

OPERA AND TRANSLATION: EASTERN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

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Outline

“Every high C accurately struck utterly demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate and chance”, wrote W.H. Auden in 1951 (p. 10). Auden, who was an opera lover, librettist and translator of libretti, considered opera “the last refuge of the High style” and perhaps the only art “to which a poet with a nostalgia for those times past when poets could write in the grand manner all by themselves can still contribute” (1968, p. 116). In other words, opera has not made – or had not made in Auden’s days – the compromises with contemporary society other art forms may have agreed to, or indeed chosen, for better or for worse. This is also why in the Western World opera polarizes opinion the way it does: considered elitist (i.e., expensive, difficult, artificial or implausible) by some, it attracts enthusiastic devotees who, like Auden, consider it the ultimate art.

But despite opera’s reputation for exclusivity, it appears that attendance is on the rise in Europe as well as in the US (Desblache 2007, p. 167; see also Desblache 2012). Undoubtedly, the introduction of surtitling (Mateo 2007) has played a major role in making opera more accessible to audiences who do not understand the source languages (often Italian, French or German) and are not familiar with the libretti. In the East, China, Japan and Korea witnessed a decline in the number of opera house audiences but translation has been able to generate renewed interest in the traditional heritage. Moreover, several Asian operatic forms, including musicals, have traveled in a more accessible way to the West in English translation (see Yeung 2009); to give an example, the famous *kun* opera *The Peony Pavilion: Young Lovers’ Edition* received unprecedented success when it was performed in the UK in 2008. In fact, Mei Lanfang, one of the greatest Peking opera masters in modern history, already had some of his operas performed in the USSR and the US in the 1930s (Wu 2012). Attempts have been made to render Cantonese opera lyrics into performable English, and to translate historical information about the operas themselves and the artists’ biographies (Cui 2013). But opera has also travelled the other way round: witness to this are adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays into Cantonese opera performances with surtitles (for example, *Treason of the Hero* adapted from *Macbeth*).

Research on opera and/in translation started approximately two decades ago (see Apter 1985, Kaindl 1991 and 1995, Burton 2001 and Dewolf 2001), and opera’s hybrid nature – in the sense that several semiotic systems (Gorlée 1997) and genres mingle and coexist – was immediately recognized. In Asia, many operatic forms strongly rely on costumes, colour symbolism, make-up, themes on the stage and the dramatic atmosphere of the theatre. But poetic lyrics are very important, and the Japanese *haiku* and *tanka* (see Mirrer 2012) in relation to *kabuki* and *noh* performances are typical examples. Genres such as *pansori* in Korea, which are traditional manifestations of East Asian culture and aesthetics positioned halfway between opera and the musical, are comparable to Western operettas.

Opera translation has been called a 'specialized translating task' (Low 2002), an 'art' and a 'craft' (Burton 2009), and even a 'peculiar burden' (Apter 1985) which makes different requirements on translators by comparison with, for instance, literary translation. This is, of course, due to the association of words and music, though opera libretti themselves frequently have literary and mythological roots (see Rosmarin 1999). The old question of fidelity in translation concerns opera as well but, as Desblache (2004) points out, this age-old concept (which is anyway fraught with problems) cannot apply here in the same way as in certain other types of translation.

It seems plausible to suggest that research in opera translation has the potential to challenge traditional dichotomies within Translation Studies and invites us to reconceptualize the notions of 'source', 'target' and 'directionality' in translation. Indeed, as Virkkunen (2004) argues from a multimodal perspective, there isn't one single answer to the question of which is the source text for, say, opera surtitles: some may argue it is the libretto, but each unique performance in its singularity may in fact have to be the source text.

The last few years have seen the development of an area known as media accessibility, whose aim is to raise awareness of the difficulties visually or hearing impaired spectators face and to offer appropriate solutions. In the case of opera (or operetta), strategies include audio introduction, audio description, audio subtitling and, of course, surtitling (Orero 2007, Orero & Matamala 2007, Weaver 2014). Reception studies involving protocols used in cognitive psychology are crucial in this respect, in order to provide information about how individual members of the (heterogeneous) audience carry out information processing when attending opera performances. But accessibility also concerns audiences who do not suffer from disability and simply need the spectacle to be brought nearer to them (see Desblache 2007 and Mateo 2007), whether the opera happens to be in their own language or not. Thus, the Peking Opera initiated a project to publish translations in English of 100 of its classics, which are a landmark of traditional Chinese culture. In fact, as Mateo (in press) reveals, opera and languages have a long history together; the production and reception of operas have sometimes been – and remain today – real towers of Babel, stimulating the spectators' "multilingual imagination" (O'Sullivan 2007).

Recorded performances are becoming common (interestingly, opera was filmed even before the advent of sound in moving pictures), and they need to be translated as well. This raises complex intermedial issues, since in such cases opera or operetta become cinema (Citron 2000 and 2010) and there is an aesthetics of the opera/film encounter to consider, along with the place of the spectator in relation to the (translated) spectacle. Tensions between high art and popular art operate here, and between live and reproduced art forms (see Benjamin [1936] 2010 on the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility).

This volume, which to our knowledge will be the first entirely dedicated to opera in/and translation, aims to advance research in opera translation and contribute towards establishing it as a translation modality in its own right. We welcome contributions in English from scholars working in Translation Studies, Musicology, Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Media Studies, Cognitive Psychology and other relevant disciplines, as well as from professional opera translators and performers, on topics such as:

- opera and operetta intra- or interlingual surtitling in Asia and the Western World
- the translation of libretti, for publication or performance
- recorded performances and their translations
- the translator’s voice or discursive presence in opera and operetta translation
- the translator’s role within the production and in the creative performance
- audience design in opera translation
- the ideological appropriation of operas and operettas through translation
- political and cultural agendas in Asia and the Western World
- translated repertoires and the travels of operas between East and West
- the reception of translated opera: social and cultural reception but also cognitive processing by various spectator groups or individuals
- performing translated operas
- acting, dancing and translation
- the challenge of cultural, historical, religious or mythological references
- humour in opera and operetta translation
- translating intertextuality
- the translation of poetry and rhythm
- multilingualism at the opera house
- psychological delineation of characters in translation
- interpersonal interaction on stage and with the audience
- genres, text types and opera translation
- translation in the broadest sense, e.g. translation of myth or literature into opera
- quality issues in transference
- the ethics of alterity in opera translation

Timeline

deadline for abstracts: **17 April 2015**

notification of acceptance of abstracts: 5 June 2015

deadline for fully written articles: 27 November 2015

notification of acceptance of articles: 19 February 2016

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Please send abstracts of 400-500 words to adriana.serban@univ-montp3.fr and kkychan@ouhk.edu.hk in Word and PDF format, by the deadline indicated above.

The manuscript will be submitted to John Benjamins Publishing.

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