Libretti in English: An Appeal for Sane Translations

Author(s): A. Keay

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 63, No. 955 (Sep. 1, 1922), pp. 650-651

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912233>

Accessed: 02/01/2015 01:23

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

abrogate its own musical laws.' I do not think we can all agree with him here. A study even of the Elizabethan composers will reveal the fact that, in their desire for more characteristic expression, they were frequently finding themselves cramped by the conditions of their day. Their attempts to widen their limits may appear to us to be crude, but they were attempts none the less, and I cannot agree that their *first* thought was to secure a 'fair musical shape.' Their first thought was to express themselves in the best way they could, and time after time they found they wanted more elbow-room. Though many of their crudities may be explained by the exigencies of polyphony, these do not explain all. And the same may be said of much of Purcell's work, with (for the period) his daring harmonic innovations. Music must be both a beautiful and expressive art. Mr. Boughton would have it always beautiful, but he would limit its range of expression wherever this does not coincide with the beautiful. The question then to be asked is this: 'What are the limits of expression in music?' To answer it we must remember that all art is suggestive rather than realistic. Directly music tries to enter the field of realism it prostitutes itself as an art; but who shall put a boundary to the field of suggestive expression in music, and say, 'Thus far and no farther'? If a composer (according to the canons of accepted taste) can justify his procedure, no matter how novel it is, in the matter of characteristic expression, then who shall condemn him?

The terms 'euphony' and 'cacophony' are surely relative only.

Mr. Boughton also insists on the impersonality of a composer's work, and condemns Beethoven for seeking 'self-expression rather than the service of musical art.' One feels bound to say that if this is true, then musical art is profoundly grateful to Beethoven for his waywardness.

I agree entirely with one of our foremost dramatic critics who wrote the other day: 'There is no such thing as *impersonal* work . . . any intelligent person ought to be able to draw a fairly faithful portrait of Shakespeare or Molière from reading their plays.' Is it not a very great compliment to Mozart with regard to his *Requiem* to read this: 'I am unable to say which movements were left unwritten by the master himself'? We may also (especially after hearing Mozart's *Requiem* fairly recently) disagree with Mr. Boughton over its excellence as a work of art. If this is a 'self-standing piece of music,' it does not do much to strengthen his argument. As a piece of characteristic expression of most beautiful and solemn words, it is a travesty and nothing else. Again, says Mr. Boughton, ' . . . the music set to verse or to a dance must be a self-standing piece of work.' Does Mr. Boughton really mean us to take this seriously, or is he writing with his tongue in his cheek? Do the expression of the words and spirit of a song count for nothing? If this principle is adopted we shall have worse diction than ever. Are we to judge Wagner's music-dramas apart from scenery, action, and general theatrical setting? Is a sacred work to be equally impressive alike in the concert-hall and cathedral? Surely Mr. Boughton is here pressing his ideal a little too far!

And may we not dissent from his definition of originality and individuality? Mr. Boughton seems to think we ought to regard 'originality' more in the light of 'obvious parentage'; that the originality of a composer consists in our ability at once to detect the source of his influence—his musical parentage; which is surely originality on Mr. Boughton's part! I have not consulted the various dictionary readings, but I think we are most of us able to distinguish between 'originality' and 'eccentricity.' Only a rather stupid person would say that original, bizarre, and eccentric, conveyed the same meaning. Original work must of course owe its debt to the past, but it takes its step forward into the future on its own account, and that step a characteristic one. It has absorbed the experience of the past, has been influenced by it, but it re-creates and gives rise to something fresh; it is not a mere copy, saying nothing that has not been said before and probably a great deal better. Its great essence is vitality. Can we accept Mr. Boughton's definition of 'individuality' as the 'sign . . . that an art-work is not standing alone'? Again, I think the confusion of thought is Mr. Boughton's. What do we mean by 'individual'? Mr. Boughton says that

'individual work is not divided from other similar work of its time.' He means to imply that the 'group' is not divided, and that therefore the work of the group is similar. But the word 'individual' plainly refers to 'one person' or thing—it is the one that is 'not divided,' does not share with the others; it is a separate entity, standing alone, and therefore individual work is work a person does by himself, having its own personal character, and unlike the work of others, or even of others working as a group or school.

To sum up, therefore, we must not be pessimistic over our so-called 'decadence.' To any student of history and psychology, the state of musical composition at the present time is no surprise nor discouragement. The phase will pass, and time will settle the matter and adjust the gain and the loss. There are times when Art seems to take many steps backward, but, like a good bowler, this is only to get a better length on the ball. Music will never revert to classicism pure and simple: we must have the beautiful, but we must have the expressive as well, and the latter must be continually growing and expanding. Time will see to it that with this growth and expansion Art still remains.—Yours, &c.,

HAROLD E. WATTS.

LIBRETTI IN ENGLISH: AN APPEAL FOR SANE TRANSLATIONS

SIR,—I am very much interested in the question of the English libretti of operas, which is touched upon in the 'Robert Radford' article appearing in your May issue, because I believe it to be a factor of vital importance in any attempt made to establish opera in English on a firm foundation.

The primary reason for composing vocal music is to give audible expression to the words to which it is set, and unless it permits its exponents to sing with as much intelligent diction as would be exercised by a trained orator, it fails in its main object. Much interesting vocal music, particularly of an operatic nature, has failed to acquire lasting popularity because of an inferior libretto, for very few operas have been written which are musically so great as to be able to live in spite of their text.

Notwithstanding the views expressed by certain idealists in their letters to *The Times* and elsewhere, the fact must be faced that the number of operas by native composers, which the British public cares to hear, is so very small as to be incapable of supporting any opera company worthy of the name. Yet there appears to be a growing desire on the part of modern peoples to have opera performed in their native language—which, from their point of view, is not unreasonable—and that desire must be reckoned with, because the people pay the bill. That being so, at least for a time any attempt to establish opera in English here on a satisfactory basis must be made chiefly by the use of the works of foreign composers.

That fact raises the question of English translations, or adaptations, of the original libretti, and on that subject Mr. Radford has not expressed himself too strongly, although I do not agree with him that the fault lies entirely with the publishers. It is not difficult to imagine that in face of an urgent demand for an English translation of a new opera successfully produced abroad, they might be forced to accept the best within their reach. Further, it is possible to suppose that not all of them have had a staff capable of judging whether or not a given translation was a faithful rendering of the original text, being partially, if not totally, ignorant of the tongue in which it was written.

For some time I have been devoting considerable attention to this subject because I consider the present position to be acutely distressing. The most charitable criticism I can give, of a general nature, is that the English adaptations I have examined appear to me to be a conglomerate of an exceedingly free translation and the voluntary action of the translator's imagination. He has, as it were, taken a bird's-eye view of the original libretto, and then set to work to express the same ideas on broad lines, avoiding intricate passages, and filling up their places with sloppy padding. That in the process negatives are turned into positives, affirmations into negations, and interrogations into assertions, seems to count for nothing. Thus the libretto the music was

composed to express is not only lost sight of, but another is fitted in its stead which renders the whole effete. To the singer who really understands the original text the task of suitably interpreting the music by means of such a ghastly parody is more than discouraging: it is hopeless!

Here I venture to give two examples of what I mean—one from *Rigoletto*, showing how the plain meaning of the original has been perverted, and the other from *Un Ballo in Maschera*, showing how fine points of detail may be obscured by generalisation. Both phrases will show how very closely a translation may approach to the original without losing accent or rhythm:

IL DUCA. *Rigoletto*, Act 2,

RENATO. *Un Ballo in Maschera*, Act 1.

(a) Original; (b) Boosey's edition; (c) my rendering.

These two phrases ought conclusively to prove that our public has been kept in ignorance of the real gist of most foreign operas, and, as a consequence, is unable to appraise at its true value the composer's work.

My present conviction is that such translations cannot, and indeed need not, be made in verse. It is not sufficient for the person who undertakes them to be equally conversant with both languages concerned. No one who requires the aid of a dictionary ought to attempt the work, for various colloquialisms, peculiar forms of speech, innuendo, and play on words are often used which no dictionary help can elucidate. Further, the translator must be more than merely an efficient philologist; he must be sufficiently musical and have enough knowledge of singing to be able to catch the proper accent and rhythm, while adhering rigidly to the exact meaning of the original text.

Since I believe that the mere discussion of a subject, without action, leads nowhere, I have ventured to attempt to make a new translation of two or three of the libretti I have at hand, which, while faithfully conveying the exact import of the originals, would still be singable, and at the same time make the acutely high notes as comfortable as possible for the vocalist. I may mention that the task was considerably simplified for me in the case of *Faust*, my copy being an Italian edition of Ricordi's without an

English version; for, although he may try to ignore it, an English adaptation distracts the reader's mind and sometimes causes him to see red. Of the result I may say that I consider the translation to be adequate; as to how far it is practicable I do not feel sure. Although, as I read it, I believe it to be so, others may not see eye to eye with me in every detail. Reviewing my work after its completion, I feel the necessity for collaboration; the turn of a phrase—which would make all the difference—while it has escaped me, may suggest itself to other minds.

With this idea in view during April—hence before the appearance of your article referred to above—I communicated with a prominent member of our new National Opera Company, proposing what practically amounted to the round-table of which Mr. Radford speaks. I suggested that after a preliminary conference between us, he should assemble such of the principal singers of the Company as would take the solo work in the opera (*Rigoletto*) concerned, so that I might have the benefit of expert opinion on an all-important point. Owing to pressure of work on the one hand, and, on the other, to the fact that *Rigoletto* is not included in the Covent Garden programme, my proposal was not found acceptable at present.

Yet I do not feel inclined to take this first reverse lying down. I believe that this much-needed work can be done successfully, and hope that some of those who are equally interested, and are qualified to do so, will render me the assistance and counsel which my National Opera Company correspondent was unable to give. If such will be good enough to communicate with me soon, I shall be very grateful.—Yours, &c.,

A. KEAY.

2, Gledstanes Road, W.14.

WANTED—COMPOSITIONS FOR WIND INSTRUMENTS

SIR,—A short time ago the esteemed Commander of Kneller Hall made through a well-known daily paper an appeal to British composers for original works for military bands, which I hope met with the success it deserved. As a wind-player of about twenty-six years' experience, I shall be glad if you will kindly allow me through your valuable medium also to appeal to our able composers to bear in mind the now not inconsiderable number of players on the flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon, and to write and publish solos, duets, trios, quartets, and quintets for these instruments. There are several solos by well-known living composers already published for each of the popular first three, but only one or two for the last two lesser-known instruments. Josef Holbrooke and Percy Grainger have each written quintets for them, which have deservedly been performed in London and the provinces, but I know of only one quartet for that unique combination (without the horn as tenor instrument), and this is an admirable little march, written at my importunate request by my friend, the late Edmondstoune Duncan, for a party—but I regret to say I have not yet been able to get a publisher to print it.

A German composer has written one, published at Leipsic. I am aware that the sale for these works will be less than in the case of strings, but if a series of graded quartets, easy to difficult, for one of each of these five instruments were published, and also adapted as string quartets, at popular prices, I think they would pay their way.

Hoping some abler pen than mine will follow up this suggestion.—Yours, &c.,

JOHN PARR.

7, Snig Hill, Sheffield.

August 5, 1922.

SIR,—It was with particular pleasure that I read in a weekly contemporary that one of the most gratifying features of the Royal Academy of Music Centenary celebrations was the brilliant promise shown by that 'rising young composer, J. B. McEwen,' and that his Quartet *Biscay* was one of the most notable of all the works heard during the fortnight. It is a pity that all our rising composers do not receive such encouragement at the proper time.—Yours, &c.,

A. K.