

# Re-Arranging Translation Culture in North America: What Could Literary Translation Gain from the Music World?

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**Keywords:** Translation, Music arrangement, Fluency, Original text, Lawrence Venuti, Pentatonix

Literary translators and music arrangers are in the same business: although one works with text and the other with song, theirs is the task of ushering a work into its afterlife, reworking and rethinking it for a new cultural, linguistic, or musical context. They face similar challenges in the way they approach their task: for both, the spectrum ranges from a literal word-for-word/note-for-note method, to a more abstract sense-for-sense method that can sometimes veer into paraphrase (Boyd). While the tasks of these activities are analogous, translation and arrangement in their Anglo-American context represent very different ways that consumers think about the relationship between original and derivative works (like translations and arrangements). Building on Lawrence Venuti's ideas in *The Translator's Invisibility*, I argue that literary translation discourse has a skewed image of the "original" as an artefact, whereas arrangement has a much more cordial relationship with original works and views them instead as the first step in a longer creative process.

This paper begins with a comparative analysis of the role fluency plays in the reception of translated texts and arranged songs. I take fluency as my starting point because, as I argue later in this paper, it is a common factor in the cultural values that shape translational and arrangement preferences and practices. Fluency reveals how translation and arrangement take different approaches to "the original." On the translation side of this comparison, I summarise Venuti's critique of fluency as a marker of Anglo-American translational preferences (4-5). On the arrangement side of this comparison, I use examples from the American *a*

*cappella*<sup>1</sup> pop group Pentatonix to illustrate how arrangements develop in relation to the original works from which they derive. This comparative analysis then raises questions about the authority of “the original,” which I address in the second half of this paper. I turn to Louise M. Rosenblatt’s transactional reader-response theory and Roland Barthes’ notion of the death of the author to help answer these questions, as these critical frameworks provide insights on “originality” and implicate audiences’ roles in translation and arrangement.<sup>2</sup> In short, this paper considers different ways of thinking about the relationship between “original texts,” the derivative works that stem from their afterlives, and their readers, and suggests that Anglo-American readers would do well to take a more critical perspective on the way they approach original texts and translations.

First, a working definition of music arrangement: arrangement is generally understood as “...the transference of a composition from one medium to another or the elaboration (or simplification) of a piece, with or without a change of medium” (Boyd). Any time a piece of music is rendered for a different instrument or voice, or in a different genre, or for a different level of difficulty, it is considered an arrangement: Franz Liszt’s (1811-1866) famous piano transcriptions of Ludwig van Beethoven’s symphonies, beginner-level solo guitar versions of classic Beatles’ tunes, and a four-part choral transcription of Bruno Mars’ 2010 pop hit “Just the Way You Are” are all examples of arrangements. While it is important to remember that, much like translation, arrangements exist on a spectrum of faithfulness to their originals,<sup>3</sup> this paper is more interested in the derivative nature of arrangements. Arrangements – covers in particular – have the potential to be received as authentic, unique musical expressions while still maintaining ties with their originals. As proof, one need look no farther than the success of Pentatonix, who rose to fame by creating *a cappella* covers of well-known pop and seasonal songs: notably, the group only created an album of original work after having released and toured several EPs and albums of covers. The fact that Pentatonix has built a career by performing and selling covers of other artist’s original work is a

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<sup>1</sup> *A cappella* is a Western musical term that denotes singing without musical accompaniment.

<sup>2</sup> By “audiences,” I mean readers, listeners, and consumers alike.

<sup>3</sup> Music arrangement exists on a spectrum of faithfulness with regards to an original work – the more faithful an arrangement, the closer it will sound to an original, while at the other end of the spectrum, some adaptations rework a song so much that its resemblance to the original song is sacrificed. Mashups and sampling are an example of the latter, pushing the limits of “free” arrangement so far that they are often regarded as adaptations and are criticised as pushing the boundaries of plagiarism. See David J. Gunkel’s article “What Does it Matter Who is Speaking? Authorship, Authority, and the Mashup” for more on this topic.

telling outcome of Anglo-American audiences' perspectives on originality in a musical context.

### **Translation, Fluency, and the Audience-Original Relationship**

Translation theorist Lawrence Venuti argues that fluency is a key factor in the cultural values that shape contemporary Anglo-American translation practices (2-5). Fluency drives demand and shapes the publishing landscape (Venuti 2-4). Venuti explains that Anglo-American readers expect fluid, fluent English in the translated texts they read: fluency sells (2-4). This demand is best served by a domesticating approach to translation (Venuti 5), in which the translator "...leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer [of the original text] toward him" (Schleiermacher qtd. in Munday 46). In this kind of approach, translations use language that is familiar to target audiences. The fluency of this familiar language gives readers the impression that the translation they are reading "...reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text" (Venuti 1). In other words, the domesticating approach to translation serves and generates a demand for fluency that makes the translation *appear* like the original.

As far as Venuti is concerned, the dissimulating effect of fluency is highly problematic. He explains that fluency replaces an original text with something "...that will be intelligible to the target-language reader" (18), and that in doing so, a domesticated translation skates over and erases cultural differences between itself and the original text (18-19). In Venuti's way of thinking, the Anglo-American readership's demand for fluency reveals a warped relationship with the original: we want to feel like we are reading an original text, so we demand target-language fluency. This fluency, though, actually flattens cultural differences between the original text and the translation (Venuti 18), which reduces our awareness of the richness and authenticity of the original text. Ultimately, we are left with a translation that falls dreadfully short of the original text. Our demand for fluency comes from a desire for originality – but that fluency betrays both the original text and ourselves as target readers by creating a flattened imitation that masquerades as the original text (Venuti 21). Uncritical target readers are fooled into believing they are reading something that is identical to the original. Broadly speaking, Venuti paints a dysfunctional view of the Anglo-American readership's relationship with foreign language original texts, and points to fluency as an incriminating factor therein.

### Arrangement, Fluency, and the Audience-Original Relationship

In music arrangement, fluency is also a selling factor, but it represents a different relationship between consumers of arrangements and an original work. Fluency here is a question of musical quality: audiences know a good sound when they hear one, and they spend their money accordingly. Culture is a primary factor in determining how listeners decide what constitutes a “good” sound. Anthropologist Bruno Deschênes explains that, to become a fan of a certain type of music, a listener “...must identify, even if only partially, with the cultural models that characterize it” (142) – a person’s social identity is a factor in their idea of “good” music. Of course, values vary across cultures and between individuals, so the question of what makes “good” music is subjective. Nonetheless, it remains that our ideas about what constitutes quality artistry are bound to our cultural contexts (Deschênes 138).

Fluency is shaped by culturally-perceived notions of musicianship. Whether an arrangement is written, recorded, or performed live, its audience expects a skilled and genuine product that meets their cultural values.<sup>4</sup> Given, then, that audiences know a good sound when they hear one, fluency is a matter of creative, culturally-relevant originality as well as faithfulness to the original. A good arrangement pays homage to its original while bringing a new sound to a familiar tune. Pentatonix’s 2016 cover of [Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah”](#) is an example of this<sup>5</sup> – having gone Platinum in February 2018 (“Gold & Platinum”), and having garnered more than 289,925,542 views on YouTube, the cover has met with great success. [Pentatonix’s version of “Hallelujah”](#) has the same melody as the original song, but it moves the song from the context of Cohen’s iconic folk-rock sound (lead voice backed by electric guitar, bass guitar, synth/organ, drums, and background vocals) to the distinct *a cappella* sound of four- and five-part vocal harmonies accompanied by beatboxing and percussive stomping and clapping.

Pentatonix’s cover demonstrates how good arrangements develop a song beyond its original sound without cutting all ties with the original. Take, for example, their reworking of “Hallelujah”’s recognisable broken-chord accompaniment: Pentatonix keeps the basic broken-chord idea of an

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<sup>4</sup> A written arrangement’s audience is the musicians who play it (for example, a high school choir that buys written choral arrangements of pop songs), while a recorded or live performance’s audience are the people listening to the arrangement (e.g. people who buy albums and concert tickets). Each of these kinds of audiences expect a quality product, which they determine based on musicality.

<sup>5</sup> See sound file attachments for sample clips of Pentatonix’ arrangement and Cohen’s original.

accompaniment line, but transforms it from a background part played by one instrument (electric guitar in Cohen's recordings) to a more prominent accompaniment line that moves back and forth across vocal parts, creating a haunting sound that drives the drama of the song. The effect is that Pentatonix's version of "Hallelujah" is immediately recognisable precisely as a *version*: it is not to be confused with Cohen's original sound, but equally worthy of its audience's attention. Pentatonix's version of "Hallelujah" is a new, authentic and artful *cappella* voicing of the song that is uniquely their own, but that still pays homage to Cohen's original.

### Recognition and Authenticity

In addition to culturally-determined notions of artistic "fluency," an arrangement's recognisability also contributes to its success. A neurological study showed that familiarity is a crucial factor in listeners' emotional connections to music (Pereira 1). The study also implied a connection between listeners' familiarity with a song and the amount of money they spent on it (Pereira 1), which directly impacts a song's quantifiable success.

Indeed, recognisability played a role in the success of Pentatonix's "Hallelujah." The song was well-known before Pentatonix covered it; it is remembered as one of Cohen's hallmark songs, and previous covers by other artists have built its fame over the years.<sup>6</sup> Pentatonix's version is the latest development in the song's afterlife, to borrow a term from literary translation (Benjamin 254), and the success of their version builds on the visibility of previous versions. Each cover is recognised as both its own creative expression and as a version of the original song: it pays homage to the original while remaining true to its own artistic authenticity. In Pentatonix's case, authenticity is a matter of translating a song that was best-known as a folk-rock ballad into a four- and five-part vocal harmony, keeping the song's sense of drama while reworking it for a different set of instruments (that is, voices).

Pentatonix's arrangement of "[Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy](#)" is another strong example of the role that familiarity plays in an arrangement's success.<sup>7</sup> With its rapid-fire precision of staccato notes, tight harmonies, and effective beatboxing, their cover is an excellent example of musicianship, but the song's success also lies in the fact that it rather daringly re-works a highly recognisable piece of classical

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<sup>6</sup> Recent covers include KD Lang's 2004 recording, her live performance at the Opening Ceremonies of the 2010 Winter Olympics, and Alexandra Burke's live performance on Britain's 2008 X-Factor finale.

<sup>7</sup> See sound file attachment for sample clip.

music. In the music world, and in *a cappella* especially, we acknowledge that an arrangement exists apart from its original. Unlike current trends in Anglo-American literary translation, which try to preserve a text's originality in translation ("try" being the operative word here) (Venuti 1), music arrangements take on a life of their own, retaining a connection to their original while still being distinct.

### The Performance Element

The performative element of music also shapes an arrangement's relationship with its original. Music naturally develops and evolves in performance. Even if an original piece of music is being performed by the same person, on the same instrument, in the same conditions, we expect that it will sound at least slightly different each time, whether intentionally or not. Music is not static, it exists innately as an in-the-moment phenomenon. The notes on a page of written music may not change with each performance, but they will be played or sung slightly different each time. Indeed, audiences expect this, even with original compositions: rather than expecting a song to be performed exactly the same every time, we acknowledge that it will be different, and, whether consciously or not, we listen instead for unique differences in tone, dynamics, rhythm, pacing, and a variety of other interpretations an artist will use to colour each performance. We listen for quality musicianship: a good performance will bring these elements together in a unique combination that appears effortless – it will be *fluent*, creative, and beautiful in accordance with our socially-determined beliefs in what makes "good" music.

If we expect a certain degree of variability within the performances of an original composition, an arrangement simply adds another level of variability to the song: we expect to hear a well-known melody, and maybe some familiar riffs, accompaniment parts, or ornaments, but we expect to hear them in a way that is new. I return to "Hallelujah"'s broken-chord accompaniment as an example – Pentatonix's version serves the same accompaniment function as Cohen's, but it sounds very different from Cohen's original guitar part because they had to find a way to make it work in an *a cappella* context. Given the performative aspect of music, then, good arrangements are a branch in the trajectory of a song's afterlife: they remain artistically authentic and avoid erasing the original, bringing more visibility and awareness to the constantly evolving creative process of interpreting a

song.<sup>8</sup> The notes on a page of an original composition are a point of departure for future arrangements.

### Shifting Perspectives on “The Original”: Reader-Response Theory

While any discussion on performativity and constantly-evolving creative processes might seem irrelevant to a translation’s relationship with its original, reader-response theory suggests otherwise. Texts might appear more stable than songs, but their meanings also change over time. Louise M. Rosenblatt, literary scholar and reader-response theorist, explains that “Every reading act is an event, a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular configuration of marks on a page, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context” (4). As these elements change and develop over time, so too does a text’s meaning. Like a song’s performance, a text’s meaning happens in-the-moment and evolves each time the reader returns to it (Rosenblatt 4). An original text is not an immutable, fixed artefact with stable meaning. As readers’ knowledge, cultural contexts, and experiences change over time, the way they interpret an original text will change (Rosenblatt 4): just like an original composition will sound at least slightly different with each performance, so too does an original text’s meaning change with each reading.

Translation, then, like music arrangement, is simply another step in the evolution of a text’s meaning. If an “original” text is already the subject of multiple and equally legitimate interpretations, the transformation and interpretation involved in translation are a logical next step in a text’s interpretive process. To return to Venuti’s line of thinking for a moment, I argue that Anglo-American readers are largely ignorant of this function of translation. We read translations in an effort to access an original artefact, when transactional reader-response theory suggests that, through its interactions with its readers, that “artefact” is in fact no artefact: rather, it is constantly radiating outward on its own creative trajectory. We would do well to realise this in the way we think about translations. I return to Pentatonix’s “Hallelujah” and “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy” as examples. These arrangements are genuine products of their moment and cultural context,<sup>9</sup> and while they keep respectful ties to their originals, these

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<sup>8</sup> That is not to say that a good arrangement cannot eclipse the success of the original – Cohen’s “Hallelujah” was not an instant hit, and only gained popularity after Jeff Buckley’s 1994 cover (Lynskey 565).

<sup>9</sup> Pentatonix is working in a culture where interest in *a cappella* music is currently booming: not only is *a cappella* growing across genres (The Swingle Singers are a well-known *a cappella* presence in the jazz world, while Van Canto are pioneering *a cappella* metal), it is also gaining visibility through other media (for example, TV show *The Sing-Off* and movie franchise *Pitch Perfect*).

covers exist quite apart from their original composers and original cultural contexts.

### The Death of the “Original” Author

To continue this idea of derivative works existing apart from their originals, it can be said that even though a translation or arrangement stems from an original, the author or composer of that original work has no authority over the derivative work. This certainly is the case with the two Pentatonix covers discussed in this paper. Leonard Cohen died in November 2016 (“Leonard Cohen”), a few weeks after Pentatonix released their “Hallelujah” cover and two months before it would go Gold on the American charts. Similarly, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), the composer of the original “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy,” was long dead by the time Pentatonix arranged and recorded their 2014 cover. The likelihood that Cohen had a direct impact on Pentatonix’s “Hallelujah” is slim; the likelihood for Tchaikovsky is nil. Even in cases where an original composer is still living at the time an arrangement is made of their work, there is a sense in which they are still cut off from their work: their song has moved beyond them in the creative trajectory that is its afterlife.

This brings me to Roland Barthes’ notion of the (metaphorical) death of the author. Barthes points out that contemporary ideas of authorship are a product of the rise of the authoritative individual in Early Modern European thought (142-143). Because of this, we assume the author has complete authority over their texts: “The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end ... the voice of a single person, the *author...*” (Barthes 143, emphases original). When we realise, however, that the author is a recent and Western construction, we can no longer regard the work as the product of an author’s genius (Barthes 145-146). Barthes’ historical perspective on the author strips them of any great power over their work – in which case, to return to my thought experiment on Venuti, the “Original Work” does not even have any authority as an individual’s authoritative text, as we like to think it does. As such, there is little sense in prioritising the original, as we tend to do in the process of translation (Venuti 1). Barthes explains that the appropriate response to the death of the author is to look ahead to the birth of the reader (148), because therein lies all sorts of potential future meanings into which a text will grow.



In other words, a text, whether literary or musical, exists apart from its author. Barthes writes that “The Author ... is always conceived of as the past of his own book” (145): once a text is created, it is cut off from its author, rather like a child grows up to become independent of its parents (145). Communications scholar David J. Gunkel inserts music production into Barthes’ literary discourse: “Cut off from the direct influence of its progenitor, a recording can accurately reproduce sound without the presence, consent, or control of the original author” (79). Cut off from its original source, a song – or text – has nowhere to go but forwards. The success of groups like Pentatonix, who, as creators and performers of arrangements, are in the business of exploring a song’s afterlife, speaks to the fact that we already recognise the creative potential of a song’s future: after all, Pentatonix’s success has been entirely contingent on their audience’s approval. In the Anglo-American music world, we the audience appreciate fluent, artistically authentic re-workings of existing songs.<sup>10</sup> Our literary world, however, does not take such a forward-looking perspective toward translation: we obsess over “the original,” and misunderstand our role in continuously generating its meaning. Instead of critically embracing the creative journey of a text, we try to lock it down and extrapolate some kind of stable, authoritative Truth, smothering it in the process. While the tasks of literary translation and music arrangement are analogous, we think about them and carry them out in completely opposite ways.

### So, What Now?

Similar as translation and arrangement are, Anglo-American readers think differently about their relationships with original texts and translations as opposed to original songs and their arrangements. Fluency is a key factor in the different values that shape literary translation and music arrangement. Our tendency to prefer domesticating translation methods create translations that have the appearance of fluent originals – except that the result is a “sham” original, a translation that disguises itself as an original text and, in the process, usurps the authority of the foreign original. We insist on fluency in arrangements, too, but this fluency is the sign of an arguably more critical relationship between an arrangement and its original: fluency is the sign of a well-evolved creative process in which the arrangement is recognisable as a unique artistic creation with a past

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<sup>10</sup> One caveat here in the afterlife of derivative works is copyright law – artful arranging is one thing; plagiarism is quite another. That’s not to say, however, that unlicensed derivative works cannot be appreciated as “good” art – that question opens up a discussion on the nature and notion of “good” art that is beyond the scope of this paper.

that ties it to previous work. The problem, then, is not so much in the ways we go about translating, but in the way we privilege “the original.”

Rosenblatt’s transactional reader-response theory and Barthes’ death of the author are helpful frameworks for challenging the authority with which Anglo-American culture views original texts and compositions. Reader-response theory asserts that meaning is made in a text’s interaction with each reader, in which case, the “original” has no prescribed, unchanging, authoritative meaning – rather, its meaning is dynamic, evolving over time as the circumstances under which it is read evolve. The death of the author furthermore undermines the authority of an “original” work by revealing how, even if an original work did have stable meaning, a text is cut off from its author and their intended meaning. Rosenblatt and Barthes undermine the authority of the “original” text, suggesting that Anglo-American readers would do better to look forwards to a text’s future, rather than backwards to its past that is more construct than authoritative truth. In other words, we as translators and as readers of translations would do well to take a more critical relationship towards the afterlives of original texts, as we already seem to do with original compositions and their arrangements. We would do well to look backwards while also looking forwards, so as to responsibly embrace the creative possibilities of a text’s future in a way that is informed by its past.

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