

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

### BEYOND THE 'VERBAL FIXATION': NEW PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSLATION AND MUSIC

The complex interface between translation and music is finally beginning to attract the attention it deserves. 2025 saw at least two interdisciplinary conferences that brought the domains together in creative ways (*Music to my Ears: Creative Practices in Music and Translation* at Goldsmiths in May; and *Translation and Music: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* at Zwickau in June/July) with a third planned for 2026 in Lodz (*Translating Music: The Musical Work and Its Transformations*). There have been some interesting publications too. Malgorzata Grajter's *Applying Translation Theory to Musicological Research* (2024), reviewed here by **Rui Pedro Almeida**, is the first truly systematic attempt to look at music through the lens of Translation Studies. Helen Minor's *Music, Dance and Translation* (2023), reviewed by **Vanessa Montesi**, uses multimodal theory to explore the relationship between dance and music, providing an interesting sequel to her equally provocative *Music, Text and Translation* (2013). And mention should of course also be made of Lucile Desblache's *Music and Translation: New Mediation in the Digital Age* (2019), which, despite being shackled by a rather limited definition of translation,<sup>1</sup> nevertheless provides a very thorough and far-ranging overview of the various ways in which the two domains intersect.

What is new about this latest outcrop of offerings is that they are slowly beginning to venture beyond the interlingual to consider how music translates and is translated without necessarily involving the verbal code at all. We find in them not only case studies of intersemiotic translation between music and other arts, but also reflections on how translational processes figure in different forms of musical production: how performers working from printed scores are effectively translating the composer's intentions from the written medium into sound; how old songs are retranslated in the form of jazz improvisations and cover versions; and how musical themes, works and genres are successively translated across geographic and cultural borders and adapted to suit new audiences and purposes, generating new forms and varieties. That is to say, the wealth of theoretical material that has been produced in Translation Studies about matters such as interpretation, mediation, authorship, rewriting, constraints, and more recently, trectuality<sup>2</sup> and translationality,<sup>3</sup> can be applied to music just as readily as to written texts.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps reflecting the still dominant understanding at the time this book was written, there are repeated suggestions that 'translation proper' is verbal and that other uses of the term are merely metaphorical (for example, pp. 68-69, 110-111, 114, 221-3, 267). Near the end of the book (p. 285), however, she does acknowledge that this understanding is beginning to change.

<sup>2</sup> This is a portmanteau term, coined by researchers at the University of Turku, that combines textuality, transmission and translation, bringing together researchers working in translation studies and textual scholarship to look at how texts are transmitted across languages and cultures (<https://blogit.utu.fi/englishturku/2019/11/06/trectuality-at-the-intersection-of-textual-scholarship-and-translation-studies/>, Accessed: 13 July 30, 2025). See Bennett (forthcoming, Chapter 3) for examples of how this can be applied in the musical context.

<sup>3</sup> This is defined by Robinson (2017, x) as 'transformationality: the constant emergingness of everything through embodied, situated, performative interactions'.

This comes not a minute too soon. For years, the field of Translation and Music was limited by its reluctance to embrace forms of transfer that did not overtly include verbal language, and although there were a few random case studies by translation scholars of intersemiotic translation involving music,<sup>4</sup> much of the interesting work dealing with musical transfers was undertaken in other disciplinary fields, such as adaptation studies, interart studies, intermediality or simply musicology.<sup>5</sup>

Şebnem Susam-Sarajeva's Introduction to her pioneering special issue on *Translation and Music* in 2008 suggests reasons why this might be the case:

If the researcher comes from musicology, for instance, he or she will not necessarily be familiar with the concepts, tools and models available in translation studies; the research then tends to focus on aspects other than interlingual translation. Translation scholars on the other hand feel more comfortable dealing with written texts. We often have difficulty in comprehensively discussing other mediums together with the verbal one; we then end up sliding into a predominantly textual analysis. Few of us with a background in translation studies can effectively deal with meanings derived not only from text, but also from melody, pitch, duration, loudness, timbre, dynamics, rhythm, tempo, expression, harmony, pause, stress or articulation in music. If we consider that research in translation and music may also require a background in media studies, cultural studies and/or semiotics, we can begin to appreciate the difficulties encountered by anyone who ventures into this field (2008, pp. 189-190).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the long list of text types that she provides in that same Introduction (2008, pp. 191-2) of 'where translation and music might come together' is exclusively verbal in focus. Likewise, the vast majority of studies that have been published before and since that special issue of *The Translator* came out in 2008 have been overwhelmingly concerned with the verbal aspects of music translation, whether practice-oriented<sup>7</sup> or descriptive.<sup>8</sup> This is reflected in the overviews provided in the major TS encyclopedias and handbooks. In 2012, Marta Mateo's entry on 'Music and Translation' in Volume 3 of the *Translation Studies Handbook* was limited to opera, stage musicals and songs, and although she does distinguish translating for performance and surtitling from the translation of opera libretti for programmes or CDs, very little is made of the multimodality that is such an important

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bennett (2003, 2007, 2019), Minors (2013b), Stones (2013), Moss (2013), Ng (2020), Takebee (2020) and Vidal (2020).

<sup>5</sup> See Desblache (2019a, pp. 115-117) for an overview. Grajter (2024, p. 61) makes the point that "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*" (emphasis added).

<sup>6</sup> This perspective is broadly endorsed by Desblache, who points out that both musicology and translation studies are 'practice-oriented disciplines which tend to devote their theoretical explorations to their own field' (2019a, p. 58).

<sup>7</sup> For example, there are works that provide advice for practitioners about producing singable translations of song lyrics or opera libretti (e.g. Franzon, 2008; Apter and Herman, 2016; Low, 2005, 2017), about the challenges involved in opera sur- or subtitling (Low, 2002; Virkkunen, 2004; Mateo, 2007; Rędzioch-Korkuz, 2016, 2018; Page, 2020) and more recently, about including music in audiodescription (e.g. Igareda, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the studies included in Franzon et al. (2021, 2024) and selected chapters of Minors (2013, 2020) and Şerban and Chan (2020).

feature of the first two. Susam-Saraeva's entry on 'Music' in the 2020 edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* covers the same restricted ground, though divided according to functional rather than genre criteria (and with the addition of audiodescription in the 'Accessibility' section). Desblache's entry for the *Routledge Handbook of Literary Translation* (2019) initially seems more promising, in that its introduction briefly mentions some nonverbal forms of musical translation like score interpretation and jazz improvisation, but these are not developed further, and the body of the entry rehearses the familiar themes of song translation, sur- and subtitling, and the translation of written texts on musical subjects. As for Anna Rędzioch-Korkuz's more recent survey of the field, despite briefly gesturing towards non-linguistic transfer ("i.e. cases where natural languages are not involved", such as "translating a piano concerto into ballet" [(2024, p. 68)], she does not fully acknowledge that such studies lie within the scope of translation studies, and ultimately restricts her remarks to 'vocal translation' on the grounds that "the presence of a natural language(s) is considered here fundamental to translation studies (as opposed to translation semiotics)".

Klaus Kaindl, in a chapter advocating for a multimodal understanding of translation generally, makes clear how ludicrous this "verbal fixation" (2020, p. 54) is in the musical context. Building on his earlier work on the plurisemiotics of song translation (2005), he shows how the very shift to a new cultural and linguistic environment triggers major transformations that affect all levels of the musical text: the staging of Bizet's comic opera *Carmen* in German at the Vienna Court Opera in 1875, for example, produced a change of genre as well as other shifts on the level of 'the modal realisation and intermodal relationships associated with it' (2020, p. 58),<sup>9</sup> while the translation of Elvis Presley's rock-and-roll hit 'Hound Dog' into German caused the song to mutate into the domestic *Schlager* genre of popular music, with repercussions on the level of the harmony, melody and rhythm. Such shifts are inevitable, he suggests, because:

In translation, a multimodal whole is /.../ transferred into another temporal, social, and cultural context. Assuming that the meaning of modes always depends on the specific context of use, such a transfer also means change, since the recipients and with them the social and cultural parameters change. Thus, every translation is inevitably subject to change. Fixed, rigid relational specifications, such as the relationship between source and target text, are just as obsolete as the idea that modes could pass through the process of translation without undergoing change. (Kaindl, 2020, p. 59)

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<sup>9</sup> The much larger dimensions of the stage created new semiotic potential, which in turn affected the use of extras, props, and stage decor as well as the verbal, vocal, and musical mode. This required a modification of the original genre, as the intimate setting of the *opéra comique* was not suitable for the Vienna Court Opera. To overcome this problem, the translator, Julius Hopp, modified his text to suit the conventions of the Romantic opera, which was reflected in the musical realisation and the relationship between spoken and sung modes. The orchestra was extended, the spoken passages were deleted, and the singing style was adapted to the conventions of the Romantic opera. This also led to dramatic changes in the realisation on stage: the choice of costumes, the number of extras, and thus also the representation of the characters had to be adapted according to the new genre and medial conditions. The medial context, the genre-specific conventions, and the modal relationships influenced each other and turned a realistic chamber play into a bourgeois Romantic opera. (Kaindl, 2020, p. 58).

Thus, if Susam-Sarajeva (2008, pp. 189-190) and Desblache (2019a, p. 58) see the “verbal fixation” as a consequence of disciplinary over-specialization, Kaindl seems to be suggesting that it is the result of an inadequate understanding of what translation truly entails.

In fact, he is not the only scholar to be making this observation. There have been signs around for a while that Translation Studies as a discipline is ripe for a paradigm shift,<sup>10</sup> beginning with our understanding of what constitutes our object of study. Since 2017, there has been a spate of works announcing that such a shift is already under way. Some, such as Gentzler (2017), Robinson (2017), Blumczynski (2017), Marais (2019) and Bassnett & Johnston (2019) have approached this on a theoretical level, emphasising the ubiquity of translational processes and their material embedment. Others, like Lee (2022), Robinson (2023), Grass (2023), Lucas (2023), Robert-Foley (2023) and Campbell and Vidal (2024) have a more practical orientation, showing how translation can serve as the starting point for creative artistic works.<sup>11</sup> What they all have in common, however, is their willingness to go beyond the merely verbal to include translational phenomena of all kinds, and on their insistence that translation produces change.

Although a number of these works include references to music, one that has proved particularly relevant to my purposes is a short section in Piotr Blumczynski's 2023 book *Experiencing Translationality* entitled 'Translationality in music' (pp. 184-186). In it, Blumczynski discusses how “playing a familiar piece of music is an act of re-enactment, recreation and remembering” and how “all live performances of the same piece are slightly different and yet recognisable as its instantiations and versions” (p. 184). Thus, cover versions (“pieces of music transferred – or shall we say translated? – between artists” [p. 185]) offer excellent opportunities for translational analysis, as he shows in his case study of Johnny Cash's version of 'Hurt' by Nine Inch Nails.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Kuhn (1962), the father of the term 'paradigm shift', described the way in which such major ruptures come about. There starts to be a build-up of exceptions (or 'anomalies') to the old paradigm, challenging its internal coherence, until it is no longer sustainable as a heuristic model and a crisis is provoked. This is, I believe, what we are now witnessing in our field. For years, translation was understood to be an exclusively interlingual form of transfer committed to keeping the meaning the same, but there are now so many exceptions to both of these parameters that the definition is clearly insufficient.

The first parameter was challenged in 1959 when Roman Jakobson mooted the notion of intersemiotic translation, while the second has been successively dismantled since the 1980s when Descriptivists showed how texts are often adapted, truncated, extended or altered in translation, sometimes beyond recognition, to serve some specific purpose in the target culture. Since then, the various binaries that have served as the coordinates through which particular instances of translation are plotted and discussed (i.e. original/translatum, author/translator, source language/target language) have gradually been eroded by exceptions and anomalies. The only way forward, therefore, is to acknowledge the limitations of the old understanding of translation and embrace a new paradigm once and for all.

<sup>11</sup> See Vidal (2023) for a collective review of some of these titles.

<sup>12</sup> Blumczynski is not the first to make this point, of course. Grajter (2024, pp. 49-53) points out that some of the most respected theorists of translation and semiotics, such as George Steiner (1998, pp. 27, 438-446) and Umberto Eco (2001, pp. 102, 104, 107, 129) had already discussed music in translational terms without receiving much uptake amongst their immediate contemporaries. Kobus Marais (2019, p. 145) also uses

Blumczynski's understanding of musical translationality has since become the starting point for other studies, most notably a short reflection by África Vidal entitled '*Allegro ma non troppo: Going out for a walk through musical translationality*' (2025), and Karen Bennett's full-length monograph *Translationality in Music* (forthcoming), which explores the issue in more depth. It is hoped that these works, together with those by Grajter (2024), Minors (2023, 2013) and Desblache (2019a) mentioned above, will help in definitively propelling the field of Translation and Music – and maybe even Translation Studies more broadly – out of its verbal fixation and into a productive new paradigm.

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The call for papers for this special issue on Music in/and Translation resulted in an unprecedented number of very high-quality submissions. Our objective was to offer a representative selection of the kind of research that is currently being done in the field, with priority given to studies that extend its boundaries into previously unexplored terrains.

The issue opens with a paper that is interlingual in focus, but potentially far-reaching as regards its 'post-translation effects' (Gentzler, 2017). **Frida Lizeth Flores Moreno and Krisztina Zimányi** are concerned with the translation of Baroque musical treatises, specifically the translation from English into Spanish of *The Art of Playing on the Violin* (1751) by Francesco Geminiani, with the objective of helping Spanish-speaking musicians in Latin America to play Baroque music according to conventions of the time. Historically Informed Performance (HIP), as it is called, is itself a controversial topic in music studies with certain analogies to archaizing translation in literature,<sup>13</sup> and the authors give some time to discussing this, and the way in which such translation has been approached over time. They then propose a methodology for approaching this particular translation task. The resulting paper, which reveals the complexity of trying to understand knowledge systems from the past, is thus also of interest not only to scholars of Translation and Music, but also to those involved with History and Translation.

The next three articles all deal with song translation, which, as we have seen, has been a central concern of translation scholars for a long time. The first continues the practical focus with an article by **Peter Low and Lauro Meller** describing their collaboration in the production of singable English translations of some fifty songs written by Brazilian singer-songwriter Noel Rosa. Peter Low was of course the author of the very influential 'pentathlon principle' (2005, 2008, 2017) for singable translations, and he briefly revisits this before detailing the methodology used in this specific exercise and the difficulties

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examples from music in his proposal to replace the traditional categories of interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic translation with the much broader categories of intra-, inter- and extra-systemic.

<sup>13</sup> This is briefly mentioned in Desblache (2019a, p. 70) and will be explored in more depth in Chapter 2 of Bennett (forthcoming).

encountered. The results will be of interest not only to practitioners of song translation, but also to scholars working on the very topical subject of collaborative translation.

The second article of this group by **Anna Rędzioch-Korkuz** is also interesting in singable translations but is descriptive in nature and concerned with the Polish version of the song 'Good Morning Starshine' from the rock musical *Hair* (1967). Mobilising Yuri Lotman's concept of the semiotic border as a space of tension, she analyses not only what happens to the song lyric in Polish translation but also the cultural contexts of production and reception, which of course were very different: for while the English song remains irrevocably associated with a Broadway musical that was revolutionary in terms of its genre and message, the Polish version was first performed by Poland's 'queen of pop' on a TV entertainment show at a time when that country was under the communist regime. In fact, the song was not so much translated into the Polish language, Rędzioch-Korkuz observes, as into the Polish zeitgeist of the early 70s, defined by an imposed conformity and the marked absence of the protest and rebellion that so coloured American culture at that time.

The third and last paper of the group by **Iván Villanueva-Jordán** explores the topic of cover versions, with a focus on shifting gender representations. The study looks at the song '*Non sono una signora*', originally released by the Italian singer Loredana Bertè in 1982, and three Spanish-language covers recorded by different Latin American singers in 1984. Engaging with Susam-Sarajeva's (2019) concept of the interlingual cover version and Prato's (2007) theory of coverability, Villanueva-Jordán analyzes how these versions negotiate gender, societal roles, and popular music discourses, contrasting thematic and narrative shifts across the adaptations to reveal how translation and performance interact to reframe gender and sexuality.

The next three articles move into the domain of audiovisual translation to examine the complex multimodality at play in video and film. **Darryl Cameron Sterk** looks at the music videos of Formosan Indigenous diva Abao, considered within the politicized framework of a settler society. Focusing on her award-winning 2019 album *Kinakaian* 母親的舌頭, Sterk shows how translation features not only interlingually in the title (where a Paiwanese word is juxtaposed with a Chinese phrase meaning 'Mother's Tongue'), lyrics and subtitles (which are in Paiwanese, Taiwanese, Chinese, or English), but also intersemiotically in the music videos, where the lyrics are translated into dance and (in the title track) also into Taiwanese sign language. This results in a complex multimodal product in which 'everything everywhere is playing all at once'; however, instead of the expected cacophony, this produces a surprisingly harmonious whole which can serve, Sterk says, as a metaphor for democracy and indigeneity in a settler society.

The practices of sign-singing and embodied song, which involve the translation not only of song lyrics but also of specifically musical features like rhythm, tempo, pitch and timbre, are amongst the most exciting developments to have appeared in our field in recent years. **Omar Mohammad-Ameen Ahmad Hazaymeh's** paper is concerned with the way hologram technology can be used to enhance the musical experience of the deaf and hard

of hearing by enabling such interpretations to be integrated into performances. After reviewing the various ways in which digital technology has transformed our engagement with music generally, he describes the methodology used to produce life-size three-dimensional holographic projections, which allow the signs to be viewed from multiple angles. When combined with sensory systems, such as vibrating seats, wearable haptics or interactive floors (which translate rhythms and frequencies into a form that can be experienced through the body), or dynamic lighting systems synchronized with the music's tempo and emotional shifts, the technology provides the deaf and hard of hearing with a rich immersive musical experience, which approximates that enjoyed by hearing audiences. Though Hazaymeh does not explicitly focus on the technical processes used to transform audio signals into visual or kinaesthetic form, this is clearly also a translational operation, which one day might produce new studies in our field.

The next article by **Paula Igareda** continues the accessibility theme with a study of how background music in film soundtracks is dealt with in audiodescription (AD). Music plays a multiplicity of roles in film – used to set a scene, create atmosphere, build the narrative, and identify characters and themes, amongst other things; yet, in audiodescription, it is sometimes underestimated, with the result that it may be overwritten. In order to determine if the practice has become more sensitive over time, Igareda analyses the audiodescriptions of eight films in which background music is particularly important, four from the 2000s and four from the last two years (2023-2025). Her results suggest that there has been a growing respect for music in current audio-described films compared to earlier practices. The study is then complemented by a second experiment designed to assess the iconicity of music in audiovisual identification and its implications for AD. Based on these findings, the article proposes the need for greater integration of music in audiovisual accessibility studies.

**Helen Julia Minors'** article is also concerned with film music, but focuses upon its capacity to translate emotion, understood through the prism of cognitive metaphor theory. She begins her paper with an account of the history of music in film, from the earliest days of silent cinema, when it would be provided by a live pianist or orchestra, to the sophisticated digital soundtracks of today. Then she turns her attention to *The Shape of Water*, a 2017 film by Guillermo del Toro, which features two mute characters (one non-human) whose emotions are conveyed largely through musical means. Drawing on published interviews with the composer Alexandre Desplat, Minors analyses how the music is also used, diegetically and non-diegetically, to set the era and location, define character, and evoke the medium of water that is such a significant feature. In this particular case study, Minors concludes, music has in many ways become the main mode, no longer something that merely echoes a narrative told through verbal and visual means, but an active generator of character and plot.

The final two articles – the most adventurous of all – describe creative translations involving music, each of which sheds light on important theoretical and artistic questions through its informed practice. **Sofia Lacasta Millera** recounts the processes involved in

creating a visual translation of Leroy Anderson's famous musical piece 'The Typewriter' (1950), done in the context of the short course *Soundscapes – Translating from Music*,<sup>14</sup> held in the Spring of 2022. After analysing the semiotic elements making up the source text and describing the various performances it has undergone in different sociocultural and audiovisual contexts, she explains how she and her collaborator, África Vidal Claramonte, approached the translation, creating visual analogies of features such as rhythm, pitch and timbre, while also recalling the office imagery evoked in some of the stage performances of the work. The resulting visual poem, which was also used as the Epigraph for Vol. 5/1 (2023) of *Translation Matters*, is then presented in two forms, one in Spanish and the other multilingual.

Though Lacasta Millera's experiment was not overtly conceived within the Practice-As-Research (PaR) paradigm, it has been implicitly labelled as such by Grajter (2024, p. 136), creating a link to the final article of the issue by **Daniel Galvão**. This views songwriting as an intrinsically translational practice and advances a PaR methodology to show how the experience of a place's atmosphere can be translated into a musicopoetic artefact. After carefully positioning his work within a theoretical framework that brings together diverse strands of the most exciting translational and arts-based research, Galvão describes how he set about adapting Barrett and Bolt's (2007) PaR model to his particular purpose, namely to render into music the atmosphere of the Brazilian peninsula of Búzios as experienced by him in 2018–2019. With a rigour worthy of the empirical sciences, the paper sheds important light on the semiotic processes through which the work's tempo, rhythm, pitch, volume, timbre and intermusical relations effectively translate his lived experience of that place. In doing so, Galvão succeeds in establishing songwriting as an embodied creative practice, through which the resulting artefact is simultaneously the subject, method, and product of research.

Taken together, all the articles in this special issue on *Music In/And Translation* will hopefully enrich Translation Studies' engagement with this art and offer new avenues for research that go beyond the 'verbal fixation' to embrace all kinds of creative semiotic processes.

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<sup>14</sup> The purpose and results of this course are described in Bennett (2024).

- Bennett, K. - Editor's Introduction: Beyond the 'verbal fixation'  
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