Translating Songs that Rhyme

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This article concerns 'singable translations' intended for performance in the target language. Translators have often assumed that a song-translation must rhyme as much as the original, and equally well. This false assumption underlies their poor strategic thinking, and prevents them from doing justice to four other aspects of the complex task: sense and naturalness (which are requirements of normal translating), plus rhythm and singability. No wonder singers often reject their efforts as unusable. Quoting the great composer-librettist Wagner, and some 20th century song-translators such as Drinker and Kelly, the paper highlights the need for flexibility, notably in the frequency and quality of rhymes. A score-sheet is proposed for evaluating not only true rhymes but also near-rhymes, which should be part of every song-translator's toolbox. The article ends with a comparative evaluation of three English versions of part of a Schubert song.

Translating Songs that Rhyme

What should a translator do with songs that rhyme? The present paper attempts to clarify what makes for quality in song-translation. The main examples are European art songs translated into English, but many points made will apply to other kinds of song (popular ballads, jazz songs, operatic arias) and to other languages.

To the question 'Do song-translations need to rhyme', the first answer must be: 'Not if they are not intended to be sung'. Despite what some writers seem to think, song-texts are frequently translated for purposes other than singing. For example, music teachers and singers may need translations for study, for reading silently in recital programmes, or for reading aloud before the song is sung in the source language. The translator's choice of strategy should be determined by the particular *skopos* (end-purpose) of the song-translation, as I have shown elsewhere (Low 2003a, 2005a,b). Since rhyme is in essence a phonic device, rhyme is of limited use in a text intended only for silent reading. To use rhyme in opera surtitles, for example, would be bizarre and distracting, and would add a further constraint to a task where pressures of space create enough problems already.[1]

A second answer might be: 'Not if rhyme is absent from the source text'. Although rhyme is normal in many singing traditions, it is not universal. The Latin Mass is unrhymed, and so are some texts in the European art-song tradition, and not necessarily only in recent texts either, such as Debussy's *Chansons de Bilitis*, over a century old. To attempt rhyme with them would be a pointless strategic mistake. Now some might wish to think further about genre

and the expectations of the target audience, and these cultural considerations belong in the translating process. But rhyme is not the sort of expectation that translators will happily or easily satisfy. It should certainly not dominate the resulting text, as it did when the *Scottish Psalter* turned Hebrew poetry into rhyming doggerel.

A third answer might be: 'Not if the target language does not use rhyme'. Some languages do not use rhyme in song, and consequently much of the present paper is irrelevant to them.

My focus here is on 'singable translations' intended to permit the actual performance in the target language of foreign songs, with their preexisting music. All references to song-translating will henceforth refer to this alone, an area for which Harai Golomb proposes the promising acronym MLT – 'music-linked translation'. (Golomb, 2005) The devising of such target texts is unlike the tasks most translators perform, since no other kind of translation places such importance on the phonic properties of languages.

Do singable translations need to rhyme? Long ago A.H.F. Strangways inclined to the answer 'no': 'translators have concentrated on the wrong things – rhyme chiefly . . . it cannot be claimed that rhyme is a vital necessity for song, still less for translated song'. (Strangways, 1921: 220) He admitted, however, that rhyme is often desirable, and most of his contemporaries thought it essential.

Before proceeding, let me touch on a more fundamental question: ought songs to be sung in translation? Many people seem to think not, particularly musicians in the European classical tradition. 'Mozart in English is not Mozart', they say. This is a tenable opinion. The two main reasons for singing in the original are the strong claim of the source text and the defective nature of most translated versions. Only the source text offers the actual words set by the composer, along with all their phonic features such as rhymes and vowel-sounds, and of course their integral meaning. Such considerations prompted one enthusiast to declare: 'To sing lieder in translation is a weak substitute for the real thing – a poor supermarket wine beside one of the great Rhine or Rhine-Hessian vintages!' (Whitton, 1984: 85)

Conversely, there are some who argue vigorously for singing in the language of the audience. Golomb's fine recent article describes music-linked translation as 'the only procedure that can possibly simulate the effect of synchronised verbal/music/rhetorical fusion, as it functions in the original, transmitted from a singer's mouth to a listener's ear as an interaction realised in sound, sense and gesture'. (Golomb, 2005: 142) The British opera producer David Pountney puts it this way: 'the sense arrives, like a glowing hot coal, straight from the mouth of the singer, and strikes instantly at the head and heart of the listener'. (Pountney, 1975: ix) By that argument, a Sydney Opera House production of *Die Zauberflöte* in German would not be Mozart either.

Of course, relatively few songs have been translated well enough to achieve the ideal effect. Translating is a complex activity, and the devising of singable texts is more difficult than most translating tasks. Some attempts are worthless. Some others, however, have been dismissed on invalid grounds by pedants who fail to understand the task or who think a translation can be judged without considering its *skopos.*

What criteria should singable translations meet? And what is the place of rhyme among these criteria? Here I wish to highlight the views of a great composer-librettist of the 19th century, and of two translator-theorists of the 20th, Drinker and Kelly.

As long ago as 1852, Richard Wagner wrote with shrewdness and scorn about translations he encountered in German opera-houses. Here is the passage from his *Oper und Drama*:

> These translations [...] put together by people who knew nothing of either music or poetry [...] were before all else not musical; they rendered an Italian or French text-book, for itself as word-poem, into a so-called Iambic metre which they ignorantly took to represent the really quite unrhythmic measure of the original; and these verses they got written under the music by some poor hack of a music-copyist, with instructions to dribble out a syllable to every note.

> The poetical labours of the translator had consisted in furnishing the vulgarest prose with the absurdest end-rhymes; and since he had often had the most painful difficulty in finding these rhymes themselves, – all heedless that they would be almost inaudible in the music, – his love toward them had made him distort the natural order of the words, past any hope of understanding. This hateful Verse, contemptible and muddled in itself, was now laid under a music whose distinctive Accents it nowhere fitted; on lengthy notes there came short syllables, on longer syllables the shorter notes; on the musical 'ridge' there came the verse's 'hollow', and so the other way round.

> From these grossest offences against the sound, the translation passed on to a complete distortion of the latter on the ear, by countless textual repetition, that the ear instinctively turned away from the text and devoted its sole attention to the purely melodic utterance. (Wagner, 1893: 359–60).

Here Wagner highlights the question of rhyme, finding some choices of rhyme to be absurd, and claiming that rhymes matter less than people think, since they are 'almost inaudible'. Then he focuses on word-order, where he criticises the translations for their lack of naturalness and the loss of comprehensibility, blaming these faults on the prioritising of rhymes. Thirdly, he criticises the general mismatch between words and music: misplaced accents, short syllables where long ones are needed, unstressed syllables on stressed notes, etc.

He also says that the translations in question are not poems but the 'vulgarest prose'. We can safely conclude that he deems them defective as vocal texts and would not dream of setting them to music. In the same chapter of *Oper und Drama*, Wagner deplores one consequence of these poor translations: they encouraged singers to downplay the text, and thus tended to debase the whole verbal dimension of music-drama. German opera-singers, he says:

> . . . accustomed themselves to paying less and less heed to the text, as conveying any sense; and through this disregard they emboldened the translators to an ever more thorough slovenliness in the prosecution of their labours. (Wagner, 1893: 361–362)

Those scathing remarks come from a composer who wished his own works to be presented in the language of the audience. Not only did he want high-quality translations, he even 'offered to rewrite music, if necessary, to accommodate the needs of translations from German into other languages'. (Herman & Apter, 1991: 102)

Some idea of the 19th century German translations Wagner disliked can be gained from 19th century English ones. Theodore Baker's version of *Die schöne Müllerin* (words by Müller, music by Schubert) appeared in 1895 and remained in print for much of the 20th century. Here is part of song six 'Der Neugierige':

O Bächlein, meiner Liebe	O streamlet dearest streamlet,
Wie bist du heut so stumm!	How dumb thou art today,
Will ja nur Eines wissen,	I'd fain know one thing only,
Ein Wörtchen um und um,	One word then prythee say,
Ein Wörtchen um und um.	One word then prythee say.
Ja, heisst das eine Wortchen,	One word is 'yes' so pleasant,
Das and're heisset 'Nein'	The other word is 'no',
Die beiden Wörtchen schliessen	Each little word comprising
die ganze Welt mir ein.	My world of bliss or woe.

And here is part of song eight 'Morgengruss':

O lass mich nur von ferne stehn,	I only crave afar to gaze
Nach deinem lieben Fenster sehn	Upon thy window's shining rays,
Von ferne, ganz von ferne!	Tho' distant 'tis my pleasure.
Du blondes Köpfchen, komm hervor!	I fain at your small door would see
Hervor aus deinem runden Thor,	That fair young head so dear to me,
Ihr blauen Morgensterne,	And morning stars of azure,
Ihr blauen Morgensterne,	And morning stars of azure,
Ihr Morgensterne!	the stars of azure!

Dr Baker may have known German perfectly, but shows little ability to write well in English. He rhymes, but his skill in rhyming is unimpressive, and some of his contemporaries were no better. Such examples explain why some classical musicians dismiss translations outright, and even draw the hasty conclusion that Lieder are 'untranslatable'.

A hundred years after Wagner, an American musician-translator named Henry Drinker published an extended discussion of song-translating. With concerns similar to Wagner's, but a deeper analysis of the task, he wrote perhaps the best article ever penned on making singable English versions of German songs. Near the start of his article, he says this:

'I suggest six requisites in an adequate English text for a vocal work:

(1)   to preserve the notes, rhythm, and phrasing of the music;
(2)   to be readily singable with the particular music;
(3)   to be appropriate to the particular music;
(4)   to be idiomatic and natural English, and not merely translated German, Italian, etc.;
(5)   to contain rhymes wherever the music or the text calls for them; and
(6)   to reproduce the spirit and substantially the meaning of the original'. (Drinker, 1952: 226)

Drinker then explains and expands on all these points. His call for 'rhymes wherever the music or the text calls for them' may seem to beg the question: does he mean rhymes as numerous as those in the original and matching its rhyme-scheme perfectly? His article shows that he doesn't insist on a perfect match, as we shall see, and his approach is generally practical and undogmatic. We may note also his demand for 'idiomatic and natural English', a point which few song-translators before his time seem to have grasped.

The paper which I most recommend alongside Drinker's is more recent and even more practical: Andrew Kelly's 'Translating French Song as a Language Learning Activity'. Despite its modest title and tenor, this may be the best piece yet written about making singable English versions of French songs. Kelly gives this advice to the translator:

(1)   Respect the rhythms;
(2)   Find and respect the meaning;
(3)   Respect the style;
(4)   Respect the rhymes;
(5)   Respect the sound;
(6)   Respect your choice of intended listeners; and
(7)   Respect the original. (Kelly, 1992–1993: 92)

It is significant that the injunction is 'respect', not 'replicate closely'. He says for example: 'there is no need for slavish observation of original rhythms...' (Kelly, 1992–1993: 95).

The writers quoted above all think that multiple considerations apply when translating songs. My own formulation of these is 'the pentathlon principle', which lists five criteria very similar to Drinker's (merely combining his second and third). My metaphor is of a pentathlete trying to optimise his score over five dissimilar 'events': namely Singability, Sense, Naturalness, Rhythm and Rhyme (Low, 2003b, 2005a).

This approach is in part a reaction against those who would dictate rules, such as 'Rhyme always perfectly' or 'Don't alter the syllable-count' or 'Keep the same metaphor' – the very rules which have made people liken this translating task to a 'strait-jacket'. A more thoughtful response is to say: 'Those things are desirable, but losing two points here may prevent the loss of five elsewhere. Trying to maximise my score in rhyme is less important than optimising my score overall'. By tolerating some rule-bending – some small

margins of flexibility in several areas – one can more easily avoid serious translation loss in any single area, and can 'wiggle out of the strait-jacket'.

Rhyme

It is in the context of this need for flexibility that we tackle to the question of rhyme. Two areas where one can gain valuable 'wiggle-room' are frequency of rhyme, and quality of rhyme. This is true in any language where rhyme is desired, so that few of the following remarks apply only to English.

Our thinking can be enhanced by some preliminary questions:

(1)   Are rhymes frequent in the source text?
(2)   Is rhyme important in the source text?
(3)   Is it a comic song?

Any strategy for translating a song should involve answers to all of these, preferably conscious and considered answers, such as the following:

(1)   The frequency of rhymes varies greatly, with some texts rhyming every two or three lines, and others rhyming twice in some lines. Normally, frequency depends on metre: there is more rhyming in texts with hexasyllabic lines than those with decasyllabic lines. When a song has short lines all rhyming, it is harder for a translator to replicate this feature. It may be better not to try, but only if rhyme lacks importance in the particular song.

(2)   Whether rhyme is important in a specific text is harder to judge. Here (as always) translators need to assess which features are crucial and which have lower priority. One cannot even generalise and say: 'All translations of Verlaine must rhyme'. Only after examining the text in question can one decide whether the omission of rhyme would be a serious loss. One kind of song where rhyme tends to matter a lot is the clever comic song, where rhymes (often surprising ones) provide wit and gusto.

(3)   Fortunately, comic songs are a special case, because their different tone permits a different approach. An expert writer on jazz song, Gene Lees, puts it thus: 'In humorous songs, almost anything goes, including peculiar word order and outrageous false rhymes'. (Lees, 1981: 15) This approach made it much easier for me to translate Erik Satie's 'Ludions' (words by Fargue).

A flexible approach may be more acceptable in today's climate than it used to be. Historically, rhyme was common in English poetry, but today's poets value it much less. In song, the situation is less clear-cut. Perhaps unrhymed songs are more common than formerly, but in many traditions rhyme is still strong. There is even one tradition – rap – where it is very prominent, though the virtuoso rhymes evident there would not all be judged good rhymes by the practitioners of the past. It is certain that fewer people now are concerned about quality of rhyme and consistency of rhyme-scheme: we in the 21st

century are not afflicted by the rhyming pedants that lived a hundred years ago.

Some functional thinking is useful too. Rhyme exploits the phonic features of language. It creates echoes – audible links – between syllables at the end (usually) of lines of verse. It is associated particularly with writing that manipulates another phonic feature: rhythm. Together, rhythm and rhyme often have the deliberate effect of building stanzaic patterns, where at the end of a unit (such as a quatrain) one expects a 'clinch' – a rhyme that closes the pattern in a satisfying way at the very point where a sentence ends.

That fact enables us to see that rhymes are not all equally important: some could be called 'passing rhymes' and others 'clinching rhymes', a difference to be explored presently. Similarly, rhymes in songs are not all equally audible and prominent. We can see, on the one hand, that music often lengthens a rhyming syllable, and places it on a down-beat with a prominent cadence – this is particularly true of the 'clinching rhymes'. On the other hand, Wagner was not mistaken or alone in suggesting that some rhymes in vocal music are inaudible. Frits Noske puts it this way: 'While rhyme has an important auditory function in recited poetry, its value, unless reinforced by a musical rhyme, is much more restricted in music'. (Noske, 1970: 31) And Arthur Graham (1989): 31) explains that: 'the auditory effect of rhyme is much weaker in song than in poetry, for the actual time between rhymes is greater and the cadential function of rhyme is handled by musical cadence'.

Frequency of Rhyme

Although song-texts usually have one rhyme per line, there is no law saying that a translation must replicate this. Nevertheless some writers, perhaps thinking of only a few kinds of song, make declarations like this: 'The rhyme-scheme of the original poetry must be kept because it gives shape to the phrases' (Dyer-Bennett, c.1965/1979, quoted in Emmons, 1979). Well, rhyme is indeed a good way to retain the shape of the phrases, but there may be better ways of doing so, verbal or musical – and perhaps even in the work he was translating, the same *Schöne Müllerin*.

The case for equal frequency was challenged over ninety years ago. As early as 1915, Sigmund Spaeth declared: 'When rhymes are emphasized by the music, the translator can hardly afford to omit them. But usually a modification is permissible, as, for instance, in the four-line stanzas with alternating rhyme (very common in French songs) where the rhyming of the second and fourth lines is quite sufficient in translation'. (Spaeth, 1915: 297) In 1921 Strangways (1921: 224)gave this advice: 'rhyme if the form of the stanza makes rhyme expected; but this is the case less often than might be supposed'.

Drinker offers advice particularly about those ABAB quatrains where the first rhyme is a two-syllable 'feminine' one, saying that 'the rhymes in 1 and 3 may be omitted without noticeably affecting the smoothness of the verse'. (Drinker, 1952: 233) If it is a long strophic song, he says, one may restore them in the final stanza to good effect. This is certainly a better option than creating an expectation of frequent rhymes and then disappointing it. Herman and Apter (1991): 104–105), discussing the translating of operas, remark similarly

on the case of quatrains: 'having as much rhyme as the original [...] is not always the best option for translators into English. One alternative is to drop intermediate rhymes, retaining only the rhymes which end a verse or quatrain. (e.g. changing rhyme scheme *abab* into *xaxa*)'.

That argument can be taken further. What I call a 'clinching rhyme' is the rhyme that closes a structural unit such as a quatrain. Usually it comes at the end of a syntactic unit (a sentence), before the singer takes a big breath. This rhyme is more prominent and audible than the 'passing rhymes' which the singer does not dwell on. Now a weak clinching rhyme can be a serious defect. In a rhymed quatrain, therefore, the final rhyme is the most important By comparison, it matters little whether this rhyming word rhymes with line 1, 2, or 3 – or whether the other two lines rhyme well, or at all. The rhyme-scheme for a quatrain might thus become xAxA, AxxA, or xxAA – and it need not do the same thing in every stanza. This is particularly useful if the lines are short (if the text rhymes after every six syllables rather than 10 or 12). It is a general rule that the tighter the rhyming, the more the rhyme will determine the whole line, and one must try to minimise the adverse consequences of this. A useful 'rhymester's trick' is to decide on the clinching word before choosing the earlier word that rhymes with it – the result will seem less contrived than it really is.

Like most of the people quoted above, then, I refuse to demand equal frequency of rhymes. But rhyme does matter, and loss of a rhyme incurs some loss of points. The following advice from Kelly (1992)–1993: 104) has general validity: 'Particular attention is needed to rhymes in prominent places – the first and last verses, refrains and verse-ends'.

Besides, one must be influenced by the importance of rhyme is the song in question. Drinker says that a minority of verse is actually driven by the rhymes, and that a rhymester can often recognise this. Indeed one can: these are often comic verses, and one may suspect any text with short lines and frequent rhymes. His conclusion is very useful: 'These poems are essentially verbal stunts and in such cases the translator is, I believe, justified in taking even more liberty with the literal meaning of the text than ordinarily.' (Drinker, 1952: 234) A case in point is 'Les filles et les chiens' by Jacques Brel. At first I considered this song untranslatable, but later – following Drinker's line of thought – I proved otherwise with a largely rhyme-driven version. The translator's normal reverence for the meaning of words need not apply when the original author has clearly prioritised their sounds.

Quality of Rhyme

The other area where rhyming can be flexible is in the quality of rhymes used. To insist on nothing but perfect rhymes is to tighten one's own strait-jacket. 'But surely', say some people, 'a pair of words either rhyme or they don't!' No, that simple view is ultimately wrong. In truth there are degrees of phonic similarity, of 'rhyming-ness'. A pair of words may well have audible links that fall short of perfect rhyme.

Here is a serviceable definition of good-quality rhymes. For two words to rhyme,

(a) either they must end in open syllables with the same final vowel and preceding consonant; or (b) they must end in closed syllables with the same final consonant(s) and preceding vowel. In addition, (c) the rhyming vowel must be a stressed one (sing/blessing is not a rhyme, and nor is knighthood/ driftwood). It follows that pairs of words with further resemblances beyond those in the definition constitute 'rich rhyme', and that some pairs fall just short – near-rhymes.

Near-rhymes should be part of the toolbox of every song-translator. This was suggested as long ago as 1921, when Strangways opined that: 'if rhyme does not present itself, there is a good deal to be said for doing without it; assonance is sometimes available, and alliteration may lend its artful aid'. (Strangways, 1921: 216) More recently Kelly put it thus: 'There is a wide choice of acceptable English rhymes: from the pure to the approximate; from the assonance of rhythms to that of vowels and even consonants assisted by rhythm... This greater freedom in English facilitates translation, as well as aiding style'. (Kelly, 1992–1993: 102–103) Ronnie Apter likewise draws attention to: 'rhyme substitutes such as off-rhyme (line-time), weak rhyme (major-squalor), half rhyme (kitty-pitted) and consonant-rhyme (slat-slit)'. (Apter, 1985: 309–310) Other terms sometimes used are slant-rhyme and part-rhyme.

We need to acknowledge these as inferior without proscribing them as taboo. Nobody considers them as good as good rhymes. Lees even calls them 'cheats': 'The ear seems to accept a similarity between *m* and *n*, as in *pain* and *game* . . . It's a cheat but it works'. (Lees, 1981: 14) And he adds 'Another cheat you can get away with is the rhyming of a singular with a plural'. Though undesirable as a rhyme, it may be a good option for other reasons.

Lees was talking of creative song-writing, but the point is even more applicable and important to translating. While the devising of rhyming verse in English requires practice, it is not difficult – creative writers, after all, can revise their verses freely, and may at times let the rhymes lead them onwards. Translators, by contrast, must consider the meaning already present in the source, and are working under other restraints as well. If anything, then, they require greater mastery of rhymes – and of near-rhymes – than other makers of verse.

This is why I propose a schema to use in assessing quality of rhyme. Going from rich rhymes to poor near-rhymes, it seeks to show the range of options without undue complexity. The first examples take a word that is notorious for the cliché rhymes which it generates ('my love flies above as a dove') especially in songs.

Options for closed syllables

A.	Love/glove	Vowel and the consonants on both sides
B.	Love/shove	Good rhyme
C.	Love/rough	Final consonant close but not identical
D.	Love/move	Vowel close but not identical
E.	Love/lug	Final consonant different
F.	Love/have	Vowel different

Options for open syllables

G.	Belie/rely	Consonant and the vowels on both sides
H.	Lie/fly	Good rhyme
I.	Lie/rye	Consonant close but not identical
J.	Lie/die	Consonant different
K.	Lie/lay	Vowel close but not identical
L.	Lie/lee	Vowel different

Four of those options are true rhymes (A&G, which are richer than B&H). The term 'near rhyme' suits C, D, I and J. We may note that German poets often accept cases of option D (*Zeiten/bedeuten*). As for E and K, they are not good substitutes for rhyme, while F and L can scarcely be heard as kinds of rhyme at all. Yet they are better than nothing, and so are included here:

 POINT-SCORING SCHEMA for the evaluation of rhymes

Love/glove & Belie/rely	10 points
Lie/fly	9 points
Love/ shove	8 points
Lie/rye	7 points
Love/rough	6 points
Lie/die	5 points
Love/move	4 points
Lie/lay	3 points
Love/lug	2 points
Love/have & Lie/lee	1 point

Since we are discussing songs, a preference is given to open syllables, those which end with a stressed vowel and no consonant. These are desirable because the singer has less trouble executing them and because the listener can grasp the meaning of long notes without having to wait for the final consonants. 'Closed syllables' here include cases like eggs/begs (two final consonants) and even aping/piping (a unaccented syllable after the stressed vowel) – pairs which score 8 points and 6 points, respectively. Now views will differ about precise points-value, and refinements could be made – one could look, say, at interposed consonants (laze/paves) – but the schema's main virtue is that it permits quantified evaluation. In addition, I count a bonus point whenever the 'clinching rhyme' is of good quality (8 points or above).

 To show how this works, here are six lines translated by Andrew Kelly. This advocate of 'approximate rhymes' even dared tackle a stanza of Georges Brassens with very short lines and prominent rhymes:

Notre Père,	Lord our Father
Qui, j'espère,	Who, I gather
Êtes aux cieux,	Art in Heaven,
N'ayez cure	In your glory
Des murmures	Spurn this story
Malicieux.	Quite unproven.

On my schema this translation scores $6 + 8 + 4$, giving an average of 6, which is impressive under the circumstances, and which also – this is a key point – permits good scores on all the other criteria. [2]

How does all this help the song-translator? In the first place, it greatly widens the pool of available rhyme-words. In the second place, the flexibility offered can lead to better solutions to the other problems: sense, rhythm, etc. The Brassens-Kelly example proves both points, in a stanza which would surely be 'untranslatable' with perfect rhymes. My plea for tolerance of flexible rhyming is a call to extend the acceptance long given to a few imperfect rhymes (e.g. love/move, time/mine) to the acceptance of many others – in the interests of overall quality.

One extreme case is the word 'nothing'. As Gene Lees (1981): 53) puts it: '*Nothing* rhymes with nothing'. By the above schema, however, near-rhymes like 'cutting' and 'stuffing' would score 6 points, as would all the words that rhyme with them, over twenty words altogether. Even 'loving' would score 2.

Look again at the case of 'love'. English provides only six true rhymes, some quite problematical – can one use 'shove' or 'guv'? That is why song-writers have often settled for near-rhymes scoring 6 points or even less. Now song-translators, not being entitled to invent meanings at will, have even better reason to exploit the dozens of near-rhymes available: there are over twenty in the 'rough/stuff' group alone.

A word must be said about so-called 'feminine rhymes' – two-syllable rhymes where the last syllable is unaccented and the penultimate vowel is the one that needs to rhyme. These have caused particular problems for song-translators. Traditionally, English poetry has made less use of such endings than has poetry in some other languages (such as Italian). Therefore translators working into English need unusual skill in feminine rhymes. Although penultimate stress is not uncommon in English, one certainly has difficulty finding good rhymes of this kind (what rhymes with 'uncommon', what rhymes with 'English'?).

One of the easier solutions is to use the '–ing' suffix, but it is boring to overdo this option. At times translators determined to rhyme have tried two-word rhymes, coupling 'the door, sir' with 'What for, sir'; but this is undesirable, except in comic songs. Drinker comments on particular over-worked rhymes like capture/rapture, badness/gladness, ever/never, mea-sure/pleasure/treasure. (Drinker, 1952: 233) More practical, Herman & Apter (1991): 103) speak of searching for: 'syllables such as -es, -le, and -er to match the very light final syllables of words in languages such as German and sung French'. Naturally, their tolerance of imperfect rhymes makes their searching easier. One-syllable rhymes are much easier to find, of course, and so translators sometimes opt to slur the final two notes of the music. Thus, for example, the German *Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten* becomes 'I do not know what it can me-ean'. This certainly loses points in terms of rhythm. However, the need for flexibility forces one at times to consider the one-syllable option. It is least offensive where the two musical notes are short and on the same pitch.

Other Considerations

Good strategies for handling rhymes enable song-translators to do better justice to other requirements of their task: sense, singability, rhythm, and naturalness.

I have not developed similar scoring-systems for these other four 'pentathlon events'. The notion of 'losing points' when a line of translation falls short of the ideal seems adequate. This does not mean equating second-best with perfect, it means accepting imperfection (as translators must) and trying to minimise it. Song-translators cannot avoid inaccuracies, and given the complexity of the task, rule-bound dogmatism is unhelpful or just plain silly. As with rhyme, a deviation in one area may have great compensating benefits in another.

Sense

The need for flexibility in song-translating is seldom doubted in the matter of sense. Not only do all translators make use of standard 'creative tools' of good wordsmiths, such as transposition, modulation, paraphrase and com-pensation, but almost all make semantic compromises that would be unacceptable in, say, scientific translation.

One of the earliest remarks recorded about opera-translation comes from 1711, when Addison said that translators 'would often make words of their own which were entirely foreign to the meaning of the passages they pretended to translate; their chief care being to make the numbers of the English verse answer to those of the Italian, that both might go to the same tune'. (Addison, 1711/1875) This is a claim that semantic considerations were being sacrificed to the syllable-count. It has often been echoed: people remark, with or without reproach, that song-translations are 'very free'. The truth, however, is that every translation is free by some criterion. For example, most alter the rhythm of the words. Normally this does not matter, because rhythm is seldom relevant and is sacrificed, quite properly, to the criteria that do apply, notably meaning. In songs, however, phonic properties and semantic details all have their importance. Therefore there should be limits to freedom. Addison's words 'entirely foreign to the meaning' are certainly a criticism. He implies that some transfer of sense is needed in song-translating. And he is right, because otherwise the text produced is not a translation at all.

Drinker (1952: 235), in discussing sense, emphasises the need to look at the song as a whole: 'The translator must try primarily to reproduce the *spirit* and *mood* of the original'. He points out also that there is no need to translate line by line (in this respect, singable translations differ from those intended for study). Here is how he puts it: 'Very often, also, the order in which the thought is expressed in the foreign language can be rearranged as between the several lines, thus giving more latitude in finding sets of rhyming words'. (1952: 234) Another well-judged remark is this one, from Golomb: 'Semantic approxima-tions and loose summaries that would be hair-raising in music-free contexts and normally rejected as translational nonstarters can be accommodaed on the microlevel in MLT [music-linked translation], especially if sacrifices of this type earn the text such valued qualities as rhythmical elegance, witty and

effective word-music alignment, immediate communicability etc'. (Golomb, 2005: 133)

A further point to consider is that the meaning of the words is a lot more important in some songs than in others. For the latter ones, departures from meaning are less serious.

I move now to two considerations which (like rhyme) are foreign to most translating tasks: Singability and Rhythm.

Singability

This is a subject which singers have a particular competence to judge, and which other writers have covered in more detail. (Drinker, 1952; Herman & Apter, 1991; Gorlée, 1997) Its importance is so great that translators who fail to produce really singable versions have wasted their time. One of the likely benefits of a flexible approach to rhyme is a higher score in singability.

Attention must be given to vowels. It is not that each vowel needs to match the original one, but that it must match the needs of the melody. When translating into English, one cannot use short vowel-sounds at will, because these are unsuited to long notes. A short vowel placed under a minim or semibreve will not even emerge as the vowel you wanted. As Lees explains: 'You cannot sing *cappp*...you can only sing *caaap*'. (Lees, 1981: 19) Thus words like *cap*, and *trick* are often unusable. The word 'bit', on a long note, will come out as 'bet' or 'beet'. A particular concern of singers is the choice of vowels on high notes. Good vowels for high notes are those found in 'cart', 'kite', 'cut' and 'key', followed by 'court', 'cot', 'kit' and 'soot'. Similarly, some recommend particular vowels for low notes – the vowels of 'coat', 'coot' and 'cot'. Another special case is the showy melisma, where a single vowel is held for ten or twenty notes: here the vowels of 'cart' and 'kite' are good options.

There are issues with consonants too. Some single words like 'strict' are hard to enunciate, and consonant-clustering in adjacent words can create tongue-twisters. A phrase like 'God's grace' is bad because it puts four consonants together – dzgr. In this regard Lees (1981: 22) advises: 'Do not, if it can possibly be avoided, begin a word with the same consonant that ended the preceding word'.

Another aspect of singability is matching the composer's reading of the source text, for example, by placing the key words exactly where the music highlights them. Rather than expand on this question, however, I move to that of rhythm. As with rhyme, this is an area where inflexible views have led to poor translating.

Rhythm

Eugene Nida says that translators of songs are constrained to replicate, among other things: '(1) a fixed length for each phrase, with precisely the right number of syllables, [and] (2) the observation of syllabic prominence (the accented vowels or long syllables must match correspondingly emphasized notes in the music)'. (Nida, 1964: 177) Fortunately, his words 'fixed' and 'precise' overstate the situation. There are kinds of song where perfect syllabic

fit is needed, such as hymns intended for unrehearsed congregational singing by untrained voices. But there are many other kinds of singing, and some of them involve rehearsed performance by trained professionals.

He is right, however, about syllabic prominence. It is not enough simply to achieve the same syllable-count: verbal stresses must match musical stresses. False stresses sound unnatural, can obscure the meaning, and can even alter it – *aller mourir dans le désert* cannot become 'to go and die in the desert' because the stress will fall on the final syllable! As Lees (1981): 31) puts it: 'It is absolutely necessary to fit unstressed syllables to unstressed notes, stressed syllables to stressed notes'. For example, words like 'the' cannot fall on a downbeat; nor can weak syllables such as the – ing suffix. Stress matters less in some other languages, but these immutable stresses are part of English. Only a comic song may break this basic rule, as famously demonstrated when Flanders and Swann stressed the fourth syllable of 'hippopotamus'!

Given the constraints, translators sometimes choose to alter the syllable-count, for example, rendering the three syllables *mon ami* as 'my friend', by either suppressing one musical note or slurring two together. On this controversial matter, I make this proposal:

Rhythmic variants already present in song	–lose 0 points
Small alteration to rhythm	–loses 1 point
Small alteration to melody	–loses 3 points

But are such alterations acceptable at all? Drinker (1952: 227) expresses horror: 'to change the music to suit the convenience of the translator is akin to blasphemy'. This is an understandable view when the music is by great classical composers. The word 'blasphemy' shows, surely, that he was thinking of Bach or Brahms, not Irving Berlin or Jacques Brel. Drinker's view, which is shared by other classical musicians, can fairly be characterised as rule-bound. They think that even the dotting a crotchet would be 'breaking the rules'. A more flexible, end-focused approach is more likely to succeed. After all, the objective is the successful live performance of a song to an audience that can understand an English version, and if some judicious adding and subtracting of syllables helps to achieve this communicative goal, it can surely be justified. A decision to 'lose points' in this area does not declare that 'the music doesn't matter', only that the tiny details of the music are not sacrosanct.

An unsacred song can provide an example. Brel's 'Les filles et les chiens' begins each stanza with two isolated syllables: 'Les filles'. Isolated phrases are often tricky in song-translation, and would be even made trickier by a rule-bound approach. Well, the obvious English version is monosyllabic: 'Girls'. As a translator, I took this option unhesitatingly, convinced that no alternative could possibly score as well on the criteria of sense and naturalness.

Besides, there is a detail which Nida – and even Noske – were unaware of: the phenomenon of rhythmic variants. Many songs themselves show flexibility in syllable-count, within the source language. These are songs where different verses fit the same music (strophic songs), and which vary tiny details of rhythm and sometimes of melody, to accommodate different wordings. Two genres where this is common are folk-songs and ballads (for

example, the Scottish favourite 'Loch Lomond' and the Australian favourite 'Waltzing Matilda'). The former switches between a single up-beat note and a two-note anacrusis. The latter includes different rhythmic versions of bar one and two. This gives ample justification for anyone translating these texts to use either version of these rhythms in any verse. Such variants are far less common in hymns.

They occur also in those art-songs that are strophic. Here, the poem was often not written for musical setting, and the composer who chose to set several stanzas to one melody often encountered rhythmic problems. To return to Schubert's *Schöne Müllerin,* 'Morgengruss' (quoted above) varies the first and last lines of the stanza, and in other songs a line may even have two syllables more than its counterpart. These variants were created by the poet, and the composer merely coped with them. It happens even in regular French verse: Gounod's 'Sérénade' has regular hexasyllabic lines (by Hugo), but the sixth line of the stanza is stressed sometimes on the third, sometimes on the fourth syllable. Noting this phenomenon, Drinker (1952): 228) says that the translator may use any variant already present in the song: 'I do not regard these as changes in the music'. What song-writers do, song-translators may do too.

At times one may even tinker with the rhythms in ways not condoned by the composer. In these cases the translator does 'lose points', but the losses are either small or justified. In the jazz tradition, the loss is minimal, because such tinkering falls within the normal 'wiggle-room' accorded to performers reinterpreting standard songs. Focusing on another popular genre, the French *chanson,* Andrew Kelly says: 'There is no need for slavish observation of original rhythms, simply respect with minimum departure within musical limits for reasons that are clear such as better meaning, sound, naturalness of expression, accommodation of rhyme etc'. (Kelly, 1992–1993: 95)

What about Italian opera? It is best not to generalise. Suppose we have a recitative recounting some offstage events. Here sense, naturalness and singability matter more than rhythm or rhyme. If the important narration is well-served by adding or subtracting the odd syllable, one should do so. Even Drinker (1952): 228) accepts the omission of a repeated note 'at the end of a line in recitativo secco'. The same opera, however, will have major arias in which any tampering with the syllable-count of the melodic phrases would be very undesirable.

If one has to add a syllable, the best place is where two notes are already slurred together. If one has to subtract a syllable, the best place is where two notes are sung at the same pitch. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I were translating the 'Marseillaise'. The start reads (with the downbeats placed in capitals): *Allons, enFANTS de la paTRI-e*, with two notes slurred on the stressed syllable TRI. For this I would add a syllable: 'Be ready, CHILdren of the MOTHerland' where that slurred syllable is replaced by the two syllables 'mother'. Conversely, in the chorus, *Aux ARmes, citoYENS,* I would omit the short second syllable of 'armes', thus: 'To ARMS, men of FRANCE'. These are minor changes that do not affect the melody or the basic marching rhythm of the song (I see no way of retaining the semantic richness of 'citoyens').

My final example is from German Lieder: long ago Strangways claimed that the crucial last line of 'Erlkönig' (Goethe-Schubert) should be reduced from nine syllables – *In seinen Armen das Kind war tot* – to seven – 'In his arms the boy was dead'. (Strangways, 1921: 222) These changes, omitting the first note and slurring two others together, would by some be called blasphemous. But Strangways argued that they make possible the ideal placement of the three key words, and retain the semantic accuracy and dramatic simplicity which other options would compromise.

The above cases involve altering the rhythmic detail of the music. Less acceptable, but not totally ruled out, in my view, is the occasional small tinkering with the melody. Such changes would certainly 'lose more points'. But the situation may be desperate, and the alternatives even more ghastly.

Naturalness

This is a normal requirement of good translating: one seeks to use the target language in a natural way, and not produce 'translationese'. Naturalness is particularly important in song – and other oral texts – because the option of rereading is unavailable.

Song-texts, of course, are not spontaneous pieces of language, and may contain departures from natural expression. But that does not explain the extent to which song-translations have ignored or dismissed the need for naturalness. What does often explain it – though not excuse it – is the determination of translators to rhyme at all costs. An article by Frederick Kirchberger, published first in 1972, explains why many song-translations are never actually sung: 'Due to the desperate search for rhymes, the choice of words tends towards either the trite or the far-fetched'. (Kirchberger, 2006: 532) Arthur Graham (1989: 31) concurs: The search for rhyme often breeds awkward syntax and inappropriate vocabulary'. To use the pentathlon metaphor, it is as though the athletes were unaware of the 1500 metres event, and neither trained nor competed.

One area where this problem can be seen is inverted word-order. In English, for example, subjects regularly precede verbs, and so that is the pattern that prose-translators follow – irrespective of what happens in the source – except in questions. But song-translators, at least before 1950, seem to have ignored this issue. Their contorted or pretentious efforts in English often detract from the comprehensibility of a song in performance – and this, we recall, was one of Wagner's objections to German translators. For example, a famous aria from *Samson et Dalila* begins with normal French word-order *Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix*, yet this is translated with a strange inversion: Softly awakes my heart.[3]

On this, Lees (1981): 14) has a very clear view: 'The lyricist should avoid inverted or otherwise peculiar word orders in setting up a rhyme'. We may note, however, that his remarks are directed at song-writers, not translators. Besides, poems and song-texts in many languages play around with word-order. We should therefore not ban all departures from normal word-order (which would amount to placing this criterion in first place). Instead let us accept the permissibility of unnatural word-order, and simply deduct points

for it. For example, I would deduct 3 points for 'his daughter fair' and two for the less clumsy 'his daughter young and fair'.

Drinker's (1952: 232) typically thoughtful comments on this problem insist on the need for flexibility. Unusual word-order is hard to avoid altogether, he says, 'in view of the necessity of putting a particular word on a particular note or a particularly strong word at the beginning or end of a musical line'. This is a dilemma between naturalness and one aspect of singability.

Even worse than inversions was the widespread use of archaism in song-translations. How can one explain the famous aria from Wagner which begins (in a well-known translation) by addressing 'O Star of Eve'? Is this a variety of apple? No, the German word was *Abendstern* – 'evening star'. The translator's deviation from naturalness also detracted from sense. Theodore Baker's version of *Die schöne Müllerin* included not only the words quoted above – 'fain' and 'streamlet' – but also such oddities as 'I trow', 'brooklet' or 'mead' (as a synonym of 'meadow'!), and the bizarre 'prythee' with its first syllable on a longish stressed note. I would deduct points for all these archaisms, which were already archaic when the translation was made, and for rare abbreviations such as 'o'er', 'ne'er' and 'neath' (it is better to add a syllable than to stoop to these oddities) Even 'thou' and 'thee' are unacceptable – except in religious texts translated before 1960. Some may object, perhaps, that a text (a Goethe poem, say) sounds archaic today. But that is irrelevant, since usually he wrote in the German of his day. The only case where archaism would not lose points in a translation is when it was present from the start as a deliberate feature of the text, for example, in a modern song about Robin Hood.[4] In that case the deviation from naturalness could be justified as fidelity to the style of the original.

Evaluation of Translated Texts

Putting these crtieria together, I propose an overall evaluation of six lines translated by Baker. This is song twenty of *Die schöne Müllerin*, 'Des Baches Wiegenlied', stanza two:

Will betten dich kühl	Cool, cool be thy bed,
Auf weichem Pfühl,	Soft to thy head,
In dem blauen	In the chamber of
kristallenen Kammerlein.	crystal blue.
Heran, heran,	Come ye pale nymphs,
Was wiegen kann	Of forest and spring
Woget und wiebet	To rock him and swing him,
den Knaben mir ein.	my boy fond and true.

SINGABILITY: 5 points. Despite the easy open syllables which end lines 3 and 6, this text is defective for singing: the adjacent 't's mean that line 2 will surely emerge as 'soff to'. Besides, the word 'nymphs' is something of a tongue-twister.

NATURALNESS: 4 points. Line 4 uses an archaic word 'ye' in an archaic construction. Even worse are lines 3 and 6, where the adjectives follow the nouns.

RHYTHM: 7 points. Here Baker wisely matches his rhythm to the first stanza of the source. In lines 2 and 4, however, the downbeats fall awkwardly on the weak words 'to' and 'ye'.

SENSE: 6 points. Müller mentioned neither nymphs nor 'fond and true'. Baker could argue, perhaps, that he found them in its subtext.

RHYME: 6 points This is the average from 8 points for bed/head, 2 for nymphs/spring, and 7 for blue/true, with a bonus point for this clinching rhyme.

My overall assessment thus gives a total of 28, on a scale where a real success would score 40. Some critics might wish to dismiss it as 'a mere adaptation, not a translation at all'. But my attempts at quantification are more subtle than this approach.

The most convincing, most conclusive criticisms of any translated sentence are those which prove that better options were available. Proof enough can be seen in two more recent efforts, those of Kirchberger (1972, 2006) and Heiberg (2006):

KIRCHBERGER	HEIBERG
I will bed you so cool	I'll pillow your head
In my velvet pool;	on mossy bed
Sleep in my chamber,	In a small chamber, blue,
the crystal deep	cool and crystalline.
From far, from nigh,	Sing, currents strong,
Swell the lullaby,	a slumber song.
Help rocking and singing the	Lull him, my lad, help him
wand'rer to sleep.	find peace within.

Besides saying merely 'those are better', I can propose a comparative assessment:

CRITERIA	Singability	Naturalness	Sense	Rhythm	Rhyme	TOTAL
Kirchberger	8	7	8	7	8.7	38.7
Heiberg	7	6	7	7	6.7	33.7
Baker	5	4	6	7	6	28

That remains, of course, only one person's assessment of a small fragment from each of the translators in question.

Practical Conclusion

This paper is not intended to deride past translators, but to assist future ones. Its conclusion is that the devising of singable translations – though more difficult than some have thought – can be facilitated by good strategic thinking and by the use of good tools and guidelines.

The guideline most emphasised here is this: be flexible about the frequency and quality of rhymes.

Long ago Spaeth delcared: 'The ideal musical translator is not only a linguist, but a poet and a musician as well.' (Spaeth, 1915: 298) That is true but unhelpful. Any translator can attempt a song. Those most likely to translate it

well are already wordsmiths with experience in making rhyming verse, and with knowledge of singing. Such assets can be enhanced by studying fine writers of lyrics, such as (in English) Gilbert, Lerner, or Sondheim.

A careful reading of theorist-practitioners Drinker and Kelly will help also. They urge beginners not to start at the beginning. Focus first, says Drinker (1952): 237), on 'crucial words and phrases', and then solve the problem of the rhymes, early in the process. Only later should one should proceed to 'building the line behind the rhyme'. (Drinker, 1952: 240) This advice may seem obvious, but it was not obvious to many in the past!

Drinker recommends the use of a rhyming dictionary for help with the rhyme problems. This is itself a recipe of 'wiggle-room'. One good option is the dictionary of Gene Lees (1981), which has a fine practical introduction. Drinker recommends also the use of Thesaurus, an excellent tool for finding 'the line behind the rhyme' (i.e. the words preceding the rhyme), when the first option that one selects doesn't work, and one is seeking a synonym with different syllables and stresses. These are only aids, however, to the crafting of good singable versions. Song-translators must bring their skill, their lateral thinking, and their creativity to the service of songs, singers and listeners. The results should enable more people to experience the songs properly – without the words being downplayed or ignored in the ways that appalled Wagner – to experience them not just as music but as complex works of verbal-musical art.

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Notes

1. Two articles on translating for surtitles are Sario and Oksanen (1996) and Low (2002). Though skilful, the rhyming English subtitles used for the film *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Rappeneau, 1990) show how distracting this can be.
2. Even 'glory', although it translates no word of the French, is a notion present in the subtext of 'cieux'. The man who recorded this song pronounced 'gather' as 'gaather', thus raising the rhyme-score to 6.7 points (*Graeme Allwright sings Brassens,* 1985, Philips 824 005-1*)*. Despite the reduction in naturalness, this proved acceptable as a humorous effect.
3. Some hearers took the first word to be the subject of the verb – even before 'softly' became the name of a laundry product.
4. Nevertheless, when the Broadway musical *The Man of La Mancha* (1965) was done in French, the archaisms in the original were ignored, to the advantage of the musical drama. The translating team (led by Jacques Brel) clearly did not consider verbal archaism to be an essential feature.

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