7'16"   815"

Xabier Erkizia

COULD SOMEBODY TRANSLATE THIS MUSIC FOR ME?

8'35"

As I write this article, I read in a newspaper[1] a sentence that is highlighted in an interview and which very much catches my attention: «Music cannot be translated into words, and that is precisely where its power is». These words belong to a composer, Luis de Pablo to be precise, and they clearly summarize one of the matters that have centred musical creation since its beginnings. Is music exportable, translatable to other arts or languages? Or is it a self-centred and closed art which does not accept any translation whatsoever as valid?

Historically, the relation between music and translation has been, at the very least, conflictive because of the problems implied. Although music has used, very often, the interpretation of works from other

disciplines as a starting point, for example the use of librettos to compose operas, poetry or literary narratives as composing tools, curiously enough it is only very seldom that carrying out the inverse exercise has been accepted. In other words, traditionally, musicians or composers have avoided, or even condemned any attempt to literally translate musical works to other languages except in those cases strictly necessary for their own technical development, such as happens in the case of notation. Music, they have taught us, is by nature different from the other art in that it seems to be self-sufficient and intransferable and precisely, as De Pablo says, that is where its power of transformation resides.

This questionable dilemma, mainly derived from the very intangible form and nature of sound, has also protagonised heated debates, and an evident problem of control. The circles of power, conscious as they are of the capacity of transformation and manipulation, not only of music, but also of the public expression of the message of sound in general, have always maintained an uncomfortable relationship with this art, searching for formulas (often in vain) of decodification and transcription that would make a stronger control of sound messages possible, with the objective of regulating both its commercial and political —even military—use. Be that as it may, we cannot take for granted that music is still a powerful manipulation tool, an invisible and incomprehensible weapon that is quite capable of obtaining unsuspected and important results through relatively modest investments.

2 *Las Prosas de Berbelitz,* Anjel Lertxundi. (Translation by Jorge Giménez Bech). → *http://www.eizie.org/es/ Argitalpenak/Senez/20041030/ berbelitz*

«When returning home, our blessed Berbelitz has put on music. The Mason Funeral Music by Mozart. While he listens to it, half-lying down on the sofa, the music renews the combat between the most contrary wishes and disappointments; and all this produces sadness in him, for he imagines that death may be something like that; and if one compass cuts his breath, another makes him close his eyes, the next pinches him, and the fourth makes him await the inevitable; and as soon as he imagines Mozart's coffin, his own coffin pushes Mozart's out of the picture, and he even perceives the smell of wax and when the Orchestra of the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields concludes the piece, he feels his inside is as serene as a recently ironed sea. He regrets not to have answered to the person who asked him 'is it possible to translate music?' that the very act of listening to music is a translation».[2]

↑ Drawing by Brahms→ http://blog.modernmechanix.com
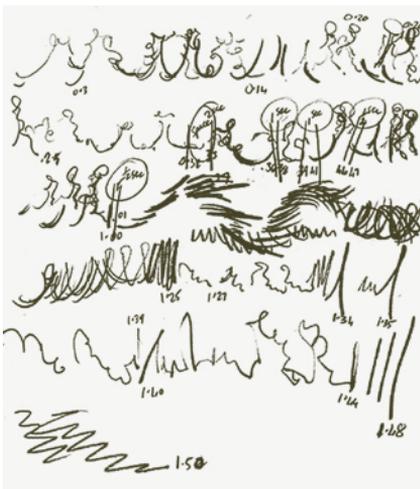
In musical experience, listening and interpretation are both part of the same process of decodification. When listening, we come before what in many cases is an unconscious but constant process of translation. Each ear, each person, listens and translates according to their own physical and cultural conditions. And just as there are no two ears that are the same, there is also no space for an exact translation of meanings between emitter and receptor.

Vladimir Jankélévitch in his classical *Music And The Ineffable* attempts to find a valid answer to this question and states that «in order to admit that music translates the soul of a situation, and makes that soul be perceptible by our own soul's ears, it is not necessary to confer to it a trans-physical scope. Indeed, physical sound is already a mental matter, a phenomenon that is immediately spiritual» and he adds that «musicians express themselves even without wanting to».

Therefore, when speaking of a translation we are confronted by a great contradiction which, on the one hand affects the economic, political and artistic values of a musical work, and on the other hand affects the listening and comprehension thereof. The language that vindicates its autonomy, its untranslatable character and in a certain sense its objectivity, is by nature a translation and therefore subjectivity in its purest state.

If from this statement we can deduce that there is no universal translation for music, then how is it possible that one single melody can move masses of people? Is it possible that thousands of people translate the same message? Up to what point is the context, the shared listening situation, responsible for conditioning that translation? Is it the sounds themselves or the listening situations that unleash the musical de-codification processes? Up to what point does the format of reproduction condition listening itself?

As we lack clear answers to all these questions, and as that is precisely the framework I am asked to analyse, I will now attempt to deal with certain matters that appeal to those problems of translation in different artistic contexts and situations that I have lived through and which I hope will be of interest to the reader. For this purpose, I shall use various examples in which I have found dilemmas on translation and that are useful to illustrate certain related matters.

Case no. 1
The translation of image into sound
or the problems behind the soundtrack

Cinema, from its silent beginnings, has constantly been searching for different strategies to take maximum advantage of the dramatic capacity, that strange power of attraction, of sound. Music in cinema, even in its initial stages as a live performance, has served as a subliminal adhesive of films, as a tool of expression at the service of the narrative proposed by the images of the film.

With the arrival of talkies, that relation, instead of changing or adapting to create their own unique language that would equally merge both disciplines and their own characteristics, underlined their differences even more, condemning the use of sound to ornamental (as a sound effect) and commercial purposes (as an advertisement) in most cases. This relation of subordination is more and more latent in the current audiovisual culture, where music without image has lost a considerable part of its capacity to catch people's attention. There is hardly any music now that can be commercialised or projected without images.

3 *Sculpting in Time,* Andrei Tarkovski.

However, we could say this is one of the few artistic disciplines that has accepted the idea of translating the messages from the screen into music, or at least underline them, by means of a process of translation of meanings of approximate equivalence. In this sense, the cinema director Andrei Tarkovski, well-known among other things because of his personal use of sound in all of his films, used to vindicate that «sometimes image follows sound and represents a secondary role and not vice versa. Sound is something more than just a simple illustration of what is happening on the screen»[3].

In the example case of the short film *Hezurbeltzak*[4] (2007) directed and drawn by Izibene Oñederra, the work we attempted to carry out was an exercise in the fusion of languages. It was an attempt to flee from the stock music that is predominant in cartoon films and in the effectism of synchronisation by default, with the objective of appealing to the sensation of experience of the film. To a certain extent, the creative process developed to definitely structure the result demanded that music composed for the film and that the film itself turned into a single and inseparable work, that they mutually translate each other. The sound result*, as with the visual result, attempts to propose a narrative that flees from conventional uses of sound elements in cinema and eliminates the barrier between music and sound effects. This is an exercise of translation understood almost as a kinaesthesia in which the experiences of listening and watching merge and mutually affect each other.

4 See page 75.

*Listen and watch *Hezurbeltzak*
→ www.arteleku.net/4.1/blog/audiolab/?p=1743

Case no. 2
Sound literature, or the problem
of the translation of words

Probably literature is the field to which music has recurred the most for inspiration. And although in most cases these relations between literature and music have limited themselves to the creation of lyrics for songs, it would be incomplete to limit that relationship to concrete cases of the song format. We cannot forget that historically, literature, as an oral tradition, has potentially used both resources—words and music—equally, and therefore it would be somewhat inadequate to separate them, as we can do in cinema.
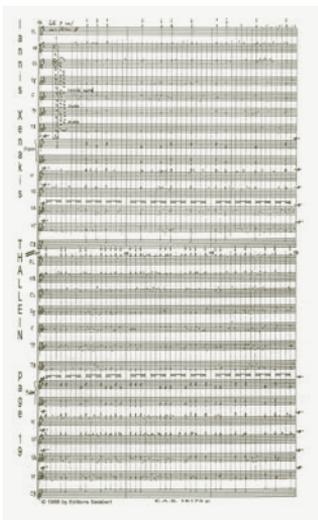
Literature, words and images share at the same time, in their poetic version, a similar character to that of music: its power of abstraction. If the poet shares with the reader his ideas, life experiences, doubts, joys, grief, if the poet expresses feelings and «the very verse is from the very beginning the translation of the author's feelings», it should not be strange for us to accept composers as some kind of poets. Paul Ricoeur says in his essay *A passage: translating the untranslatable* that «only a poet can translate a poet». And it is perhaps there where the translation between literature and music acquires more sense. However, admitting this similarity does not mean that there are no problems between these two disciplines, nor that we accept all translations as literal translations.

5 → *www.newmediafest.org/2007/index5.html*
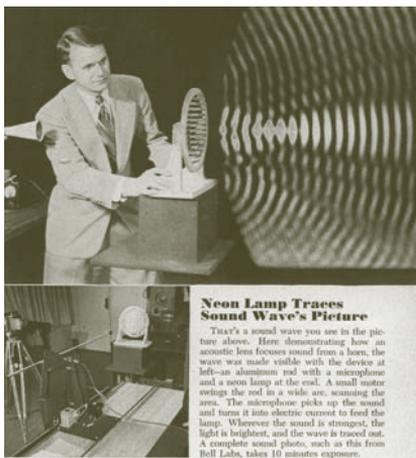
In the exercise proposed in 2007 for the *Soundstory* project[5], the intention is not so much to literally translate the wonderful story *Sentimental Eulogy to the Accordion** by Pío Baroja, but to recover the sound references and the literary resources used by the writer to reflect the personal relationship with the mentioned musical instrument. It is therefore an exercise in interpretation, not of the narrative structure of the story, but of the feelings represented by Baroja in relation to my own experience.

*Listen *Eskubide (Eskusoinuaren alde)*
→ www.soinumapa.net/zehar/eskubide.mp3

Neon Lamp Traces Sound Wave's Picture

THAT'S a sound wave you are in the picture above. Here demonstrating how an acoustic lens focuses sound from a horn, the wave was made visible with the device at left—an aluminum rod with a microphone and a neon lamp at the end. A small motor swings the rod in a wide arc, scanning the area. The microphone picks up the sound and turns it into electric current to feed the lamp. Wherever the sound is strongest, the light is brightest, and the wave is traced out. A complete sound photo, such as this from Bell Labs, takes 10 minutes exposure.

↑ Neon Lamp Traces Sund Wave's Picture → http://blog.modernmechanix.com

Case no. 3
Literal translation by means of technology

Curiously, the first invention in history that was capable of registering sound was a translation instrument. Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville's phonoautograph, contrary to the Edison's later phonograph, was not thought to reproduce sound but to create visual images of sound. Neither musicians, nor industry, nor even the military institution expressed any interest whatsoever in this invention, although they would express interest a few years later with the invention of the gramophone, which, although it did not offer any possibility of registering or translating sounds, it did facilitate the technical reproduction and commercialisation thereof. Since then, it is the reproduction systems which have made it possible to control the sound messages we made reference to at the beginning, while ignoring the possibilities of systems for the translation between disciplines.

During the 20th century many composers —including Iannis Xenakis—attempted to carry out a more in-depth analysis of those relations between other supports and languages by means of other techniques. In the work by this Greek composer and architect we find constant references to translation between codes, from architecture to mathematics, using for this purpose all kinds of resources, including technological resources. An example of this are the constant references to the use of the laws of stochastics as composing tools, as an attempt to emulate various sound events in nature, such as the singing of crickets or rain, or the work carried out with the recently vindicated UPIC, a computerised machine that carries out the inverse exercise to that of the phonoautograph and that managed to transform and therefore translate visual images into sounds.

Several decades later, the evolution of digital technologies opened an almost uncoverable range of possibilities for moulding, transforming and working on sound, but referring to the matter that occupies us now, above all, it offered for the first time the technical possibility to generate a literal translation of any kind of information in terms of sound. In the world of zeroes and ones, all kinds of data, be it text, image or code, can be translated literally into sound waves and vice versa.

These new possibilities have offered an infinity of sound works based on translation, such as *El fuente is the challenge*[6], where the Alku recording company, in an ingenious and ironic action, translated over a dozen applications of commercial software into digital noise in order to present them again as music. Another recent example is the *Gene2music* project[7] by Rie Takahashi and Jeffrey Miller who have managed to translate people's genetic code into musical compositions.
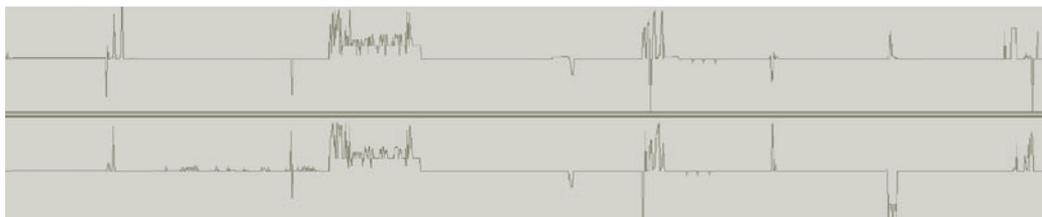
[6] → *http://personal.ilimit.es/ principio/cataleg.htm*

[7] → *http://www.doe-mbi.ucla.edu/ cgi/pettit/gene2musicweb*

In the example used to justify this third and last case, the sound piece chosen is part of the work *[Spam Detect]**, in which the main objective I set for myself was to find a system of translation that responded to the informative aggression of receiving spam messages with an equally striking sound. In order to do so, after analysing the complex distribution systems used by spammers, I selected the most interesting messages I received for a year, and I decided to translate those mainly publicity messages into binary codes converted into sounds in order to process them afterwards. ♦

*Listen *Republica*
→ www.soinumapa.net/zehar/republica.mp3

↑ *[Spam Detect]*, Xabier Erkizia.