

The Joy of Opera: The Art and Craft of Opera Subtitling and Surtitling

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Abstract

The subtitling and surtitling of opera presents unique challenges. The necessity for operatic translation is discussed, along with the history of different types of titling, the particular setup used at the Royal Opera House, and the techniques employed in writing opera titles.

Definitions

SUB-titles are translated text displayed *below* the image, as on a cinema or television screen; *SUR*-titles are displayed *above* the stage, in live opera or theatre performances (some opera companies refer to these as 'supertitles'). Subtitling and surtitling involve differing requirements and techniques.

Why do we need surtitles?

The argument in favour of some form of translation as an aid to comprehension is amusingly set out by Joseph Addison, writing in *The Spectator* as early as 1712 or thereabouts (quoted in Marek, 1957: 567-569):

It is my design in this paper to deliver down to posterity a faithful account of the Italian Opera, and of the gradual progress which it has made upon the English stage: For there is no question but our great-grandchildren will be very curious to know the reason why their forefathers used to sit together like an audience of foreigners in their own country, and to hear whole plays acted before them in a tongue which they did not understand. [...]

We no longer understand the language of our own stage; insomuch that I have often been afraid, when I have seen our Italian performers chattering in the vehemence of action, that they have been calling us names, and abusing us among themselves [...]. In the meantime I cannot forbear thinking how naturally an historian, who writes two or three hundred years hence, and does not know the taste of his wise forefathers, will make the following reflection, 'In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Italian tongue was so well understood in England, that operas were acted on the public stage in that language'.

So nothing much has changed in nearly 300 years of opera-going!

History of subtitles for opera

Subtitles for opera on film have been around almost as long as cinema itself, since the early years of the twentieth century, beginning with 'intertitles' in silent film excerpts from operas. (For details of the various technologies, see Ivarsson and Carroll, 1998: 9-19.) On television, the first subtitles for opera in the early 1970s consisted of a series of caption boards placed in front of a camera and superimposed on the television picture. This cumbersome arrangement was superseded by experiments with automated electric typewriters, and eventually by the familiar electronic systems in use today. For video or DVD, titles can be cued to timecode with the accuracy of a single frame (1/25 or 1/30 of a second), and software can provide useful information, such as whether a title is flashed up too quickly to be read at a specified reading speed; this is important in opera, as the pace of sung text can be much faster (or slower) than the speed of normal conversation.

History of live surtitles

This is not well documented; reputedly the first live titles in an opera house were in Beijing in 1983 (these were neither sub- nor sur-titles, as they were in Chinese and therefore displayed vertically at the side of the stage), although there are reports of live surtitling (in Danish) in Copenhagen before this date, and at New York City Opera at about the same time. English surtitles were used in Toronto, Canada, in 1984; in England, they appeared experimentally at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 1986, and were soon taken up by other organisations (Welsh National Opera, Glyndebourne Festival Opera, Scottish Opera, Opera North, various seasonal and touring companies). Controversially, English National Opera has now introduced surtitles, even though its company policy is to perform all its operas in English.

Hardware and software for surtitles

Various systems are currently in use, with no widely or internationally agreed 'standard' system. Titles can be projected on a screen, either from slides or electronically via a digital projector, or with presentation software such as PowerPoint™; there are various types of LED (dot matrix) screens, some of which have refinements such as variable brightness, fading, and colour options; and most recently there are

'seatback' screens, like those found in airliners, which display the titles on a small screen below eye-level on the back of the seat in front of the user. These were pioneered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, and are now used in Vienna, Barcelona and several other opera houses around the world. They have the advantages of multi-language possibility, directionality (ideally being visible only to the individual user), and the option to be switched off if the audience member does not wish to have titles at all.

Arguments for and against the use of surtitles for live opera performances

In the early days of surtitling, there was much debate as to whether surtitles were necessary or desirable; opera critics and stage directors tended to be opposed to them, audiences mostly in favour. That battle has now largely been won, with only a few critics and directors resolutely against the idea. In the eighteenth century, the more well-to-do members of the opera audience would have invested in a printed libretto with translation, which they would follow during the performance (with the house lights up); this is perhaps the nearest equivalent to modern surtitling.

Our approach to watching opera has changed in recent decades; we are no longer content just to appreciate the lovely sound of the voices and let the opera wash over us. Audiences now expect to know in detail what words are being sung, as they would for the dialogue in a subtitled foreign film; no longer do we sit in the dark for hours at a time, listening to whole acts of Wagner or Richard Strauss with only the vaguest idea of what is actually going on. Surtitles are now therefore considered a necessity (and there will be complaints if they are absent). The approach of opera directors has changed too; with surtitles, the director knows that we will be aware of the meaning of what is being sung, and he (or she) will be less tempted to fill the stage with superfluous action or comic 'business' just to keep our attention from wandering.

David Pountney, former Director of Productions at English National Opera, once famously compared surtitles to 'a prophylactic [i.e. condom] between the opera and the audience'; but what are the alternatives? We cannot now sit in the dark and try to follow a printed libretto. Critics hope that we will do our homework and study a translation of the opera text in advance; but it would hardly be possible to remember all the words in detail during the performance. One alternative is to sing the opera in translation, in the language of

the audience; this is a viable policy, followed at English National Opera and (until recently at least) in many German and Italian opera houses. However, this raises the new problem of arriving at a *singing* translation which follows the composer's musical line and phrasing, is comfortable to sing (with appropriate vowels on high notes, for instance), and is also an accurate rendering of the original text.

One point of contention is the advisability or otherwise of surtitling an opera in the language in which it is being sung; The Royal Opera now provides English surtitles for operas sung in English, as a matter of company policy – for the benefit of 'members of the audience who rely on surtitles because of hearing problems, or for whom English is a foreign language' (Royal Opera, 2002); but there is still some opposition to this, particularly from singers and directors, who feel that it is an insult to the clarity of diction of the singers. However, some composers (for example Harrison Birtwistle, for his opera *Gawain*) have specifically asked for English surtitles, knowing that the sung words will be difficult to hear. Same-language surtitling presents its own problems, since it will be obvious to an audience if the sung words are not reproduced exactly; omission, simplification or *précis* will need extra care.

Surtitling at the Royal Opera House

The Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, has used a variety of systems, starting with Kodak™ carousels each containing a limited number of 35 mm slides. The disadvantages of this system are that the slides are prepared in advance (by an outside supplier), so re-editing of the text is impossible; and that even with three projectors and three carousels, only a limited number of titles can be used in each act of an opera, before the carousels can be changed during the intermission. The Royal Opera House now uses a custom-tailored digital system (Diamond Credit ROH, by Courtyard Electronics Limited), projecting electronically-generated titles via a digital video projector on to a suspended screen above the proscenium. This is backed up by a limited number of 'seatback' screens, relaying the basic surtitle text to areas at the back and sides of the auditorium which do not have a view of the main surtitle screen.

Texts (supplied by ourselves or commissioned from a specialist translator, who will be a musician as well as a linguist) are prepared and edited in the Surtitling Department – in consultation with stage directors, music staff and language coaches – and then downloaded

via the company's internal IT network to the computer in the Surtitles Operators' Box, situated behind a window at the back of the Balcony (with a limited view of the stage, but with TV monitors showing the stage picture and the conductor). The Surtitles Operator cues the titles from a marked-up musical score during the performance; the output signal is relayed to the digital projector, high up at the back of the Amphitheatre, and via a separate computerised system to the seatback screens. The Diamond Credit software has great flexibility in the programming of parameters such as luminance and speed of fade (in and out) for each title, and individual letter spacing (kerning) for legibility – an important consideration when the projected letters are some 12 inches (30 cm) high.

Writing titles for opera: source texts

Many opera libretti are based on existing plays or novels, so it may help to consult the original source works – Beaumarchais, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Schiller, Racine, Oscar Wilde... – though there may be little of the original left. Sometimes the motivations or relationships of the characters may be clearer in the source work than in the libretto as set by the composer; and an understanding of the historical background will aid the surtitled's task (and therefore the audience's comprehension).

It is also vital to obtain the correct version of the musical score in use for a particular production. Many operas exist in more than one original version, or in conflicting editions (Bizet's *Carmen* is notorious in this respect); sometimes a director or conductor may exhume an unfamiliar version, or an extra aria, even for a well-known Mozart or Verdi opera. There may be variant readings in different versions of the score, in which the alteration of even a single word may change the sense of a line; or the director may have taken things into his (or her) own hands, and changed the sung text where it conflicts with the production 'concept'.

Conventions

Each opera company evolves its own 'house style' for surtitle texts, but – as with TV and cinema subtitling – there is general agreement on most conventions of layout and punctuation. (For reference, Ivarsson and Carroll [1998] cannot be bettered as a fount of wisdom based on a lifetime's experience!) The pacing of the surtitles should be kept slow and simple, to avoid distracting the audience. Changes of title should come at musically logical points, when the audience will

automatically look up expecting to see a new title. If a text contains much repetition, the title can be left up for a long period if necessary, or unobtrusively repeated later. Self-explanatory greetings, expostulations or lamentations can often be left untitled. Fast exchanges should be combined, simplified, or omitted; if it is too quick to cue, it will be too quick to read. 'Punch lines' or vital dramatic revelations should not be anticipated: lines may be split, delayed or faded up slowly, so that the audience does not read the information before it has been sung. Simultaneous lines in ensembles (duets, trios, quartets, quintets...) will require care in deciding which parts are audible or important; this may become apparent only during rehearsals.

Linguistic flavour

Opera libretti tend towards the flowery, archaic, poetic and repetitive in their vocabulary and grammatical formulations. The titler should try to simplify grammar and vocabulary, keeping to clear modern vernacular unless there are exceptional circumstances. The aim is transparency: we are trying to convey *what* is being said, not *how* it is being said – the singer is doing that for us. Slang, expletives and colourful language should be treated with care; for example, nineteenth-century Italian opera is notoriously well endowed with words for 'bad man' or 'transgressor' (*empio, traditore, infido, barbaro, misero, cattivo, rio, mostro, sciagurato...*), for which English is hard pressed for equivalents. It is better to play safe and just use 'he', rather than alarm or puzzle the spectator with variations on 'wretch', 'villain' or even 'bastard'.

Conclusion

The subtitling of opera on television, video and DVD, and the surtitling of live opera in the theatre, are disciplines which have come into being only in the last few decades; they have developed rapidly, both in sophistication of hardware and software, and in subtlety of application. A correct and sensitive approach to the translating of operatic texts will involve considerations and problems not found in other forms of subtitling; finding successful solutions can be hard work, but can also be satisfying. The titling of opera is not only a craft, but also an art – and of course a joy.

References

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