

Translating Opera Libretti

by W. H. Auden (1948)

written in collaboration with Chester Kallman

SILVA proudly presents him a dagger and a cup of poison

The cup's prepared, and so rejoice;

And more, I'll let thee have thy choice.

(From an old translation of *Ernani*)

To discover just how arrogant and stupid reviewers can be, one must write something in collaboration with another writer. In literary collaboration, if it is to be successful, the partners to it must surrender the selves they would be if they were writing separately and become one new author; though, obviously, any given passage must be written by one of them, the censor-critic who decides what will or will not do is this corporate personality. Reviewers think they know better, that they can tell who wrote what; I can only say that, in the case of our collaborations, their guesses as to which parts were actually written by Mr. Kallman and which by myself have been, at a conservative estimate, seventy-five per cent wrong.

Ten years ago, if anybody had prophesied that we would one day find ourselves translating libretti, we would have thought him crazy. We had always been fanatic advocates of the tradition upheld by British and American opera houses of giving opera in its original tongue as against the European tradition of translation. If people want to know what is going on, we said, let them buy a libretto with an English crib and read it before coming to the opera house; even if they know Italian and German well, they should still do this because, in a performance, one rarely hears more than one word in ten. As regards performances in opera houses, we still feel pretty much the same way, but televised opera for mass audiences is another matter. Whether the TV audience could ever be persuaded to tolerate operas in foreign languages is doubtful, not only because mass audiences are lazy but also because, on a television set, every syllable can be heard so that the irritation caused by failing to understand what is said is greater than in an opera house. (And then, of course, the big broadcasting companies are willing to pay handsomely for translations and we saw no reason why, if a translation was going to be made, we shouldn't get the money.) Once we started, we felt our aesthetic prejudices weakening for a reason which is not perhaps a valid one since it is purely selfish: we found ourselves completely fascinated by the task.

The three libretti we have translated together so far are Da Ponte's libretto for *Don Giovanni*, Schikaneder-and-Giesecke's libretto for *Die Zauberflöte* and Brecht's text for the song-ballet *Die sieben Todsünden* with music by Kurt Weill. Each has its special problems. *Don Giovanni* is in

Italian, with sung recitatives and, stylistically, an opera giocosa; *Die Zauberflöte* is in German, written as a series of numbers with spoken dialogue in between and, stylistically, an opera magica. *Die sieben Todsünden* is not a traditional opera in which, as Mozart said, «poetry absolutely has to be the obedient daughter of music», but, like all the Brecht-Weill collaborations, a work in which the words are at least as important as the music, and its language is that of contemporary speech and full of popular idiom.

In comparison with the ordinary translator, the translator of a libretto is much more strictly bound in some respects and much freer in others. Since the music is so infinitely more important than the text, the translator must start with the premise that his translation must demand no change of musical intervals or rhythms in order to fit it. This law is absolute for arias and ensembles; in recitative, occasion may arise when the dropping or addition of a note is justified, but they are very rare. The translator of a libretto, therefore, has to produce a version which is rhythmically identical, not with the verse prosody of the original as it would be spoken, but with the musical prosody as it is sung. The difficulty in achieving this lies in the fact that musical prosody is both quantitative, like Greek and Latin verse, and accentual like English and German. In a quantitative prosody, syllables are either long or short and one long syllable is regarded as being equal in length to two short syllables; in an accentual prosody like our own, the length of the syllables is ignored—metrically, they are regarded as all being equal in length—and the distinction is between accented and unaccented syllables. This means that the rhythmical value of the trisyllabic feet and the dissyllabic feet are the reverse in a quantitative prosody from what they are in an accentual. [...]

This means that it is not enough for the translator to read the verses of the libretto, scan them, and produce a prosodic copy in English for, when he then matches his copy against the score, he will often find that the musical distortion of the spoken rhythm which sounded possible in the original tongue sounds impossible in English. This is particularly liable to happen when translating from Italian because, even when speaking, an Italian has a far greater license in prolonging or shortening the length of his syllables than an Englishman. [...]

Any one who attempts to translate from one tongue into another will know moods of despair when he feels he is wasting his time upon an impossible task but, irrespective of success or failure, the mere attempt can teach a writer much about his own language which he would find it hard to learn elsewhere. Nothing else can more naturally correct our tendency to take our own language for granted. Translating compels us to notice its idiosyncracies and limitations, it makes us more attentive to the sound of what we write and, at the same time, if we are inclined to fall into it, will cure us of the heresy that poetry is a kind of music in which the relations of vowels and consonants have an absolute value, irrespective of the meaning of the words.

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