

Translator's Note:

Re-presentation of Biblical Verse through Musical Means

A translation by Amanda Lott

Translation in any sense is an arduous task, but in the creation of an intersemiotic translation between text and music the explanations for the translation must be based completely in theory and background knowledge. Because the two texts occur in completely different semiotic systems, one of the first tasks that must be addressed is this seeming lack of parallelism; of course while finding and explaining this parallel between the two systems does not mean that there is complete equivalency between them. Because of this, I've decided on a sense-for-sense approach to my translation, using the example of many previous biblical translators. Since the verses I will be translating, Matthew 26: 38-45, depict a very specific scene, there will be less of a worry about translating "only after the words" and not capturing the meaning (Bassnett 52). At the same time though, there is an ideological aspect present in the translation, and it will still be hard to express the ideas that are present in music and allow them to remain understandable.

This section of verse occurs between the last supper and the capture and crucifixion of Christ, portraying Jesus' last plea to God that this fate be taken away from him in the Garden of Gethsemane. Although these verses have been inspiration for various other compositions, I do not believe that these songs are necessarily re-presentations or translations of this scene. Generally the music focuses on a single aspect or emotion within the text, for example the anguish of Christ, and not portraying the movement and changing feelings that are shown in the passage. They tend to emphasise the importance of this scene to a believer, for example noting the 'willingness' of Jesus to give up his life because of his love for the believer. Although Jesus' anguish is visible, it is not *only* desperation or sadness that is seen in this scene. And although the believer is important when looking at this scene from a strictly religious point of view, I believe that this sort of rendition ignores the main 'character' as it were of the text. Jesus' unneeded movements between his beloved disciples and his prayers further into the garden, the resignation to his burden if his father so wills it, and the feelings created by the all too loud silence of God within this passage are all just as important; the verses feature Jesus, so I believe

that capturing all of the emotions present within the original text, as well as the movement within it, is most proficiently done through looking at the events through his point of view. It is because I wanted to capture this, to show that these verses are not just one static emotion or action, that I chose to translate these verses.

While at first the composition of the verses made up of words seems to be completely different from that of a musical score, both occur in systems that share a common ‘grammar’. The linguistic theories of Saussure that break language into the sign, signifier and signified¹ have lately been applied to musical representation as well; both systems carry the ability to transmit information to the ‘reader’ (Nussbaum 111). This will make the creation of a musical translation of the bible verses slightly easier, as it gives a starting point to look out from, but it also sets up a false sense of security in some cases.

Differences come into play when looking at the lack of specific “grammatical categories” found in music, because although it follows the same linearity as literary organization it does not have the same sort of syntactical contrast; it is “strictly less generative...and more cumulative”. For example, when looking at the words ‘he went’, there is an almost immediate knowledge of who he is. He is neither she nor they, he is differentiated from other people right away, and went is a verb specifically; it has a set category and, to a point, meaning by itself. On the other hand, I could not simply place a single chord to differentiate it in such a specific way from another ‘category’. Because a score does not generally have this same sort of syntactical grouping, it would rely on a set of chords to represent something different from its surroundings and previous chord groupings. You have to wait for the melody and musical tensions to accumulate before coming to an understanding. Of course, there are certain things that most people with a classical western music education will agree on, such as a minor key denoting a generally negative mood, or that certain time signatures are generally used to help convey certain feelings or musical tones. Another one of these pseudo-definitions in music helps with the portrayal of ‘went’, because when conveying movement, a steady ascending or descending scale of notes will do. If this

¹ The sign is the signifier combined with the signified; the signifier is the sound image, while the signified is the meaning associated with the signifier

movement is broken up by other notes, it can mean that there is something wrong with the character, in this case revealing his burden. In a musical score, the progressively contrasting chords, melodies, and motifs shift throughout a piece regularly, creating a play of signifiers similar to that of literature; the transforming musicality apparent through the use of the notes delays understanding by creating “possibilities to near-infinity”, similar to how the understanding of language is created through differentiation and deferral (Nussbaum 112-113).

This example of movement seen within the translated score, between the prayer in the garden and Jesus’ disciples, are not just actions but also the transitions in the music between the two generalized moods that appear in the text. Because of all this, the unequal translation of concepts and the ability for one aspect of a score to have more than one application or job, it becomes understandable that a sense-for-sense translation is more applicable to a text-to-music project, even if the grammar rules are similar. After all, even if the similar grammars are important and allow for easier and more understandable translation, there are still other things within both texts that should be weighted much heavier.

In deciding what aspects of the text I found most important to preserve in translation, a hierarchy was formed for the re-presentation. These slightly privileged parts are the creation of mood and tone, the depiction of movement and change, and the overall storyline² of the source verses; these are both central to the text and creating a translation that goes beyond previous musical renditions, and they also create an umbrella that captures a lot of what happens within the source text within themselves. This choice was not done to exclude anything from the translation, but rather just what happened when I decided to stress these features and decide how to portray them in the musical score. This worked just fine with a Peircian model, because knowing that I wanted to translate each of these broader aspects of the original text made it easier to look at how they would function in the musical score. For example, while I knew I wanted to capture the changing mood that appears in the text when Jesus moves between the

² Storyline as part of form, the shape and flow of the verses; because it is difficult to translate the physical form between literature and music even without the difference in the way the similar grammars are employed, that aspect of form was replaced by the idea of the storyline.

disciples and prayer, something that was obviously relatable to both texts, I also had to look at how this would function within the translated text as a whole. While the relationship between the texts was clear for this topic, the acknowledgement of how I wanted the music to affect a listener had to be taken into consideration before deciding on how to create this translated effect through the syntactical and pragmatic aspects of the score. In music, a mood is not something that is created by a singular aspect, but through a combination of factors that include a sort of “musical canvas” or background that contains the key signature, time signature, playing speed, ect., as well as the notes that make up the composition. Because of this negotiation between the texts when it came to these concepts, even the smallest elements had to be compared to each other in respect to how they functioned within both of the texts, the whole of the translated text itself, and finally on its own in the arrangement.

Choosing the instrument to play the musical score is one of the first steps I took in creating this translation, although it may seem to be insignificant. This choice, though, is something that has a large impact on the way the score is written and sounds. The tone is determined by the instrument and the written score, and because of this it is important to think about what it is that you are trying to achieve through this score to begin with. My choice of a classical piano was due to a few reasons, including the need for an instrument that was thought of as more serious and traditional, or old fashioned, but still was approachable to a lot of people even though it had this reputation. The Bible is a religious text, and I wanted to reflect this in choosing an instrument that was important in the history of music, the piano having a lot of influence on classical music, but still available to the common person. This passage is one that is well known even by those who are not religious, and this version of the Bible has been domesticized and modernized for the availability of the contemporary reader, and I wanted this to be reflected in the instrument. I also wanted an instrument and arrangement that would not be ‘larger than life’ or too difficult and crowded, which I found happened when I first started to write for multiple instruments; the piano has the versatility to depict a large range of notes and tones (cold -> warm), and the ability to hold many notes at once. This was something that was

absolutely essential to the target score in the later parts of the translation, and in the parts that portray a darker mood.

Another thing that seems to be insignificant but is in actually important for “narrat[ing] or paint[ing] stories or scenes by an author other than the composer” is the creation of a proper musical canvas (Siglind 5). Even before the notes are written down, the framework has to be set out through, again, things like key signature, time signature, and the speed at which the piece will be played. Since music has the ability to create and convey “emotions, moods, mental tensions and resolutions”, there is a consistent process behind the creation of music that represents (is a translation of), or even simply represents, something else (Siglind 9); the work behind the musical score is just as important as the final score itself in their creation. The tone and mood may be determined by the instrument and the written score, but the sounds of the instrument and the way the written score is heard are dependent on the canvas that the score is created with.

For example, the key for the majority of the target score is the most basic one available, C major. This is an uncomplicated key without any sharps or flats, but while it may come across as very simple to begin with it is also the key with the most possible diversity; it is the easiest to change into something else, to add to or take away from with accidentals³ without sounding off because of this simplicity. The reason I chose not to actually change the formal key signature in certain parts of the score and make use of accidentals is also, in small part, because C major was the most malleable and applicable signature. And of course, it is also the most available and least daunting of the keys, which ties back into part of the reason the piano was chosen as the instrument for this piece. I used this as the starting ground to show the preparatory environment that is one of the two motifs seen within this section of verses, as well as a for its malleability.

The time signature does not have quite as much impact on the sound of the complete piece of music that the key signature does, but it does change the overall sound and rhythm of the music. While 4/4 time is the most commonly used and most well-known time signature now, I found that it was too bland for what I wanted to portray in this translation; while paired with the

³ Sharps and flats

C major key signature and the classic but well received piano, the composition ends up sounding too ordinary, and while that is not necessarily a bad thing, I did not believe it fit the religious source text. 3/4 time is most frequently seen in music such as waltzes or minuets for the piano, and while it is still relatively common it lends something slightly different to the score by giving it a more flowing and somewhat unfamiliar sound. The stressing on the notes is different than in 4/4 time, and because of this it is easier to allude to a sort of faltering or specifically rhythmic feeling throughout the piece, even if the notes are played smoothly. This was really important to me, because it is exactly what I wanted to capture in the Bible verses when I first thought about a translation; it may be a calm scene with sleeping disciples and a praying Jesus within a garden, but there is also a sense of desperation within this accepting calm. The messiah is “overwhelmed” and looking for any possible way out of what he knows must be done. It also helps to paint the garden scene itself, a scene that would not be unfitting for a waltz or minuet in its beauty, but also something that alludes to something not quite comfortable.

Finally, the tempo of the music creates the last part of the musical canvas. This was something that I was at first quite worried about, because the tempo of the composition has to mirror the ‘speed’ of the original verse. If it was too quick it would seem lighter and lose some of the tension that is apparent in the garden scene; creating a picture of a frantic or rushed scene in the garden would also ruin the slow and repetitive pace that the reiteration of Jesus’ actions convey. On the other hand, there is still an element of desperation, and keeping the tempo too slow would create a sluggish tone that would not fit this. Moreover the structure of the verses leads to the figure of Jesus moving quite quickly between the actions of praying and chastising his followers, and there is no break present between verses to accommodate this change. This presents some trouble because it seems to be in contrast with the overall somber tone. Because of this, I had to find a common ground that could re-present both aspects. The tempo itself sets a slow-medium pace, *Andante Moderato*, which reflects the walking that occurs within the garden as Jesus moves around. It is not overly slow and dragging, but does not necessarily imply rapidity either. The tempo does change within the piece in a few places though to mark changes in thoughts, actions, or locations.

With these aspects of the target composition set, the canvas backing of the musical piece is created and set to help it stay true to the expressions of the source verses. This stable background, which essentially sets the rules for the way the notes work within the composition, sets the overall mood and tone for the piece. That is, it is not that these things wholly create the tone apparent in the composition, but that without them the tone would not resonate in the same way. The tone is created through the composition of notes (the body of the work) + the musical canvas they are played in, as perceived by the reader/listener. More simply put the notes rely on the canvas they are placed in to create the basic shape of how they are observed, since a note placed in C major will not have any sharps or flats and will therefore have a different sound than one placed in a different key, and a listener will hear this. This is the same as the tone created in the Bible verses; the tone there is connected to the syntax which displays the ideas, speech and actions of Jesus, as observed by the reader in the complete text, but at the same time through the knowledge of what happened before and will happen after this seen to contextualize it and help to create the present tone and mood.

With the canvas created, we can now look at the rest of the piece and the extra musical content, the references and re-creations of things outside of the music itself, which is apparent within it. Music has extra musical content “because the contents of the mental models it motivates are layouts and scenarios in which the listener acts off-line”, separate from musical models. These ‘extra musical’ ideas can be “metaphorically grounded” things such as movements or interactions that happen within the text, or things as abstract as metaphysical concepts of time or existence (Nussbaum 126). Because it is now more accepted that music is just as capable to present this outside content within its own system of representation as other art forms, the newer research into grammar and musical ideas makes it easier to re-present non-musical texts in musical ways (Siglind 11). Although I decided not to take the route of composers such as Messiaen who depicted an artistic scene through the placement of the notes on the score, I have relied on the changing of pitch to denote the movement of Jesus in the text and the time signature and use of specialized notes to suggest a specific mood (Ibid 13).



Figure A – the change between triplets, ascending notes, and minor 16th notes

Along with the time signature, I have used triplets to represent all of the passages in which Jesus is with his disciples; this gives the music a lilt that it would not normally have, and when compared to the changing upward scale followed abruptly by a mess of 16th notes^A, these triplets give an uneasy comfort. They are easy to follow and create a pleasant sound, but their movement and stress patterns also create a swaying or stumbling within the piece. They take a usually simple key and time signature and infuse them with just a little bit of insecurity. Just as Jesus is comfortable in his interactions with his disciples, allowing them to come to the garden with him and trusting them, he is still thrown off by the knowledge of events to come. Every time he returns to these people from prayer, this same feeling is created, and each time he again leaves their company to try to alleviate his anxiety. This is reflected in the triplet patterns becoming slightly heavier and less set in the key signature as the composition goes on.

There are certain words and/or ideas within this triplet motif that are emphasised as well, marked by the elongation of certain tones and the change in both time and volume. These are words like “overwhelmed”, “death”, and “stay” which I have tried to represent by creating musical effects that come close to portraying their meanings or connotations. For the first two, crescendos and decrescendos are employed to create a wave of music to try and create a fitting image, and for “death” specifically the music also slows down slightly and the notes climb upward before ending in a downward arpeggio^B. “Stay” is emphasised by slowing down the music as well, but the notes do not fall or hold any minor notes; instead the ending for this idea is a chord resolution common in hymns, which not only represents the idea of the disciples staying and praying in the garden with Jesus, but also Jesus’ acceptance and moving into the next verses.

The upward or downward notes that appear between the triplets and the 16th notes are always written similarly, just as the text they represent is always similar. Jesus always moves from his disciples to go deeper into the garden to pray, then returns to his disciples. This does



Figure B – the arpeggio and rit. portraying the idea of ‘death’

not change throughout the verses of the passage. When they move upwards on the score, Jesus walks further into the garden and away from the people he knows to pray for a way out, and when he walks back the scale reverses itself, with only one difference in the form of a flat key. Because he only ever ‘goes and returns’, there are no specific descriptions or insights into his walking between the two points, the idea and the text surrounding it are simple. This is what I was trying to capture in the movement of the notes. The flat that persist in the downward scale are there to create dissonance and more unease, because although Jesus has prayed, he receives either no answer or a negative answer, and his return to the disciples is not done in joy.

This is where the first major change in the musical score comes into play. While the only change in the Biblical text between Jesus with the disciples and Jesus praying is the change in location and a slight change in tone, I have the musical piece portrays this difference more obviously. After the notes create the idea of motion, 16th notes take the place of the triplets. These notes are slightly faster in play than the triplets, lending to a more anxious atmosphere; although they would lend to a more familiar beat within the song, which is an attempt to mirror the familiarity Jesus would have talking to his father, this familiarity is broken by a seeming change in key signature. But the key signature actually stays the same throughout the piece. Instead of just making this one change to the key signature, which would be a quicker way to represent this switch, the presence of numerous flats creates a more somber and dark image on the score itself^C. In the actual playing of the piece, the two variations would sound the same, so this use of flats is specific to the actual object of the text even though the mood still comes across in the music. It was the way I thought best to portray and emphasise the desperation that is present in these prayer sessions that is not in Jesus’ interactions with the other men. It links the images created in the source text with the target text as a whole, helping to create the mood and



Figure C – the use of written flats crates more of a dark presence on the score

showing this change on the text itself and through its presentation to the audience. This decision is one of the details that assists in displaying the larger aspects that appear in the text as a whole which link with the original verses; it portrays the strong emotions of Jesus falling “with his face to the ground” and asking for his fate to die for the world to be taken from him by God not once but three times. He knows that if God does not will it to be so, he will not escape from this, but he still asks once more, just to make sure. This is reflected not only in the changes already mentioned, but also through the continued thickening of the musical score the more this musical and textual motif is repeated.

As the atmosphere and the actions in music are shown through the playing of the arrangement, the unspoken thought motif or unseen threats are easier to get across in music than anything else; the “color” of the musical piece is created by not only the musical structure on the page, but also by the associations that the listener finds within the music (Prendergast 213, 216). Because emotion is a perception of the listener, it is hard to create music that speaks to everyone, but on the other hand, there are still those previously mentioned associations created through a western musical education (Nussbaum 192). The emotional switch that happens within my composition is created by a steady encroaching of the minor into the major throughout the piece; the chord resolution mentioned comes from traditional hymns, something that anyone who was familiar with would notice, possibly creating thoughts of church or hymns and the emotions that that person places with them. In placing such associations within the music, it becomes easier to create something closer to the emotion in the original text. Because all music has the ability to preserve and illustrate extra-musical content.

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