

## PIERROT TRANSLATIONS. (COMMENTS ON A SELECTION.)

Projecting an English translation on a screen during a performance of PIERROT LUNAIRE is an excellent way of enhancing its impact on a new audience, and one which I think could be used more often. It avoids that familiar, distracting rustle of pages when words are provided in the printed programme. For one of my own performances, a distinguished actress was engaged to declaim the English words at the start. This certainly helped set the atmosphere, but did not address the problem of following the text line by line.

Translations intended for actual musical performance are of course in a special category, as they have to encompass major practical issues as well as aesthetic ones. Choosing and fitting appropriate syllabic progressions to specific pitches and rhythms is of prime importance, but the phrasing has to work smoothly, within the flow and impetus of the musical whole. Competing with Giraud and Hartleben is a daunting task.

I greatly admire the skills displayed by the various wordsmiths in finding eloquent alternative versions to key phrases, while managing to preserve the atmosphere and meaning of the poems.

There is, inevitably, a considerable amount of cross-pollination between translators, who can hardly help being aware of one another's efforts. With so much information now available through mass communication, it is much harder these days to be truly original and avoid duplication within the strict confines of the verse structure. Even the resources of a thesaurus have their limits: – there are only so many synonyms, and too much poetic licence can risk distorting the sense of the texts.

## SINGING TRANSLATIONS.

(I have a clear favourite here, that of ROGER MARSH, who has kindly allowed it to be reproduced separately.)

The composer and critic CECIL GRAY's deservedly well-regarded singing translation, often used for programmes of early British performances, has been performed by Linda Hirst and Cleo Laine amongst others.

Scansion is impressively consistent, although the language is sometimes a little over-elaborate in the admirably zealous mirroring of rhythmic contours : ' *a fantasmagorical light ray* ' ( no. 3) ' *a chlorotic laundry maid* ' ( no. 4). ' *every hair a-bristle* ' ( no. 10) and ' *My heavy heart to lighten, I search in darkling river* ' ( no. 2. ) , .No. 8' s opening lines again prove problematic – ' *heavy, gloomy giant black moths* ' does not effectively convey ' *Riesenfalter* ' and the necessary elision on ' *moths* ' inhibits projection. However no. 12 is splendid ' *The haggard harlot, with scraggy gizzard, will be his ultimate paramour* '. No. 21 is another delight ' *a merry swarm of idle thoughts* ' , *A happy whim makes me aspire to joys which I too long neglected* ' . –this fits the line quite perfectly.

*Madonna* is rendered in quasi-religious language with ' *Thy* ' and ' *Thou* ' ., and no. 9 is particularly successful ' *healer of spirits, snowman of lyrics, monarch of moonshine* ' .

ANDREW PORTER's ingenious version of 1984 is performed by Lucy Shelton on a Bridge Records CD, and is one of the most successful. A few similarities indicate that Porter was familiar with others' efforts, especially Cecil Gray's, and that of Schoenberg's favoured translators, Ingolf Dahl and Carl Beier.

Syntax is a little surprising now and then, (*'Hang it! Thinks he: a speckle of plaster!'*-no.18) but the heightened poetic imagery is always striking, and syllables fit the music snugly – one rather noticeable exception being the *'Black, gigantic butterflies'* of No. 8, where the final syllable has to cover two pitches. 'And' has to be inserted at the start of the opening line of **Der Dandy**: *'And with a fantastical light-beam'*. Later in no. 3 *'the ebon, highly sacred wash-stand'* and *'laughs brightly the fountain's metallical cry'* ring somewhat awkwardly, but in general, words are mellifluous and sonically attractive – for example no. 8's *'a sorcerer's sealed book'* *'vapours rise – to murder memory'*, and *'sinking down on heavy pinions'*.

No. 21 is particularly fine: *'O ancient scent from fabled times'.... 'a merry troupe of roguish pranks'*, *'with cheerful yearning I return to pleasures I too long neglected'*. (this is quite close to Cecil Gray).

Some of my other favourite moments are: *'grows tipsy on the sacred liquor'* (no.1) *'He shrieks and cries blue murder'* in no. 16; *'blinded by a flock of vultures, fluttering round in spectral swarms'* and *'Dead the head, matted the tresses'* in **Die Kreuze** (no.14), *'wild accords of passion breaking desperation's icy dream.'* (no. 5) and *'your Lunar Highness'* (no.9),  
The image of the harlot winding her pigtail around Pierrot's neck at the end of no. 12 is a particularly neat piece of poetic licence.

The English translation by INGOLF DAHL and CARL BEIER was the one that Schoenberg preferred, and it deserves our respectful attention. The composer had apparently envisaged having the vocal part given in the language of each country of performance, and had at one time suggested this particular version, for a performance in 1950 under Robert Craft . .

It stays very close to Hartleben's German, often preserving the word order a little too precisely. e.g: *'How shall I today make-up?'* (no.3). One imagines that this may not have sounded quite as odd to Schoenberg as it does to native English speakers. This version, as do most others, also faithfully reproduces verbal discrepancies from the original (see 'Discrepancies article) such as *'lightbeams (Lichtstrahl)'* at the start and *'moonbeams Mondstrahl'* at the end, of no.3.

In general it all flows and scans extremely well but does not always fit easily to the rhythms of the music.

I like the *'pallid kerchief'* of no. 4, but the final stanza reads a little curiously:

*'And the gentle Maid of Heaven,  
By the branches softly fondled,  
Spreads out on the darling meadows  
All her light-bewoven linen'.*

Such iambic pentameters, ( Kalevala /Hiawatha style), are ingeniously sustained for almost the whole of **Die Kreuze** (no. 14) :

*'Holy crosses are the verses  
On which poets, mute, are bleeding,*

*Blindly beaten by the vultures,  
Fluttering swarms of ghostly phantoms’.*

Other good moments are: ‘*Chords of savage lust disrupt the icy dream of bleak despair*’,(no. 5) , ‘*Your gaze, so feverishly swollen, Charms me like a strange enchanted air*’ (no. 7), and ‘*The dank fumes of lower darkness give off vapour – stifling memory!*’ ( no. 8) – although the earlier ‘*Sombre, shadowy, giant mothwings killed the splendid shine of sun*’ is less satisfactory.

I like the ‘*Moon’s maharajah*’ of no. 9 and ‘*a wind-puff titters softly*’ in no. 17. (the latter is also used by Andrew Porter.), but ‘*In candleshine-and-shudder*’ as the third line of no. 11 (***Rote Messe***) seems a rare mistranslation.

The last verse of no. 15 is striking, though syntax lapses slightly.

*‘Through the silvery fireglow of moonlight,  
Through the flooding waves of light, his yearning  
Soars on high to native skies so distant’..*

No. 19 is highly successful, and again features iambic pentameters:

*‘With a bow grotesque and monstrous’,  
Pierrot scrapes away at his viola,  
Like a stork on only one leg,*

*Sadly plucks a pizzicato’, and I love ‘Pop, out comes Cassander’ which follows!*

The final movement as usual is rewarding: ‘*O fragrance old from days of yore*’..... *A prankish troop of rogueries is swirling through buoyant air, ....  
.... ‘from my window framed in sunlight I freely gaze on the dear world, and dream beyond in boundless transport’..*

.....  
I should also mention the singing translations made by John Bernhoff , printed in the score of MAX KOWALSKI’S 12 Pierrot settings, (See Other Pierrot Settings) ,of which 6 coincide with Schoenberg’s own choice. A few words seem to be personal inventions made to fit the music – for instance, in ***Colombine*** we have ‘*paly blossoms*’ and ‘*I might un-leave*’ , but they all run very smoothly..

#### NON-SINGING TRANSLATIONS.

These afford the writer a much looser rein, and cover a wider range of solutions to the challenge of evoking the spirit of the poems. Some read particularly well as pure poetry, and would be suitable for recitation as a prelude to a live performance. A slight problem with translations by those whose mother tongue is not English, is that the language can sometimes seem a little stilted. ‘Made-up’ words crop up from time to time.

FRIEDA ILMA GROSSER’s translation, originally found on a Saga LP, is the one with which I am most familiar . This is a thoroughly sound and reliable version, staying close to the German, and with some felicitous verbal choices, and I find it wears very well:-

I like especially: ‘*Desires, shuddering and sweet, Ride the floods in countless numbers*’, and ‘*The poet, awe-inspired, revels in the sacred draught*’ (no. 1) (the first phrase of this is also found in the Porter).

Also: *'Winds come creeping through the clearing, softly billowing the stream'* (no. 4)  
And, in no. 10 (**Raub**) Pierrot and his *'carousing friends'* ... *'stand rooted by pallid fear'*.

Perhaps the first verse of no. 5 (**Valse de Chopin**) is a little cumbersome, but it certainly preserves the meaning: *'As a faded drop of blood stains the lips of a sick woman, thus rests upon these notes a charm born of destructive fascination'*. (Porter has the more concise *'morbid, soul-destructive charm'*)

In no. 7 *'Of insatiable love's sorrow you die, of longing, deep and choking'* scans quite naturally. The *'scrawny strumpet'* is a typically apt choice for the subject of no. 12. (like Cecil Gray's *'haggard harlot'* it preserves the alliteration of the German) .

No. 3 is particularly successful: *'with a fantastic beam of light, the moon illumines the crystal flasks'*..... *'aside he shoves the red, and the green of the Orient, and , in lofty manner, paints his face with a fantastic moonbeam'*. Also in **Madonna** (no. 6), *'the fury of the sword has spilled blood from your lean breasts'* ( not all versions are as clear or tasteful as this.) I also relish the *'pale fiery shimmer of the moon'* in no. 15, the *'mumbling'* and *'giggling'* found in **Parodie** ( 17) – as well as the moon as *'vile derider'* and Pierrot being *'venom-bloated'* at the close of **Der Mondfleck** ( no. 18.)

STEPHEN PRUSLIN's translation was made for performances by Peter Maxwell Davies's ensemble The Pierrot Players, later re-named the Fires of London, in which he was the pianist, with the late, great Mary Thomas as vocal soloist. This is an exceptionally bold and imaginative version, which does not adhere too closely to the texts' precise meaning, but sweeps along in a stream of linguistic exuberance, glorying in the sonic properties of the syllables, with frequent use of alliteration., Pruslin preserves the basic Rondel structure in most, but not all of the poems, but often varies the text at each repeat.

He opens with *'At night the moon drenches thirsting eyes,  
and a flood wells up on their still horizon'* and continues:.  
*'Waves of wine for thirsting eyes gush forth'*

*From the moon at night'*

The coda, instead of repeating the opening words , has *'that slakes his thirsting eyes'*.

In no.3 *'a dazzling moonclap reveals crystal flasks.'*, and  
*'Liquefied laughter bubbles in bronze'*.

No.4 features a *'wan laundrymaid'*, and is particularly arresting:

*'Winds slice the light that illumines the dreams of the nocturnal maid.*

*'And the ghostgirl leans down from the branches*

*To spread her silver wash onto the weir'*.

No.5.'s penultimate line : *'You pause on the brink of a poisonous scream'* strays rather far from the text, but is certainly memorable!.

No 6. (**Madonna**) inspires: *'A spiteful sword has spilled the blood  
That warmed your withered breasts'*. (*'warmed'* introduces a new element)  
*'We gander and gape'* is another striking moment..

No.7. has *'O invalid moon on the rim (?) of the sky'* ( but does not describe the lover stealing to his beloved, or of his mockery of the moon,)

I like No. 8's '*A mind-destroying mist.*', and No. 9's '*surgeon of souls*' and '*prettyplease*'. ( a quirkily appropriate touch).

No.10. does not keep to Rondel form, and paints a fresh picture of the moment of shock and horror: '*their limbs turn to chalk! They freeze to the bone!*'

The last two lines of this poem are also very free: '*phosphorescent red eyes stare from faces of stone.*' The whole translation is an exciting and liberating exercise in literary wizardry.

Other translations have come to my attention more recently:-

That of MIMMI FULMER and RIC MERRIT is quite distinctive, with attractive images,, but does not always flow easily. However it is largely faithful to the sense of the poems.

No. 1 has '*Longings beyond number, gruesome sweet frissons*' and, later '*the poet, slave to devotion, drunk on the sacred liquor.... Staggering, sucks and slurps*'. As others have done, they use '*Thy*' and '*Thou*' in *Madonna* ( no. 6). I particularly like the '*hot-blooded lover, slinking heedlessly to the tryst*' in no, 7, '*Vapours from lost abysses*' in *Nacht* (8) and Pierrot's '*drinking buddies*' in no., 10., but no. 17 goes slightly off the rails, with unnecessarily clotted language, near the end: '*The moon, wicked aping scoffer, Beams down a simulacrum of Knitting needles, gleaming and flashing*'. '*A knavish swarm of silly pranks*' is yet another excellent alternative for that passage in the final movement ( 21), and although '*O redolence from fairytale times*' is nicely put, the last two lines before the 'Coda' are a little ungainly.: '*I behold untrammelled the beloved world, and dream me out to blissful vistas*'.

A close rival in verbal exuberance to that of Stephen Pruslin is the translation by ROBERT ERICH WOLF, found accompanying the recording by the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble with Jan de Gaetani on Nonesuch.

For the most part, it scans very well if read aloud as poetry in its own right, and the rondel format is adhered to throughout. It maintains a lively sonic palette.

There are some memorable touches: '*To still my luckless grieving*' ( no.2) runs smoothly, and in no. 3. '*the laconic Dandy from Bergamo*' is felicitous, as is '*Water spurts noisily with metallic laughter*'.

Later on, with the lines:

*'He of the waxworks face, Pierrot  
Racks his brain and thinks: How shall I  
make me up today?*

*Vetoes rouge and Orient green*

*And paints his phizz in loftier style*', syntax and rhythm seem to have lapsed somewhat, and the '*spitwatered drop of blood*' and '*phthisic sick*' of no. 5.do not seem happy choices, along with the '*milkless breasts*' of the '*Madonna*' (6).

The latter part of this poem is more successful:

*'In thy fleshless, wasted hands  
Thou hold'st the corpse that was thy Son,  
As tidings to a careless world.*

*But still they turn their eyes away*'.

As often the 'Sick Moon' of no. 7 gives rise to some colourful images:

*You darkgloomed lifesick deathbed moon*

*Splayed white on night sky's pillow.*

*Your huge and feverswollen face*

*Holds me fast, like alien tones.*

*From stanchless quenchless ache of love*

*You'll die of yearning, choked and smothered.*

(As in other versions there is a tendency towards half-invented composite words).

The 'wood-dry whore with rope-long neck' is yet another imaginative solution to the problem of encapsulating the subject of no. 12. (it is entitled '**Gallows Ditty**').

Other enjoyable moments are: Pierrot's 'fellow- tipplers' of no. 10 (**Raub**), also, in 'No. 17: 'The moon, cold-hearted cynic, (who) 'Is aping with quicksilver beams', and Pierrot's 'churlish sulking' in **Heimweh** (15). However, in the earlier part of the latter: 'So trite and mawkish, inanely à la mode' seems rather awkward, although one admires the inventiveness .

**Serenade** has Pierrot drawing 'cat-squeals from his viola' and later he 'grabs old baldy by the neck'.

**Die Kreuze** works particularly well all through, in both language and pulse: examples are:

'Eyes struck blind by beating wings

*Of a spectral vulture swarm', and 'Slowly solemn sinks the sun'.*

A translation by LAURANCE WIEDER occasionally seems to betray a lack of confidence with the language. Indeed it now and then lapses into incoherence., with a few mistranslations: 'hasten me on my conception' ( **Valse de Chopin**) 'by the murk gleam of gold' **Rote Messe** -11); 'Pierrot stumbles about the rest'- no.18; 'So Pierrot forgets the dream faces' ( no. 15); 'a crazy swarm of vagaries' (21).

However there are plenty of novel delights: 'The withered whore with stringy neck' of No. 12; 'Hot and jocund, sweet and tasty' ( no. 5) 'and it chimes through his heart's desert' ( 15), 'the glossy baldspot' of no. 16; 'Dead the head – stiff the ringlets, far the scattered noise of rabble'.( **Die Kreuze**). Rather less happy are: 'If I might, fabled, stalk slightly tipsy, strew petals,'(from **Colombine**, no.2) and, at the climax of no. 13 'His knees chatter under him; swooning, he headlong collapses. He fancies; he hears whizzing punitive down, on his sinner's neck slicing, the moon..... But this version is certainly far from dull!

Steve Dummer, the conductor of his own ensemble, Talkestra, compiled a special translation for the performances involving Julian Jacobson. (see 'Case Studies') He admits to evolving an amalgam of other known versions combined with his own ideas, although I have to admit that only a few segments have a ring of familiarity. .

Here are some characteristic snippets: No.1 'The poet, driven by devotion, grows tipsy on the holy drink'. No. 4: 'a pallid washerwoman washes faded towels at night'. No. 6 ends with the cry 'O Mater Dolorosa'. No. 12 involves 'the barren strumpet with a long throat' ( no alliteration here ). In no.10 'blanching fear holds them spellbound', and in the final verse of **Enthauptung** (13) 'his knees wobble under him'. In no. 16 'Pierrot gently drills with hypocritical tenderness – with a cranium-borer'.

In the last movement, after an opening similar to Andrew Porter's, comes '*A happy wishing for pleasure that I long have scorned, makes me merry.*'

Sharp eyes may now quite frequently detect hybrids of this kind. I recently came across a modified version of the Cecil Gray 'classic' translation, in which the oft-quoted '*chlorotic*' is replaced by '*pallid*', and '*fantasmagorical*' by '*fantastical*', in accordance with modern taste.

Conscientious performers, both vocal and instrumental, have found it helpful to make their own translations for personal use, preferring them not to be available in the public domain. Both pianist DAVID OWEN NORRIS and singer MARY KING have chosen this course.

I once had the opportunity of performing Part I ( nos -1-7) in a special French translation (one would like to know exactly which version Marya Freund sang under Darius Milhaud – see Comparing Performances, and Footnotes)

ROGER NICHOLS produced this elegant singing translation, and it mirrors the original Giraud quite closely. The scansion is admirable:

For no.1 '*Le vin qui dans les yeux s'écoule*' makes an excellent start..

Certain words with special sonic qualities such as '*pernicieux*' (the second verse of Giraud) are retained, but the strict rhyming scheme (ABBA for each verse) is not applied.

The linguistics scholar Prof. Gregory Richter, in his invaluable book '*Albert Giraud's Pierrot Lunaire*' ( Truman State University Press 2001) has made a new and scrupulously exact English translation directly from the original French, of the entire set of over 50 poems.. This is as impressive as it is revealing, and illustrates the fact that Hartleben, in making his German translations, modified the texts considerably. In Giraud ( and Roger Nichols) but not Hartleben, the powerful draught which inebriates the poet ( *den heil'gen Tranke*) is specified as '*l'étrange absinthe*', the rubies of **Raub (Pierrot Voleur)** are '*injectés de meurtre et de gloire*' (infused with gore and glory), and the menacing butterflies of *Nacht* (French title '**Papillons Noirs**') are even more horrifying than in the German : '*Des monstres aux gluants suçoirs, Recherchent du sang pour le boire*' ( *Monsters with slick suckers Seek blood to quench their thirst*). The visceral quality of the Giraud is thrown into sharp focus by this masterly translation. It is ironic that Schoenberg was severely criticised for his choice of disturbing texts when the original poems are so much more graphic.

The programme book for Phyllis Bryn-Julson's recording of Pierrot Lunaire with the Ensemble Modern prints the texts in German, English (Carl Beier- Ingolf Dahl translation), French ( the original Giraud) and, intriguingly, Italian ( translator uncredited). The latter is clearly far from being a singing translation, but one speculates as to how the sheer beauty of that language would lend itself to the projection of searing images, when robbed of much of the percussive aspects of articulation. Just an example from **Colombine** is well-nigh irresistible:-

*'I pallidi fiori della luce lunare  
Le rose bianche e miracolose,  
Fioriscono nelle notte di luglio –  
Oh se potessi coglierne almeno una!'*