

Semiotics and translation: Applying translation theory to musicological research

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Małgorzata Grajter

Applying Translation Theory to Musicological Research

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In *Applying Translation Theory to Musicological Research*, the musicologist Małgorzata Grajter aims to answer the question: how can music understanding and musicology benefit from translation theory? Therefore, the aim is to infuse music research with methodologies explored in Translation Studies to consider musical works in a new light. This is a brave and worthy undertaking. While interdisciplinarity is, in principle, viewed positively by researchers, in practice, it is often challenging to break barriers across different fields. For instance, many Translation Studies scholars still feel that the notion of translation can be diluted into the more general one of transformation, particularly when it is used in the context of artistic ekphrasis. Still, both Musicology and Translation Studies have a solid base for building bridges across different fields, and more specifically across each other's fields. For more than a century, most musicologists have considered music as part of language and culture rather than a discrete abstract art form, emphasising its protean nature, favoring alliances with cultures, words, shapes, and colours. Similarly, since the beginning of the 21st century, many Translation

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Studies scholars have lamented that specialised areas of translation, including audio-visual translation, which comprises musical translation, were not more solidly rooted in transdisciplinary theory. So, it is pleasantly unexpected to see contemporary musicology infused and inspired by translation theory.

One hundred fifty-three pages long, this book is structured in four chapters, topped and tailed by an introduction, a conclusion, and an index. The author, who humbly describes herself as ‘a native speaker of a language as internationally obscure as Polish’ (p. xix) is truly multilingual in her approach and, at a time when English dominates publications, even in an area such as Translation Studies, it is refreshing to see many examples and quotes in a range of languages, some of which are of lesser use. The book is aimed at both Music and Translation Studies scholars. Still, it is slanted towards musicologists for three reasons: first, because ‘[o]ne of the principal goals of this study is to allow the new methodologies derived from translation theories to permeate the research into musical works’ (ibid.); second, because some of the definitional sections, essentially in the initial chapter, go back to etymologies, histories and definitions that might be a little basic for Translation Studies scholars. From a Translation Studies perspective, the limits of translation have long extended beyond Nida’s views (see, for instance, Pym, Robinson, Blumczynski, Scott, Chaume, and Boase-Beier). Since the author’s approach later on in the volume is slanted towards semiotics, which is an entirely justified perspective, why not stress the dyad semiotics/translation from the start, which would guide readers towards the chosen approach? Equally, the general history of Translation Studies, necessarily skeletal in a relatively short volume, might be of more interest to translators if directly linked to music? Finally, most Translation Studies scholars and translators associate music translation primarily with the translation of song lyrics. They might find it puzzling that the book is mainly about instrumental music. Nevertheless, Translation Studies scholars will learn from the theoretical framework proposed, which straddles the two disciplines efficiently and imaginatively.

The book evolves coherently: chapter one, devoted to the notion of translation within the disciplines of Linguistics and Translation Studies, gives a starting point from which further concepts can be set forth, and leads to an overview of key concepts in Translation Studies. I found the (linguistic) notions of invariance and variability, defined in this second chapter and later explored through musical analysis in Chapter 4 as musicological tools, particularly interesting. They allow an expansion of Peter Szendy’s (2008) views of arrangements and transcriptions as complements to original music. A ‘passing note’ about this second chapter: given that a 40-page chapter entitled ‘How is music translated’ is included in my book, I found the remark concerning the fact that the question of how music is translated is not

addressed in it unfounded (p. 64). In Chapter 3, the author, who refers to relevant and recent publications in semiotics and multimodality (for instance Marais 2019; Julia Minors 2021), explores the semiotics frameworks that she will later use in her analyses in depth, and shows awareness of interdisciplinary challenges when she states that “[a]s opposed to translation theory, which has attempted to include music into the scope of translation, academic musicology, as a highly specialised and independent discipline, has developed its own vocabulary used to describe translational phenomena in music with absolutely no connection to translation theory. Consequently, a lot of terminological chaos and inconsistency arose, ensuing from the discrepancies between different languages and traditions.” (p. 61) Yet *Translation Studies*, at the end of the 20th century, was also struggling with terminology. This comes with stretching the borders of any field, and is inevitable when attempting to find common definitional ground between two disciplines. Chapter 4 frames its analyses around Marais’ concepts of intra-music transfer (“all music which is translated into other music,” (p. 91) “inter-music translation,” “between different musical sub systems such as styles, instruments, and genres” (p. 111) and “extra-music translation,” “occurring between music and other non-musical semiotic systems; in other words, an extra-systemic translation of which music forms part either as a source, or target text” (p. 122). The author herself acknowledges that this framework requires caution, distance and flexibility in its approach because in music, there can be overlap between intra- and inter-translation, but also because the notion of translating music into other semiotic systems is controversial in musicology. Within this careful proviso, music analysis, both in scores and in performative interpretation, is offered. The notion of potential equivalence across and beyond musical and non-musical systems needs to be circumnavigated carefully by musicologists. I wonder, reading this chapter, whether the notion of variation, essential to music, would be more useful than those of translation, transmutation, or transduction. However, this fourth chapter is explorative and original in offering new methodologies for compositional and performative analysis. As the author notes in her concluding remarks, in a fast-changing world, both translation and music are constantly evolving beyond the familiar, and within this context, taking musical analysis methodologies beyond their established frameworks is in itself a process requiring adaptability and imagination, two qualities essential to both music and translation.

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