



<http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/em.2022.17.16>

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Guo Chen and Carlo Alberto Petruzzi
(translators and editors),
意大利语歌剧脚本字对字精准解析系列丛书
Word-by-Word Explanation of Italian Opera Librettos
in Chinese, Independent Publisher, Wrocław:
Amazon 2021–2022. Review of the book series

translation of an article published in this issue <http://dx.doi.org/10.16926/em.2022.17.15>

How to cite: Jinhua Yang, Katarzyna Suska-Zagorska, *Guo Chen and Carlo Alberto Petruzzi (translators and editors), 意大利语歌剧脚本字对字精准解析系列丛书 Word-by-Word Explanation of Italian Opera Librettos in Chinese, Independent Publisher, Wrocław: Amazon 2021–2022. Review of the book series, "Edukacja Muzyczna" 2022, no 17, pp. 283–290.*

So far, the series has produced seven volumes, each presenting a literal translation of the libretto of a selected opera. These include the following volumes:

1. G. Donizetti, F. Romani, 《爱的甘醇》 *L'elisir d'amore*, Wrocław 2020, ISBN: 979-84-960994-6-2.

Date of submission: February 2, 2023

Date of acceptance: February 12, 2023

2. P. Mascagni, G. Targioni-Tozzetti, G. Menasci, 《乡村骑士》 *Cavalleria rusticana*, Wrocław 2021, ISBN: 979-84-847304-0-7.
3. R. Leoncavallo, 《丑角》 *Pagliacci*, Wrocław 2021, ISBN: 979-84-936417-0-1.
4. G. Verdi, F.M. Piave, 《茶花女》 *La traviata*, Wrocław 2021, ISBN: 979-84-852993-3-0.
5. G. Puccini, G. Giacosa, L. Illica, 《艺术家的生涯》 *La bohème*, Wrocław 2021, ISBN: 979-84-961117-5-1.
6. G. Verdi, F. M. Piave, 《弄臣》 *Rigoletto*, Wrocław 2022, ISBN: 979-84-415368-2-0.
7. G. Puccini, G. Giacosa, L. Illica, 《托斯卡》 *Tosca*, Wrocław 2022, ISBN: 979-83-653361-2-4.

Opera is a special genre when it comes to stage and vocal works. It can constitute a paradigm for works which constitute a synthesis of arts, in particular a fusion of vocal and lyrical art. From an opera singer's perspective, it should be noted that they absolutely must have a precise understanding of the meaning of the words of the libretto. They should also be generally familiar with the characteristics of the language. As a result, the singer will be able to express the tone and mood of their part, as required by the dramatic plot and its characters. To meet this condition, the artist poses the question how to “decode” a message in a language that is incomprehensible to them and accurately understand the libretto of a given opera. The answer can be found in the series of libretto translations prepared by Guo Chen and Carlo Alberto Petruzzi.

The Purpose of the Series

Guo Chen and Carlo Alberto Petruzzi, both editors and translators of the series, focus on the librettos – the literary part of the operas. They stress the importance of the literary and dramatic level. To cover the issue, they take into account both theory and practice. The authors view the translation of the libretto as a tool for helping singers from China overcome challenges related to the performance of European operas. The initial volumes of the series also contain suggestions from Italian opera experts such as M. Baggio, N.G. Calzi, D. Menicucci and Ch. Starinieri.

The Arias from the operas whose librettos are described in Chen and Petruzzi's series of translations constitute the core curriculum in the teaching of vocal performance in professional music schools in China, and are the subject of numerous musicological analyses. However, the series in question does not address vocal instruction nor does it touch upon the subject of conveying and expressing emotion through sung lyrics. Instead, it focuses on the language of opera librettos. In doing so, the authors set specific goals, such as:

- allow Chinese singers to master the linguistic principles in European opera works;
- facilitate working on opera parts in their original language (especially when it comes to phonetics and linguistic expression);
- identify, as accurately as possible, the explicit and implicit meanings of specific statements;
- explain the semantics of the lyrics within the context of the stage performance of the opera.

The most difficult issue for Chinese students, and also very frequently for their teachers, is not the singing technique in Italian operas, but overcoming difficulties associated with language differences. Such difficulties can certainly be addressed by special Italian language courses. One can also learn the correct pronunciation by themselves, for example by listening to various performances by Italian singers. The primary focus of teachers and students of vocal performance in China is the phonetics of the Italian language. Pronunciation and diction are the areas which are improved upon. Such themes are generally addressed and analysed only in relation to specific arias. As an awkward consequence, many students become familiar with arias from a particular opera but are unable to place them within the context of the entire piece. This leads to a rather lacklustre and inadequate interpretation. To solve this problem, Chinese scholars of opera and vocal performance started to publish manuals aimed at helping to master the pronunciation and semantics of European opera arias and songs. Among these, at least three entries are worth mentioning. The author of the first entry is Li Weibo, who translated seventy-two classical Italian arias into Chinese (word-to-word translation). This collection includes works by composers such as G.B. Bassani, P.P. Bencini and G. Caccini¹. Another publication is a selection of translations of the most important German art songs (*German Art Song Word-to-Word*). Authors Zhao Qingrun and Li Weibo are affiliated with the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing. However, these translations do not include pronunciation rules and explanations related to language specificity². Another item worth mentioning is *The opera arias series*. The author is Zhou Feng. The publication includes translations of the most famous opera arias from Italian, French, German, Russian and other languages into Chinese, so that Chinese

¹ 李维渤, 72 首古典意大利歌曲字对字译词, 中央音乐学院出版社, 北京 2007 (Lǐ Wéibó, 72 shǒu gǔdiǎn Yìdàlì gēqǔ zì duì zì yìcí, Zhōngyāng Yīnyuè Xuéyuàn Chūbǎnshè, Běijīng 2007) [W. Li, 72 Classical Italian Songs Word-to-Word Translation, Beijing Central Conservatory of Music Press, Beijing 2007].

² 赵庆润, 李维渤, 德国艺术歌曲字对字译词, 中央音乐学院出版社, 北京 2004 (Zhào Qīngrùn, Lǐ Wéibó, Déguó yìshù gēqǔ zì duì zì yìcí, Zhōngyāng Yīnyuè Xuéyuàn Chūbǎnshè, Běijīng 2004) [Q. Zhao, W. Li, German Art Song Word-to-Word Translation, Central Conservatory of Music Press, Beijing 2004].

singers can understand the general meaning of the lyrics.³ However, in China there is clearly a lack of books that explain linguistic matters related to the European vocal repertoire starting from the very basics. The authors of the series of translations presented in this review seem to be aware of this issue and therefore decide to create the series in question.

Content Evaluation

The very selection of original librettos of Italian operas requires great care and diligence. The series presents librettos of seven classical operas, the most important ones in the history of music, which have been performed for over one hundred years, e.g. *L'elisird'amore* premiered in Milan in 1832. It must be assumed that each libretto must have undergone many changes. As time passed, many versions having small differences were created. The choice of the master version to be translated was crucial. The style conventions used by the librettists has also undergone changes over the 150 years since the creation of the presented works. Hence, the translator, in order to produce a faithful translation, had to deal with numerous instances of linguistic devices from the 19th century, which are no longer used in contemporary language. Also, very frequently the librettos contain everyday language and its non-literary varieties. These include dialects, vocabulary and syntax typical for the language of a particular community. This was pointed out by Yining Sun, author of a review of this series which was published in the quarterly *Italica* (journal of the American Association of Teachers of Italian). As stated by Yining Sun:

In addition to providing thorough definitions and explanations for standard words and phrases, the editors also indicate when slang and allusions are used in the text⁴.

In the translation process, it is important to remember that the Chinese text must perfectly match the original Italian text. Such an approach goes beyond the standard framework of literary translation. This is because one must recognise that the source material cannot be considered a strictly a work of literature. It is rather the fruit of a specific combination of literary, stage, and music

³ 周枫, *外国歌剧选曲集*, 上海音乐出版社, 上海 1994 (Zhōu Feng, *Wàiguó gējù xuǎnqūjí*, Shànghǎi Yīnyuè Chūbǎnshè, Shànghǎi 1994) [F. Zhou. *The opera arias series*, Shanghai Music Publishing House, Shanghai 1994].

⁴ Y. Sun, *Stella Guo Chen and Carlo Alberto Petrucci (translators and editors)*. Word-by-Word Explanation of Italian Opera Librettos in Chinese. *Volumes edited: G. Donizetti, F. Romani: „L'elisir d'amore”; G. Verdi, F.M. Piave: „La traviata”; G. Puccini, G. Giacosa, L. Illica: „La bohème”; P. Mas-cagni, G. Targioni-Tozzetti, G. Menasci: „Cavalleria rusticana”; R. Leoncavallo: „Pagliacci”, Wrocław: Amazon, 2021, „Italika” 2021, Vol. 98, no 4, (winter, published by American Association of Teachers of Italian), pp. 993–995.*

matter. To produce a faithful translation, it must be as close as possible to the Italian original. This does not only mean being correct semantically. It is also essential to consider and explain the rhetorical and expressive aspects of the language. A translation which is only literal and does not take into account neither the character and specificity of the language nor the context of the plot, will not meet the requirement of communicating them to the Chinese audience. Guo Chen and Carlo Alberto Petruzzi's professionalism and expertise provide a thorough response to these difficult challenges.

Practical Aspect

The authors of the series took into account numerous aspects to create a useful tool for Chinese vocal performers. They provided translations specifically for opera artists who wish to fully understand the content and meaning of a given opera libretto. As a consequence, a common structure for the entire was created. Each volume is divided into three parts: *Overview of the Work*, *Introduction to the Plot* and *Translation of the Libretto*.

Overview of the Work is an introduction to a given opera. It presents its origins and its authors: the composer and the librettist. It also indicates the literary sources of the libretto. The *Introduction to the Plot* part contains a short overview of the plot and describes individual acts and scenes. This part describes the most important storylines and the main characters. It allows the reader to better understand their character traits and motivations. The *Translation of the Libretto* part contains a word-by-word translation of individual opera librettos.

When writing a review of a series of translations of opera librettos, it is impossible to avoid a more general reflection on the phenomenon of the literary text in a vocal work. It is a complex matter. The authors of the reviews, according to their professional experience, see them mainly within the context of vocal performance and instruction. The co-author of this review, Jinhua Yang, discusses this topic in her doctoral dissertation. She writes as follows:

The text allows us to imagine a sketch of musical images contained in a given work. We combine the unity of the words of a musical piece with all the emerging moods within it, which work together to form the image of the composition. In both Chinese songs and foreign works, the beautiful poetic lyrics combined with the melody allow the audience and the performer to truly experience all the emotions contained in the song and take a step towards mastering and understanding it⁵.

⁵ J. Yang, *Zastosowanie i rozwój śpiewu koloraturowego w chińskich kompozycjach wokalnych na głos sopranowy w kontekście adaptacji dorobku europejskiej sztuki wokalne „bel canto”*, computer printout of the doctoral thesis written under the direction of prof. K. Suska-Zagórska, Krzysztof Penderecki Academy of Music in Krakow, Kraków 2022, p. 88.

Guo Chen and Carlo Alberto Petruzzi have an excellent understanding of the above-described way in which the text functions within a music work. Therefore, not only do they translate entire librettos “word by word”, but they also explain the pronunciation and usage of each word in terms of vocabulary, grammar and context. As an example of taking a thorough, multifaceted approach towards a single word in the translation process, it is worth mentioning the word *brillar*, which appears in Violetta's recitative in Act I of the opera *La Traviata*⁶. The word *brillar* is an abbreviated form of the word *brillare*, which means “to shine”. However, in relation to the form of *brillar*, the translators propose an explanation: “make the party more enjoyable”, “fantastic”, such that everyone has an excellent time. The author translated the word taking into account both its etymology and the specific situational context. Apart from explanations related to the words, we also find practical suggestions concerning stage movement and mental qualities of the characters. Thanks to that, we can correctly understand the intentions of the person who utters the given line.

As the cradle of opera, Italy was the birthplace of many great works. In fact, Italian operas are in a way a “musical essence” of the Italian language. They capture the beauty of the language along with its prosodic features. They fully display its extraordinary expressiveness. The famous vocal teacher Giovanni Battista Lamperti appreciated the unique qualities of the Italian language in the following passage:

Language and Song rarely go hand in hand. The Italian language is the chief exception to this rule, being the one best adapted for artistic song on account of its wealth of vowels and lack of aspirates⁷.

For singers who have little or no exposure to the Italian language, one of the first important problems is to improve their pronunciation. In the series of books in question, the authors explain the Italian language by translating it into Chinese characters. In addition, they provide a descriptive presentation of Italian pronunciation. Nevertheless, we believe it would be useful to supplement the publications with a phonetics tutorial. This would certainly be very interesting and useful for Chinese vocal students.

It is important to mention that the series by Stella Guo Chen and A. Petruzzi serves yet another purpose. In addition to the main purpose discussed above, it also contributes to building a bridge between two very different cultures, Chinese and European, and it does it in the most practical sense.

To conclude these considerations, it is worth mentioning that the encounter with the discussed series of books made one of the authors of this review,

⁶ G. Verdi, F.M. Piave, 《茶花女》 *La traviata*: 字对字精准解析, edited by Guo Chen and Carlo Alberto Petruzzi, Wrocław 2021, p. 25.

⁷ G.B. Lamperti, *The Technics of Bel Canto*, G. Schirmer, Inc, New York 1905, p. 29.

a representative of Chinese vocal studies and pedagogy, realise that it could have a direct impact on the education of Chinese singers. The groundbreaking significance of this cycle is that it establishes a benchmark for practical activities. It shows how to practice the art of Western opera, and how to boldly confront linguistic problems. Chinese practitioners should adopt a realistic and pragmatic approach towards linguistic matters in opera singing. In addition, there is an urgent need to create more “educational and exploratory tools” which would include other classical operas.

In the current context of global diversification of vocal art, building an original “Chinese vocal school” must comply with the needs of the moment. This process should not only focus on the development of folk music, but also on learning from the Western vocal arts to develop own artistic qualities. Becoming familiar with the series of translations of librettos of classical European opera works presented in this article allows us to gain a deeper understanding of their specific characteristics, especially in terms of libretto composition and language use. Such knowledge can be relevant to the development of the vocal arts in China as well.

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