserving the heteroglossia in spoken parts and recitatives rather than in cases of arias has been found, although Mateo admits that one cannot draw a solid conclusion due to the small sample of texts analyzed.

In an attempt to offer a comprehensive assessment of the volume *Opera in Translation: Unity and Diversity*, one can conclude that it is diversity that prevails in terms of the topics discussed and corresponding methods. The theoretical aim of unifying such diverse and at times disparate perspectives, however, remains to be fulfilled in terms of conceptual harmonization, especially in the clear delineation of translation and adaptation, which, according to the editors, is "a thread running through the volume" (p. 3). One might argue, however, that the real underpinning notion of the volume is in fact the intersemiotic translation (or transmutation, in Jakobson's definition) in all its multimodal totality and complexity, which has thus far provided ample material for future editions. Yet another possible unifying moment emerges in the increasing intercultural accessibility of opera (and of musical theater works in general), which raises the question of new "glocalized" meanings, produced by contemporary international audiences that comprise individuals (i.e., prosumers) with various cultural provenances. If anything, the volume clearly shows that the translation strategies of the past have always reflected the cultural "framework" of that particular time, and that there always was (although not generally acknowledged) a certain public in question, which puts the skopos theory "back in the game" in the sense of either prioritizing a certain semiotic system (e.g., music over libretto) or optimizing the interplay of the meanings thus produced to achieve a holistic "performance" of the multimodal target text (or, better yet, configuration). The social changes occurring all over the world, amplified by digitalization, mass media, migration, and interculturality, might be future determinants of such a cultural convergence, which could loosen or even dispel certain cultural barriers, taboos, and preconceptions. However, both, the process of

translation and its (in)finite outcome will retain their creative momentum between established tradition and innovation as long as there is individuality and authenticity in the translator's voice and his or her understanding of the message conveyed.

About the author

Benjamin Virč is a doctoral student in musicology at the University of Ljubljana's Faculty of Arts. He is currently working on his dissertation, *Entanglement of Literature and Music within the Context of Translating Works for Musical Theater*. His main research interest is the phenomenon of intersemiosis within multimodal artistic works. As a musical theater professional, he has translated librettos from German, Italian, and French into Slovenian. In addition, he has created Slovenian sung translations and adaptations of César Cui's *Puss in Boots* and Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*. Most notably, he also produced the first Slovenian literary translation of Richard Wagner's music drama *Das Rheingold*.