

The Difficulties of Sprechstimme in “Pierrot Lunaire”: Achieving a Desirable Performance and Translation

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Abstract

Translating text has long been a key element in musical performance practice throughout history. This is a process that not only calls for an individual who is versed in the source language and target language, but who is also knowledgeable of the target audience and overall tone and emotion that is desired of the work. In this paper I will discuss these issues, specifically examining Arnold Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire”. This work is unique in that the part of the vocalist is written in *Sprechstimme* (German for “speech-voice”), a cross between singing and speaking. The use of Sprechstimme brings about a dilemma when one attempts a desirable translation, as well as a great challenge in perfecting a proper performance technique. Is the process of translation similar as when dealing with more traditionally notated art songs, song cycles, and operatic works? What additional considerations should come into play in order to achieve a desirable translation of the fantastical imagery of the poems? This pivotal work of the 20th century could stand to lose a great deal if not given a translation that conveys the emotion that Schoenberg had in mind.

Keywords: Pierrot Lunaire, Sprechstimme, Performance Practice, Text Translation

Translating text has long been a key element in musical performance practice throughout history. This is a process that not only calls for an individual who is versed in the source language and target language, but who is also knowledgeable of the target audience and overall tone and emotion that is desired of the work. There is no single definitive process used when translating. Richard Taruskin defends at length the importance of translating in a way that supplies a performance with depth and emotion, instead of a clunky and uncomfortable, word-for-word imitation.² Dinda Gorlee delves into specifics such as rhyme schemes, syllabic accuracy, and musical liberties.³ In this paper I will discuss these issues, specifically examining Arnold Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire”. This work is unique in that the part of the vocalist is written in *Sprechstimme* (German for “speech-voice”), a cross between singing and speaking. The use of Sprechstimme brings about a dilemma when one attempts a desirable translation, as well as a great challenge in perfecting a proper performance technique. Is the process of translation similar as when dealing with more traditionally notated art songs, song cycles, and operatic works? What additional considerations should come into play in order to achieve a desirable translation of the fantastical imagery of the poems? This pivotal work of the 20th century could stand to lose a great deal if not given a translation that conveys the emotion that Schoenberg had in mind. If we had a better model for effective translation practices in this type of setting, then not only would performances of “Pierrot Lunaire” benefit, but we would also have a model for dealing with similar works in the future. In the time since the 1912 premiere, many more composers have utilized unique and modern settings of the voice, from Karlheinz Stockhausen and Charles Ives up to more recent composers of today such as Brian Ferneyhough and Georges Aperghis.

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² Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 71-83.

³ Dinda L. Gorlee, *Song and Significance: Virtues and Vices of Vocal Translation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 185- 210.

I believe that for a work like “Pierrot Lunaire,” there are very specific procedures and considerations that must be adhered to in order to achieve a proper translation and performance, and that those will differ from more traditional methods. Beyond that I believe these special kinds of practices, such as dealing with a voice setting that requires an unusual and challenging performance technique, or translating a source text that contains fantastical poetic imagery, could be applied to other art songs which also present certain unusual circumstances.

1 - Proper Performance

Let us first briefly examine the style of Sprechstimme in order to explore how it differs from more typical vocal compositions. Schoenberg gives instructions to the Reciter in the Preface of the score; a kind of rubric that discusses topics such as “maintaining rhythm...with no more freedom than would be allowed with a singing melody...becoming acutely aware of the difference between singing tone and speaking tone”, and being “very careful not to adopt a singsong speech pattern.”⁴It is obvious that he has a clear vision for the part, as he has chosen to insert these instructions into the score. I believe that since Schoenberg has gone to this length, a performer should make every attempt to reasonably and sensibly adhere to his instructions. Again, this requires a knowledgeable and skilled approach to the part.

In examining the Preface it is also important to point out how ambiguous the instructions to the Reciter are. Schoenberg explains how the spoken notes are to be differentiated from the sung notes, but beyond that he does not go into any more detail. For example, is the use of vibrato encouraged or discouraged throughout the work? Schoenberg states that rhythm is to be maintained, but should liberties be taken when translating? Unanswered questions like these have produced and will continue to produce differing performances of the part, and this is displayed in the available commercial recordings of the work.⁵The 1992 English translation of Andrew Porter has most recently been widely acclaimed, but still contains many differences from the first commercial recording of the work in 1940, as well as subsequent recordings throughout the years.⁶While this topic is more of a concern for the performance of the Sprechstimme, it still harkens back to my original claim that the Sprechstimme must be handled with care by both performers and translators. Furthermore, if one were attempting a proper performance whilst using an undesirable translation, the work would undoubtedly suffer.

When delving further into the part, the performer must discover how to insert emotion and depth into the spoken text without falling back into typical modes of expression through sung melody. It is evident that Schoenberg wished to make a clear distinction between the two, as is shown in passionate correspondences concerning the work. In a 1931 letter to Hungarian composer Alexander Jemnitz, Schoenberg wrote, “Pierrot Lunaire is not to be sung! Song melodies must be balanced and shaped in quite a different way from spoken melodies.”⁷Letters leading up to the 1940 recording of the work not only show Schoenberg’s very particular requirements on the part of the Reciter, but also his very strong demands for a capable and well-rehearsed ensemble.⁸He actually wrote at length on his opinions of needing a great deal more time for rehearsal, as the work was to be “solidified in time forever.”⁹Rehearsing for what was to be the first commercial recording, he knew it would be referenced for proper performance techniques in the future and wanted to adhere as closely as possible to his vision for the work. This evidence of the composer’s wishes requires a great deal of discipline from the performer and translator to achieve a desirable performance. One could raise the counterargument that with the detailed instructions given by Schoenberg in the Preface, there should be less ambiguity when performing or translating the work. I disagree. It is the unique use of Sprechstimme and the abbreviated Preface itself that present difficulties, and set this work apart from more typical art songs. Let us now examine more specific processes that may arise in translation.

⁴ Arnold Schoenberg, “Preface” in *Pierrot Lunaire*, op. 21, Text by Albert Giraud, German translation by Otto Eric Hartleben. Corrected Edition. (Los Angeles: Belmont Music Publishers, 1990).

⁵ Aiden Leigh Soder, “Arnold Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire”: A Study of Sprechstimme and Vocal Performance Practice through Sound Recording” (DMA diss., Rice University, 2006), 28-44.

⁶ Leon Botstein, Liner Notes, *Arnold Schoenberg: Pierrot Lunaire, Op. 21, German and English Versions, Herzgewasche, Op. 20*, Lucy Shelton (soprano), Da Capo Chamber Players, Oliver Knussen (conductor), Bridge BCD 9032, 1992, [Compact Disc].

⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, *Arnold Schoenberg Letters*, ed. Erwin Stein (London: Faber, 1987), 149.

⁸ Soder, “Arnold Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire”.” 17.

⁹ Schoenberg, *Letters*, 81.

2 - Target Translation

Dinda Gorlee describes a so-called “Pentathlon” system of translating; a rubric consisting of five different considerations for a target text.¹⁰ They are Singability, Sense, Naturalness, Rhythm, and Rhyme. There are countless systems and methods of translation used throughout the world and this is by no means a definitive method, but will at least give us some guidelines and a good place to begin to examine some aspects of translating the Sprechstimme. The first consideration given by Gorlee is “singability.” Now, while the typical idea of “singability” might not apply to Sprechstimme, let us instead look at it as desiring a more usable translation, or a preferable target text. This is paramount in the emotional and often eccentric poetry used in “Pierrot Lunaire.” Let us take a look at a recurring line throughout “Moondrunk”, the first of the twenty-one poems taken from Andrew Porter’s 1992 translation of the work.¹¹ “Den Wein, den man mit Augen trinkt,” repeated three times is translated as, “The wine that through the eyes is drunk.” This translation is clear and easily understood, still retains the dark and melancholic feeling of the poem, but also somewhat adheres to the source text. The number of syllables remains the same, and the order and emphasis of the words are relatively similar. One could easily translate this line in a simpler fashion, resulting in something like, “We drink the wine through the eyes”, or in a more word-for-word fashion like, “The wine, we drink through the eyes”, but these versions lose some of the poetic mood and with the continuing ambiguousness and fantastical imagery of the text, do not translate well when continuing into the rest of the poem.

The second idea Gorlee presents for consideration is “sense,” as in retaining and attempting to adhere to the original meaning of the text. While this may seem intuitive, one could completely lose the meaning of a translation if the source text is not kept in mind. Take for instance “Night”, the first poem of the second group of seven in the work. Using the same Andrew Porter source, the English translation reads:

Black gigantic butterflies have blotted out the shining sun
Like a sorcerer’s sealed book, the horizon sleeps in
silence.¹²

While most if not all of the source text used for “Pierrot” can be seen as poetically ambiguous, keeping this idea of the “sense” of the source text is particularly important. Without a proper “sense” strategy this stanza could be wildly misconstrued into something completely unrecognizable. Translating more rigidly one could come up with, for example:

Gloomy giant moth the killing sun shine, A closed spellbook, the horizon rests secretive.

Again, even though one could argue that both versions are somewhat ambiguous, I believe that the first is not only more sensible, clear, and poetic, but that some idea of “sense” is received, unlike in the latter. It is difficult to even follow what the subject of the second translation is while the first reads much more clearly.

The next consideration I shall address is “naturalness,” or the accessibility of the translation not only to the performer but to the listening audience as well. This may come as another obvious idea to keep in mind but again, it can be a pitfall for many translators. A prominent article on translation from *Music and Letters* released nine years after the 1912 premiere of “Pierrot” examines more closely some aspects of naturalness and accessibility that might not always be observed.¹³ Calvocoressi addresses the notion of sustaining rhythm and rhyme which I will discuss shortly, but then continues to discuss the idea of certain words and syllables having more emphasis and stress on them. On the subject of male vs. female voices, Calvocoressi writes, “For female voices, high notes are best sung to the vowel sound *a* (open); for male voices, to the vowel sounds *o* and *e*. The vowel-sounds *ee* and *oo* soften the incisive tone of a bass voice’s high notes, and the open *a* facilitates the emission of his lowest notes.”¹⁴ Just from the examples I used in the previous two paragraphs, one can see how altering the order of the text has a large impact on the aesthetic result. Furthermore, a problem that I had not even considered was that certain vowel and consonant sounds are going to come out stronger for a singer/reciter, and if not translated properly an end result could place emphasis on unintended words, yet another consideration for a translator, especially one delving into the complex rhythms and texts of “Pierrot.” The part of the Reciter is also a very difficult part to perform.

¹⁰ Gorlee, *Song and Significance*, 185.

¹¹ Botstein, Liner Notes, Arnold Schoenberg: Pierrot Lunaire, Op. 21, German and English Versions, Herzgwasche, Op. 20.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Michel-Dimitry Calvocoressi, “The Practice of Song – Translation,” *Music and Letters* 2, no. 4 (1921): 314-322.

¹⁴ Calvocoressi, “The Practice of Song – Translation,” 320 (emphases in original).

The vocal range encompassed in the part is two and a half octaves, far exceeding what is typical of human speech.¹⁵ Pierre Boulez who conducted the work many times stated that the range is far too high and too low.¹⁶ Going further, the dynamic range of the part is written as being in the range of *ppp* – *p*, a very difficult range to remain in for the entirety of the work. All of these difficulties are presented here in one single line from “Pierrot”:

Figure 1 Arnold Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21, no. 9, mm 7-9

You can see a vocal range spanning two octaves, all performed at a *pp* dynamic. With all of these challenges accompanying the part, this idea of “naturalness” could perhaps be the most important.

The next consideration I will examine is “rhythm.” Gorlee gives a few examples of song experts who believe that the number of syllables in the source text must be strictly adhered to in order to keep the character and feel of the work, but she goes on to say that she feels that way of thinking is too rigid.¹⁷ I agree. Let us examine “Nostalgia,” the first poem of the third group of seven. The first line of the poem which is repeated throughout each stanza, is translated to “Sweet lamenting, like a crystal sighing.”¹⁸ In the score, the setting of the original German text is as follows:

Figure 2 Arnold Schoenberg, *Pierrot Lunaire*, Op. 21, no. 15, mm 4-5

¹⁵ Soder, “Arnold Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire.”” 11.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gorlee, *Song and Significance*, 196.

¹⁸ Botstein, *Liner Notes, Arnold Schoenberg: Pierrot Lunaire, Op. 21*.

Using the aforementioned translation we are unable to adhere to the original number of syllables. So, we are forced to alter the rhythm somewhat if we stick with this particular translation. However, we must be careful not to put unwanted stress on less important words, which in this particular line would be “like” and “a”. If we stick closely to the original rhythm for example, the long dotted quarter in the first measure lands on the second syllable of “lamenting”. This is an unusual syllable for a long note to land on. Nuances such as this can be detrimental to a translation. In a complex work like “Pierrot”, the melodrama of the text will immediately be lost if a translator does not avoid unwanted stress and emphasis, awkward rhythms, and unnatural styles of singing and reciting.

The final consideration I will address is “rhyme.” Of the five issues in discussion I believe the concern of rhyming is least applicable to “Pierrot Lunaire”. I believe this due to the fact that the original German source text does not follow the original rhyme scheme of the French setting, therefore it should not be too much of a concern when approaching a target translation. With this being an atypical example of a singer/reciter part where there is no real song cycle, recurring rhyme scheme, or even true recurring rhythm throughout, “rhyme” is not as important. Gorlee gives examples of several sources and techniques to dig further into “fixing” rhyming troubles such as off-rhyme, weak rhyme, half-rhyme, and consonant rhyme, but those are less important to my context here.¹⁹

I have chosen to follow these five guidelines in the “Pentathlon” method because it leaves quite a bit of room for flexibility in both performing and translating. Taruskin believes in this as well, stating that the “musical performance” should be an “object to be desired”, rather than “the written text as an object to be desired.”²⁰ I believe this is necessary not only for “typical” art songs, but especially for atypical works such as “Pierrot Lunaire”. Some might argue that one should adhere more closely to the source text and source composition, however I disagree. I have discussed a few examples of what could go wrong with more straight ahead, strict translation practices, and I feel that the pitfalls of weak, unclear, and artistically lacking translations are much more of a treason than exercising some liberties when working towards a desired product worthy of performance.

3 - Desirable Aesthetic

I wish to finally examine some of the aesthetics behind this work and any evidence of Schoenberg’s philosophies on its performance. Schoenberg knew both the restrictions a translation could bring forth, as well as the possibilities of freedom and expression. In a 1942 letter to Erwin Stein, Schoenberg praises his performance of “Pierrot”, especially the fact that it was performed in English.²¹ He felt the setting in English was much more preferable and that “unfortunately” his was set in German, which was “much in the way of a full success.”²² He was even reluctant to perform or even attend a performance of the work in countries such as Germany and even his homeland Austria, where his name was being “dragged through the mud”- where he was “becoming a victim of sensationalist politicians.”²³ The evidence of Schoenberg’s preference of the English setting justifies my claim that it is more important to achieve a sensible, desirable translation of the source text. One could argue against this but in this case, it is the wish of the composer.

Schoenberg confers tremendous importance on the text of the work and meant for it (as opposed to the instrumental lines) to be the primary means of conveying emotion and feeling, rather than adding elaborate stage work, excessive instrumentation, and superfluous costumes and dance. This imposes even more emphasis on a proper translation and performance of the part. In a correspondence from Alma Mahler-Werfel, widow of Gustav Mahler, Schoenberg immediately strikes down her inquiry into incorporating dancing in place of the Reciter.²⁴ In a 1922 letter to singer Marya Freund, he is astonished that a few of the poems have even “somehow given religious offence” to some audiences.²⁵ He chose these poems based on their emotional and poetic strengths and meant for the wide range of genres in the texts to shine through in the ghostly, melancholic musical settings. Schoenberg was obviously very passionate and deliberate in the way he wrote the part, which beckons proper study and performance.

¹⁹ Gorlee, *Song and Significance*, 199.

²⁰ Taruskin, *Text and Act*, 74.

²¹ Schoenberg, *Letters*, 215.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Schoenberg, *Letters*, 85.

²⁴ Schoenberg, *Letters*, 69.

²⁵ Schoenberg, *Letters*, 82.

One might counter these beliefs and the ones discussed previously with the notion that since Schoenberg deliberately left the Preface of the score so ambiguous, that it would be more judicious to adhere as closely to the score as possible, or that even the role of the text is not as important as Schoenberg makes it out to be. I believe that in examining the pitfalls of unemotional translations and the newly examined evidence of Schoenberg's aesthetic idea for the work, that we display a successful argument to the contrary. He obviously wanted the role of the Reciter to be the driving force of the melodrama, as is shown in his refusal for superfluous stage additions. Finally, he put great importance in the performance technique of the Sprechstimme as is shown in his correspondences leading up to the premiere of the work, and his difficulties finding a suitable performer for the role.

4 - Conclusion

It is my wish, by examining "Pierrot Lunaire" and the difficulties in the Sprechstimme such as performance practice and translation processes, to prove that it is a unique piece in many rights, but especially on the part of the Reciter. It is by far one of the most pivotal works of the early 20th century and should require special treatment in performing, translating, and in continuing scholarly study. Schoenberg presented an almost entirely unheard of setting for the voice and unlocked new ideas and potentials for composers to come. Performances and recordings of the work have demonstrated continuing differences in both translation and performance, and hopefully this paper has at least scratched the surface in approaching an understanding of the piece. Discussing these strategies for this particular work will hopefully shed some light, or at least give some guidance when approaching other atypical works as well, such as the 20th century vocal works of Stockhausen, Ives, and Ferneyhough. Too often, performers are left with ambiguous, non-descriptive directions and clunky incoherent translations to work with and study. I don't believe there will ever be a definitive practice in song translation, but there is surely a more desirable and prosperous path.

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