FROM MUSIC ON THE STAGE
TO MUSIC ON THE PAGE:
SONG TRANSLATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Oana Surugiu*

Abstract

The intersection of translation and music can prove to be a fascinating area to explore, increasingly gaining the interest of specialized translators and scholars and also of researchers in translation studies, cultural studies, media studies and musicology. My paper aims to discuss the special issue of multimedial translation, as well as the way in which song translation can be used as an effective way of language teaching, with a focus on Leonard Cohen’s musical lyrics. I have chosen Leonard Cohen’s songs as cases in point, since they beautifully capture important issues of human life, create strong images, combine improbable elements and therefore, seem to express best the relationship between text and music, as well as the power of language and the musicality of expression.

Until quite recently, the translation of songs did not attract much attention within translation studies, despite the extremely important role that music plays in the daily lives of individuals and the development, cohesion and organization of societies, despite the fact that music has an enormous influence on the way society works, nations are represented, cultures are constructed and passed on from one generation to another, and why not in language acquisition also.

Therefore, the intersection of translation and music can prove to be a fascinating area to explore, increasingly gaining the interest of specialized translators and scholars and also of researchers in translation studies, cultural studies, media studies and musicology. The role played by translation in the context of musical performances can enrich our understanding of what translation might entail, how far its boundaries can be expanded and also how it can relate to other forms of expression.

My paper aims to discuss the special issue of multimedial translation, as well as the way in which song translation can be used as an effective method of language teaching, with a focus on Leonard Cohen’s musical lyrics. I have chosen Leonard Cohen’s songs as cases in point, since they beautifully capture important issues of human life, create strong images, combine improbable elements and therefore, seem to express best the relationship between text and music, as well as the power of language and the musicality of expression.

Starting from the skopos theory formulated by Hans Vermeer (1989:173), and from Bühler’s (cited in Dimitriu, 2002:51) classification of the functions of the linguistic sign, Katarina Reiss (2000: 163) creates a text typology, equivalence-based, arguing that it is the text-type that determines the translation decisions. Bühler classifies the communicative functions of language into informative (referent-oriented), expressive (source-oriented) and operative (audience-oriented). To these three (written)

* PhD Student, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași, srg_oana@yahoo.com
text-types, Katarina Reiss adds another one, a “hyper-type”: the multi-medial text type. Initially, this type of text was called audio-medial and it designated any kind of text written to be spoken or sung, and hence dependent on a non-linguistic medium or on other forms of expression to reach their target audience. Later on, Katarina Reiss changed the name from audio-medial into multi-medial, to include texts such as comics, which rely on visual, but not on acoustic elements. In this sense, a “Multi-medial” text would be a “hyper-text”, and not just a fourth category in Reiss’s classification, which includes songs, stage-plays, film scripts and opera libretti, as well as comics and advertising material that include audiovisual elements. Unlike the case of the novel, short story or lyric poem, in multimedia texts the verbal text is only one part of a larger and complex whole, and it must take into consideration the “additional information” supplied by the other sign system, different from that of language (picture and text, music and text, gestures, facial expression, etc.). Moreover, such studies call for a multidisciplinary approach, other media coming together with the verbal one. Thus, in music, meaning derives not only from the textual analysis, from text, but also from melody, pitch, duration, loudness, timbre, dynamics, rhythm, tempo, expression, harmony, pause, stress or articulation.

When it comes to language learning, the use of music and song provides many advantages: it is highly memorable, creating a state of relaxed receptivity and touching emotional and aesthetic chords, and reinforcing at the same time learning without loss of motivation (Murphey: 1992:3). Motivated language learning mostly depends on students and what they are interested in. Music is everywhere around us and all students have musical tastes. Therefore, the advantage of musical materials is that they are easily accessible for teachers, and additionally, really motivational to most students. Songs can be extremely valuable for developing certain capacities, but sometimes they can prove to be even more valuable if used creatively to bridge the gap between the pleasure of listening or singing and the communicative use of language. Songs can thus be used as enhancers, reinforcers for communicating in the classroom.

Starting from Chomsky’s “language acquisition device”, Tim Murphey (1992: 7) argues that our brain seems to have a natural propensity to repeat what we hear in our environment in order to make sense of it, and that songs may strongly activate the repetition mechanism of the language acquisition device. Songs in general also use simple, conversational language, with a lot of repetitions, which makes them suitable as sample texts for teachers, and additionally, the fact that they are affective makes them more motivating than other texts. Nevertheless, some songs, as the one chosen here for illustration, can be quite complex syntactically, lexically and poetically, and can be analysed in the same way as any other literary sample. This is why I have chosen Leonard Cohen’s Democracy as a case in point since, besides entertaining, it can help in bridging the student-teacher relationship, being at the same time an example of good poetry. As we look through each layer of Cohen’s songs – music, plot, imagery, idea – we see how well suited this is to language teaching. Cohen serves as an ideal experience because he is both popular and challenging, and because he offers enough worthwhile song-poems to let students discover a true poet’s style.

The translation of such complex compositions, especially in language teaching, can prove to be very challenging. Therefore, it should begin with a warm-up activity, a group discussion about Leonard Cohen and his other works, and also an analysis of the text, in which students learn from each other as well as from the teacher and the materials used, and explore their own feelings, beliefs and perceptions. This leads to a
greater degree of learner independence, involves the students more through their self-investment and generally improves language acquisition.

A singer, a songwriter, a poet and a novelist at the same time, Leonard Cohen has been one of the most important and influential songwriters of our time, a figure whose oeuvre achieves greater depths of mystery and meaning as time goes on. His dual careers in music and literature have continuously influenced each other over the decades. His songs reveal a rare literary quality in the world of popular music, while his poetry and prose are nourished by a rich musicality.

Musically, Cohen's songs are based in folk music, but he also draws on musical genres ranging from jazz to blues, gospel, gypsy and pop. Cohen's song lyrics are often emotionally heavy and lyrically complex, owing more to the metaphorical word play of poetry than to the conventions of song craft. His work often explores the themes of love and sex, religion, depression, and music itself, and sometimes even politics.

Love and interpersonal relationships are common themes in popular music, but in Cohen's songs, they acquire a new dimension. Suzanne, mixes a wistful type of love song with a religious meditation, Famous Blue Raincoat, written in the form of a letter, displays the sufferings of a man who has been cheated by his wife and his best friend. Everybody Knows deals with the harsh reality of AIDS, while Sisters of Mercy evokes genuine love. Cohen’s Jewish background is reflected in Story of Isaac and in Who by Fire and broader Judeo-Christian themes are sounded throughout the album Various Positions: Hallelujah, which has music as a secondary theme, and begins by evoking the biblical king David composing a song that "pleased the Lord"; Coming Back to You and If It Be Your Will are clearly addressed to a Judeo-Christian God. Besides Hallelujah, music itself is also the subject of Tower of Song, A Singer Must Die, and Jazz Police. And these, to name but a few of the songs of the poet "...born with the gift/ of a golden voice"; irrespective of the theme approached, his songs never lose their overwhelming emotional force.

One of Leonard Cohen’s most ambitious songs, Democracy is an attempt to create a new national anthem. Here, Cohen addressed almost everything that was going on in America at that time, lamenting "the wars against disorder", "the fires of the homeless", "the ashes of the gay". Everything becomes possible here: “It's coming to America first/ the cradle of the best and of the worst/ It's here they got the range/ and the machinery for change/ and it's here they got the spiritual thirst”. Democracy is indeed coming to the USA, but first, “the heart has got to open in a fundamental way”. Here Cohen criticises America, revealing at the same time that his love for this country: “I love the country, but I can’t stand the scene”. Further, he criticizes the American public’s lack of interest in politics and its addiction to television: “I’m neither left or right/ I’m just staying home tonight,/ getting lost in that hopeless little screen”. Moreover, in a 1992 interview, Cohen himself explains this song:

It’s a song of deep intimacy and affirmation of the experiment of democracy in this country. That this is really where the experiment is unfolding. This is really where the races confront one another, where the classes, where the genders, where even the sexual orientations confront one another. This is the real laboratory of democracy. (Zollo: 1992)

After the group discussions necessary to understand the poem chosen for analysis, the students are ready to undertake their own independent tasks: translating,
writing, studying deeply more of Cohen or other poets, since, depending on each level of interest or ability, several activities are possible.

The song, as a multimedial text, imposes its own regularities, which have to be taken into consideration in translation, and which may pose additional problems when translating; the translator is on the one hand confronted with a poetical text that (s)he has to render into the target language and culture, and on the other, (s)he is limited by the music on which (s)he is compelled to fix the words. The translation of lyrics is a complex enterprise, which can face multiple constraints, due to the fact that the creative process (i.e. translating the lyrics) is subject to limitations, and the process of creation is, somehow, turned upside down. From the very beginning, the translator is limited by the music on which he is compelled to fix the words.

It is an established fact that, generally, during the process of lyrics translation, the music must not be changed to fit the translated text. That is, music cannot adjust to the rhythm of the words; it is always words that have to be adapted to the rhythm of the music. Therefore, the fact that the source text is embedded in music poses a great deal of problems for the translator, problems that are not to be encountered in other kinds of translation. When translation involves not only the written text, but also other communication media, such as music, image, etc., the translator’s task is complicated and limited by the concurrence of intersemiotic communication systems, and (s)he no longer has the freedom to reach the highest degree of dynamic equivalence (cf. Nida 1964) in the translated text. Therefore, song translators must be also concerned with the overall style and the musical pacing. They have to take into consideration the vocal, prosodic and rhythmic constraints in their translation.

This partnership between text and music draws on the concept of “poeticalness” in language (Jakobson: 1964, 2004), which can prove to be a great challenge in translation. Another important issue is the concept of singability – defined as a “musico-verbal fit of a text to music” (Franzon: 2008) – which dictates the translation strategies and replaces the traditional skopos of fidelity.

Songs can be compared to poems, since they share some of the structural elements. Therefore, song translation can be approached as poetry translation. One of the greatest differences between songs and poems is that poems may be enjoyed both through reading and listening, whereas songs are usually meant for performance, being thus listened to. Cohen himself makes a distinction in this respect; the song is intended to be performed, and therefore its voice is implicit and also explicit, implied by the text and, at the same time, sounded by a body.

A poem has certain – a different time. For instance, a poem is a very private experience, and it doesn't have a driving tempo. In other words, you know, you can go back and forward; you can come back; you can linger. You know, it's a completely different time reference.

Whereas a song, you know, you've got a tempo. You know, you've got something that is moving swiftly. You can't stop it, you know? And it's designed to move swiftly from you know, mouth to mouth, heart to heart, where a poem really speaks to something that has no time and that is -- it's a completely different perception. (The NewsHour's Poetry Series, 2006)

To handle the form of the song, the translator may use the strategies for translating poetry as guidance. A song and a poem may pose many similar challenges,
such as rhythm and metre, and also make use of the same devices, such as rhyme, repetition and metaphor. The translators must decide which elements to respect, and which ones are to be left aside; the problem is that these decisions have an impact on the entire song, from rhythm and structure of the line, and rhyme, and even to the content of the song. The translator may be forced to modify the line, in order for it to fit the music, and keep the overall impression of the original; sometimes they may resort to archaisms, neologisms, padding or clichés, in order to meet the constraints of a line, and these strategies are likely to affect the songs, making them sound odd and outdated.

Function and performance are the most important aspects in song translation, and therefore, fidelity to the original lyrics should be shown and assessed contextually, in relation both to the music and the intended function. When used in language classes, song translation is best approached as poetry translation, leaving aside the constraints related to the melody and to creating a singable text, since the limitations of rhyme and metre can prove to be just as challenging. I have provided a translation of the song Democracy, in order to point out some of the difficulties students may run across while translating such a text. First of all, we should mention the cultural references, which, although difficult, can open up new avenues for class discussions and enhance the students’ knowledge: “Tiananmen Square”, “the Sermon on the Mount”, “Chevrolet”, “I’m neither left or right”. Moreover, the text makes use of poetic images, which should be rendered accordingly into Romanian: “a visionary flood of alcohol”, “to determine who will serve and who will eat”, “Shores of Need”, “Reefs of Greed”, “Squalls of Hate”, rendered into Romanian by “o beţe care naşte profetii”, “până ce se-alege servitorul şi servitul”, “Ţărmul Strâmtorării”, “Strâmtoarea Lăcomiei”, “Furtuna Urii”.

The strategies used were generally those used in the translation of poetry. Nevertheless, as far as rhyme is concerned, it was not always achieved in my translation, since I preferred to preserve the poetic image, instead of the rhyming pattern; there were nevertheless cases where both the rhyme and the stylistic effect could be kept (“It’s here they got the range/ and the machinery for change”, translated by “aici au şi tehnologia/schimbării şi maşinăria”).

Besides creative translation and writing, other activities are also possible when we are dealing with songs and music in language classes. Students can be required to collect images of favourite Cohen poems/ songs, and then discuss why they appeal to them or even provide equally creative images into Romanian. They can work up an outline comparing Cohen with another artist in terms of style, themes, values, images (why not a Romanian one); they can create a presentation on Cohen using records, lyrics, biographical data, class discussions of songs, or prepare a slide show as a visual presentation of one of Cohen’s songs, using either pictures of real people or places, or pictures taken from magazines.

Of course, not all of Cohen’s writings can be used in classroom. Besides his songs, he has published two novels and a book of poems, some of which are just too difficult, too obscure, too risqué for the average class. Nevertheless, as a folk singer, he is interest-catching to most people, and as a poet he has much to illustrate about poetic competence. Additionally, song translation is not proposed here as a “new methodology” in language classes, but rather as a tool which we can use to animate and facilitate language learning and acquisition. Songs can be successfully used in translating practice, since they are enjoyable and motivating source texts. Additionally, they can help translation become more student-oriented, and can be used to prepare advanced students for more challenging source-language texts.
Acknowledgements:
This work was supported by the European Social Fund in Romania, under the responsibility of the Managing Authority for the Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013 [grant POSDRU/88/1.5/S/47646]

References


Dimitriu, R., Theories and Practice of Translation, Iași, Institutul European, 2002


Susam-Sarajeva, Ş., Translation and Music: Changing Perspectives, Frameworks and Significance in The Translator, Volume 14, Number 2, 2008, 187-200


Appendix

Democracy

It's coming through a hole in the air,
from those nights in Tiananmen Square.
It's coming from the feel
that this ain't exactly real,
or it's real, but it ain't exactly there.
From the wars against disorder,
from the siren's night and day,
from the fires of the homeless,
from the ashes of the gay:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.
It's coming through a crack in the wall;
on a visionary flood of alcohol;
from the staggering account
of the Sermon on the Mount
which I don't pretend to understand at all.
It's coming from the silence
on the dock of the bay,
from the brave, the bold, the battered
heart of Chevrolet:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.
It's coming from the sorrow in the street,
the holy places where the races meet;
from the homicidal bitchin' that goes down in every kitchen
to determine who will serve and who will eat.
From the wells of disappointment
where the women kneel to pray
for the grace of God in the desert here
and the desert far away:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.
Sail on, sail on
O mighty Ship of State!
To the Shores of Need
Past the Reefs of Greed
Through the Squalls of Hate
Sail on, sail on, sail on, sail on.
It's coming to America first,
the cradle of the best and of the worst.
It's here they got the range
and the machinery for change
and it's here they got the spiritual thirst.
It's here the family's broken
and it's here the lonely say
that the heart has got to open
in a fundamental way:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.
It's coming from the women and the men.
O baby, we'll be making love again.

Democrație

Vine, printr-o spătură-n cer,
Din noptile de-atunci din Piața Tienanmen,
Vine din senzația că nu-i real,
Sau poate că-i real, dar nu e chiar local.
Din războaiele împotriva dezordinii,
Din sirenele din noapte și din zi,
Din focurile celor fără locuințe,
Și din cenușa celor veseli:
Democrația vine în Statele Unite.
Vine prin-o spătură-n zid,
Din cutremurătoarea Predică de pe Munte,
Pe care nu pretind deloc c-o înțeleg.
Apare din tâcerea
de pe țărm și de pe chei,
din viteză, îndrăzneață, încercata,
imă a unui Chevrolet:
Democrația vine în Statele Unite.
Vine din tristețea de pe stradă,
Din locuri sfinte unde neamurile se încheagă,
De la bărba ucigașă
Ce toacă vorbe-n orice casă
Până ce se-alege servitorul și servitul.
Din valuri de dezamăgire
unde femeile se roagă în genunchi
spre-a Domnului milostivire
pentru noi, cei din acest deșert, sau de oriunde:
Democrația vine în Statele Unite.
Vâslește, vâslește, ne-nchet,
tu, mândra mea Corabie de Stat,
spre Târmul Strâmtorâii
peste Strâmtoarea Lăcomiei,
Prin Furtuna Urii,
vâslește, vâslește mai departe.
Democrația vine în America întai,
leagăn celor buni și celor răi,
Aici au și tehnologia
schimbârii și mașinăria
și tot aici au setea cea mai mare pentru duh.
Aici familia-i ruptă
Și aici cei singuri spin
ca inima să fie mai deschisă
spre fericirea cea demult promisă:
Democrația vine în Statele Unite.
Vine de la femei și de la bărbați,
Iubito, o sa ne iubim din nou!
We'll be going down so deep
the river's going to weep,
and the mountain's going to shout Amen!
It's coming like the tidal flood
beneath the lunar sway,
imperial, mysterious,
in amorous array:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.
Sail on, sail on ...
I'm sentimental, if you know what I mean
I love the country but I can't stand the scene.
And I'm neither left or right
I'm just staying home tonight,
getting lost in that hopeless little screen.
But I'm stubborn as those garbage bags
that Time cannot decay,
I'm junk but I'm still holding up
this little wild bouquet:
Democracy is coming to the U.S.A.

Atât de mult că râul o să plângă
Și muntele ne va striga: Amin!
Vine ca o viitură,
pe sublegănarea lunii,
imperială și misterioasă,
într-o paradă a iubirii:
Democrația vine în Statele Unite.
Vâslește, vâslește …
Sunt sentimental, dacă înțelegeți ce vreau să spun,
Iubesc țara, dar nu suport ce văd,
Nu-s nici de dreapta nici de stânga,
Ci stau acasă-n seara asta,
Pierzându-n micul ecran fără speranță.
Dar sunt mai îndărâtini decât o pungă de gunoi
pe care Timpul nu o poate recicla
Sunt un gunoi, dar încă mai susțin acest buchet sălbatic:
Democrația vine în Statele Unite.