Interview with Peter Low[1]

Lauro Meller and Daniel Padilha Pacheco da Costa*

Peter Low is a Senior Fellow at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch (New Zealand) and his fields of research are Translation Theory and French Poetry and Song. Both as a translator and as an academic researcher, he is one of the leading specialists in song translation. Faced with the challenge of producing singable translations, and based on his own background as a lecturer of French at the University of Canterbury and as a trained pianist, he devised an original method which he calls the "Pentathlon Principle".

In his book *Translating Song*: *lyrics and texts*[2] (2017), Peter Low tends towards the notion that song lyrics should usually be translated in a way that they could be sung over the original melody – what he calls "singable translation". Although this sounds almost impossible, thousands of songs are translated – often well translated – all over the world. Many of them are in fact so well worded that listeners do not even suspect these songs were originally sung in a different language. Here is the interview we've done with Peter Low.[3]

Lauro Meller (LM): Dr Low, please tell us a little bit about your academic background and how you got involved with Translation Studies.

Peter Low (PL): After studying in New Zealand and France, I got a university job teaching French language and literature. One writer whose works I taught was Prévert, and to me his popular poems and texts seemed to demand to be translated into natural English, so I worked on them. Later I saw a need to teach students to approach translation as a specific skill (a craft, sometimes an art). So I developed a course on French-English translation. That was in the 1990s. I also read a lot of translation theory, which later made it possible to teach translation to students working in other languages. There are general principles, and above all there are general questions the translator ought to think about.

LM: Besides being a reference in Translation Studies, notably singable translations, you also worked as a translator. Could you tell us a little about the songs or genres you translated?

PL: I had a job as an academic; so translating was an extra thing, and I was seldom paid for it. I often translated non-literary prose texts, even a book about depleted uranium. I never did interpreting or subtitling, almost never. But surtitling, yes, I provided surtitles for several French and Italian operas. Poetry didn't scare me (perhaps it should have!). I collaborated recently on translations of the poet Évariste de Parny[4]. I often did what I call "recital translations": non-singable versions of French poems and song-lyrics intended to be printed in concert programmes or CD inserts where the song is sung in the original. But that is a different genre – certainly a different *skopos* – from "singable translations" which are intended for performance in the target language. I guess it was my various articles about song-translating that led to an invitation to write a book on the subject.

Daniel P. P. da Costa (DC): You said you translated poetry before you started translating songs. Many problems discussed in literary translation aren't excluded from song translation. What are the differences between literary and song translations?

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[4] See PARNY, 2018.

PL: One translates a poem for the printed page, and sometimes for recitation. But a song-lyric is one component in the hybrid art-form called song. That *skopos* dictates the greater importance of sounds and rhythms and the absolute need for singability.

DC: You have surtitled six French and Italian operas. You have also written about surtitling or subtitling opera on screens both in articles[5] and in the chapter called "Translations to read" of your book[6]. What are the main difficulties of this specific task?

PL: The common issues of meaning and naturalness, plus a concern for good communication in the particular *skopos* situation – but fewer difficulties than with singable translations.

DC: Since the beginning of the Romantic movement until now, translated opera has been strongly undervalued in Brazil, in spite of some remarkable advocates, as the modernist writer and musicologist Mário de Andrade[7]. But Italian operas have been often sung in translation not only in Brazil, but also in Germany, France and English-speaking countries. "Nowadays, however", as you state in your book, "most translations of opera are done not for singing but for reading on surtitle or subtitle screens" (LOW, 2017, p. 7). Why aren't there more performances of translated opera? Is this the reason why your theory doesn't deal much with singable translations of operas or musicals? Would you draw the main differences between singable translations of operas and musicals and singable translations of songs?

PL: The Italians invented opera, and their language, with few vowels and few closed syllables, is wonderful for singing. The decision to use translations lies mostly with the directors, who can usually understand the

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[5] See LOW, 2002.
[6] See LOW, 2017, p. 40-62.
[7] See KAISER, 1999.

Italian words. But there is a good case for presenting the story in a language that the audience can follow. To me, the best discussion of translating opera is in the book *Translating for Singing*, by Apter and Herman[8]. But my book makes a good point: "In operas and musicals every song needs to cohere with the extended stage-work that it belongs to, a need not covered by my five criteria" (LOW, 2017, p. 110). The TT should play its intended role in a complex storyline, and in the fictional character's emotional world. These considerations are likely to lead to more compromises, to greater flexibility with literal meaning.

DC: I'd like to ask you about the criteria behind the choice of ST (source text) in song translation. Many interpreters (for example, Ella Fitzgerald) improvise in many ways, including with the lyrics of the songs, modifying them or adding stanzas. There are often significant changes between one performance and another in the several recordings of American jazz standards. We observe the same phenomenon in Brazilian music. The composer Noel Rosa is an example of it: depending on the recording, the lyrics can vary substantially. How do you choose the original lyrics used in the translation? What criteria do you use to determine the ST of the songs you translate?

PL: I usually choose a published text, presumably authorised by the songwriter. But when there are various recorded versions, translators may follow their own preferences.

LM: In one passage of the book you ponder whether songs should be performed in the language of the public or not. To give you a Brazilian example, singer-songwriter Caetano Veloso has launched many songs – even full albums – singing in languages other than Portuguese: English, Spanish, Italian, French. Who do you think would be the presumed public of such recordings?

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[8] See APTER and HERMAN, 2016.

PL: My view is that if a song is performed in the language of the audience, the hearers and singers have a different experience. If I hear a song sung in Russian, then I might enjoy it because of Tchaikovsky's romantic melody – but there is a whole verbal dimension of the song that I am missing, it might as well be performed on a violin. My book does not contend that songs ought to be *always* performed in translation, but it refuses the opposite – which is the pretension that every song should be sung in its original language whether the audience understands it or not – which is the approach that sometimes seems to happen. I do know that some top opera composers wanted the language of the audience. Puccini said he wanted it in French for Paris. Wagner wanted his operas in French for Paris. If you're hearing the voices in a foreign language, you are missing part of the meaning of the work, the verbal dimension.

DC: At the end of the second chapter of your book, you say: "It is likely that some songs – a small minority – are impossible to translate at all well, for reasons that are linguistic, cultural or both" (LOW, 2017, p. 38). Have you ever given up translating a song because of its "untranslatability"? From your experience, do you consider some songs should not be translated, but left untranslated?

PL: I once gave up on a song of Brassens. I even mention a song of Perret as being untranslatable. Some texts are too embedded in the source language and culture. Some are too exquisite to touch. And then there are verbally weak texts which don't merit attention.

LM: When you mention "songs that don't merit attention", would that be the opposite of "songs with staying power", as Malcolm McNeill [a jazz singer in Christchurch] puts it?

PL: Malcolm would record songs of Hoagy Carmichael because he thought that these songs had staying power in time, i.e., they could be good songs in different times, in different cultures, whereas some pop songs you hear are very much throwaway – they're only gonna be popular for a while, and then

they disappear. I think "staying power" implies a quality and a merit that will give durability to this song. So, you wouldn't have a political song from this last election, because that wouldn't have staying power. You know, as well as I, that it is a hard job to do a good translation of a song, a singable translation. Therefore, you don't want to spend your time on something that will be easily forgotten.

LM: Aren't we here talking about the canon? I know this may sound impressionistic, but at the end of the day there are good songs and bad songs, aren't there?

PL: Of course there are! Subjectively I can say that "Summertime" is a good song because I like it; I can also say objectively that hundreds of people have thought that "Summertime" is a good song. It has been recorded dozens of times, it sticks in people's memories, and when you walk down the street and happen to be singing [hums the melody to "Summertime"] people will recognise it. There's objective evidence. You don't have to have to analyse the strange harmonies that Gershwin uses, you don't have to know the show *Porgy and Bess* from which it comes, the song has proven some sort of quality and merit – actually, whether you like it or not.

LM: But aren't there "bad songs" – and by that I mean without depth or originality – which nevertheless sell millions of copies and stick in people's minds over time? Couldn't these also be considered "songs with staying power"?

PL: For me "staying power" means something other than the fact that it got well-known. There's a Christmas song called "The little drummer boy" which I think is rubbish. It has been recorded and you could hear it in shopping malls and places like that. I have the prerogative of rejecting it from my canon of good songs, but I can't deny that it is well-known. And conversely, there are things from early European music which I think are wonderful – things like "Amarilli, mia Bella",⁹ which hardly anybody

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⁹ "Amarilli, mia Bella" (1601), music by Giulio Caccini and lyrics by Giovanni Battista Guarini.

knows, but which is an exquisite Italian song of the late 16th century. That's how things go. Popularity seems to bring popularity, but then staying power – I use a different phrase from my friend Malcolm: a good song is "a song that feeds me". A wonderful song of Schubert, or Fauré, or – I don't know – somebody from Italy. If I feel fed by that, in my heart and mind or both, then that's a good song.

DC: You've mentioned the opera *Porgy and Bess*,[10] in which the variations in the dialect of the characters play an important role in denoting racial and class divisions. In the second chapter of your book, when discussing the "Problems of non-standard language (dialect, sociolect, slang, colloquialisms)" (LOW, 2017, p. 28), you quote a well-known example of non-standard English in that opera: "I loves you". As a general rule, you apply to songs Newmark's advice of "'processing' only a small proportion of the SL dialect words" (NEWMARK, 1988, p. 95). Even following this "moderation principle" in the translation of non-standard language in songs, are there cases in which this problem should be left aside in favor of other things to attend to?

PL: Non-standard words are not uncommon in songs, and a TT can often handle that. But often they're unimportant and a translator can ignore them. But here (as often elsewhere) we need to ask the question: "Is this a significant feature of this particular ST, one which needs to be replicated for a true translation?" When Bob Dylan sings not "changing" but "a-changin'", I wouldn't bother to replicate that in another language, since to do so would detract from the aim of translating the song's core message.

LM: The *Pentathlon Principle* defines five criteria for translating songs. How did you arrive at the pentathlon metaphor? What was the inspiration for it?

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[10] *Porgy and Bess* (1935), music by George Gershwin and lyrics by Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward.

PL: Many classical songs (such as German Lieder) are printed with so-called "singable English versions". But most of these are mediocre or worse, and they are seldom actually used by singers. Some people even object to "singable translations" on principle. I felt that I could identify big strategic problems in the translators' approach – they failed to properly consider all the relevant criteria, which are usually five in number. In developing my own approach, chiefly to help me do better myself, I considered words like "juggling" and "trade-offs" before stumbling onto the "pentathlon" metaphor, which has the virtue of suggesting an "overall score for five events."[11]

LM: "Singability" is, in your own words, "relative ease of vocalisation". And you add that it should be "[...] the first criterion, because any target-text that scores poorly in this criterion is a failure, and would not be sung, or even pronounced, whatever its other virtues may be" (LOW, 2017, p. 82). By "first criterion" do you mean "priority number one", if compared to the other four criteria of the Pentathlon?

PL: Not number one in importance, but *sine qua non*, it's a criterion that has to be met at an adequate level, otherwise you're wasting your time. If the thing is not going to be performed because of the troubles in vocalising, because a translation into Polish contains the word such and such that can't be sung, even though it's spoken in Polish – Slavic languages seem to be worse than others – you should revise the translation so that it can be sung.

LM: Still according to you, the best people to assess if the singability is good are not the translators, but the singers themselves.

PL: Singers, or singing teachers, or choir masters – people who are really into that. Once a famous singer approached the translator and said: "I want a

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[11] By using this sporting metaphor, Low implies that the same way no athlete will excel in all five events, no translation will be 100% perfect. Then, some degree of commitment has to be made according to the difficulties and characteristics of each song: some of them will lean more heavily onto the rhythmic aspect, some on the rhymes, etc.

different vowel for that high note – can you give me a different vowel?". That seemed to be a totally reasonable choice [for the translator] and there may be reasons why the translator couldn't oblige, but she knew what she could sing well. Some languages have wonderful vowels all the way through: Italian is pretty good, Maori is pretty good, English has difficult vowels for high notes, words that shouldn't be sung on a high note, words like "the", which should never have a stress, because it is always a weak word, maybe the most common [word] in the language. English has a lot of diphthongs – a word like "today", with this /ei/ like that – that's not a bad vowel – but they can create problems in singing. Other languages like Italian have a very pure vowel and so you can sing it long – besides, that syllable will not usually have a consonant at the end, and that can create problems, perhaps more in English than in Portuguese.

LM: Should then song translators start off with the criterion of singability in mind? I believe some song translators might give extra importance to rhythm in the early stages of the translation (i.e., keeping the same number of syllables and the same stresses in both the ST and the TT), in order to make sure the "new" text can be sung over the original melody.

PL: I would say singability should be the first criterion for *evaluating* a song translation. That's not the first thing I work with. These five criteria I developed as I was actually doing a job of making singable translations. It was only after that that I considered they could be used for evaluating and comparing. In fact I wrote an article[12] in which I compared three translators of Schubert's songs – I tried to tally up how well they had managed with my pentathlon – and of course some were better than others and some were weaker. The reason why I put it first in the *evaluation* is that if the singability is poor, then you're wasting your time. That's all.

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[12] See LOW, 2008.

DC: Many song translations and operas sung in translations don't strictly respect the rhythmic patterns of the ST and, nevertheless, they are singable. How strict should the song and opera translator be about it?

PL: To me, rhythm of any translated line can be measured easily (though crudely): if the stresses fall well in the TL and the syllables match the SL, then I would say "rhythm 100%". But I often find that a little flexibility in syllable-count enables me to achieve a better overall result.

LM: You mention that rhymes are "[...] the easiest criterion to assess, and usually the least important" (LOW, 2017, p. 80). Is rhyming really so secondary?

PL: I accept that sometimes it is very important, but you can't say "this songwriter always places a great importance on rhymes," because any good songwriter will vary, and some might even make songs without rhymes or may be reluctant. One of my favourite songwriters, Tom Lehrer, does brilliant things with rhymes. He is an American Jew from New York, he wrote only about twenty songs, but all classic satirical songs. I wanted to include one in my book, but I couldn't get access to him or his agents, it was impossible, and then somebody said: "that is a piece of black humour, some of your audience won't like it." Here's the start: "I hold your hand in mine, dear / I press it to my lips / I take a healthy bite / From your dainty fingertips". [...].[13] Of course that's humorous, but how would you translate it? He also had a wonderful song where he had about twelve rhymes all ended in "-ality" – and then a song about the Periodic Table, which is a wonderful replacement text. One can't simply translate it without rhyme, because that's part of the whole point – You don't have a standard formula

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[13] The exact lyrics to the song "I hold your hand in mine" are as follows: "I hold your hand in mine, dear,/ I press it to my lips / I take a healthy bite / From your dainty fingertips / My joy would be complete, dear / If you were only here / But still I keep your hand / As a precious souvenir / The night you died I cut it off / I really don't know why / For now each time I kiss it / I get bloodstains on my tie / I'm sorry now I killed you / For our love was something fine / And till they come to get me / I shall hold your hand in mine". Retrieved from: https://genius.com/Tom-lehrer-i-hold-your-hand-in-mine-lyrics. Access on Oct 06, 2020.

to translate a song, you have to look closely at the song in question. In any case, my point is that sometimes the rhyme gives a *gusto*, an energy to a song and if you miss that, you'll lose the clinching effect of a rhyme at the end of a stanza, i.e., the final line of a group of four or six, where the instrumental interlude comes in – a clinch, as if you were shutting the door and you hear a click – and the rhyme gives that in verse. So that's a structural value, it tells you where the end of a section of the song is. And also probably at the end of a sentence, it's a grammatical thing. But it's clear to me that there are lots of vocal music that don't have rhymes, and that varies in different cultures: Maori music doesn't have rhymes, Latin songs, church songs didn't usually have rhymes.

LM: In contrast with the examples you have just mentioned, I would say rhymes are still relatively important in Brazilian Popular Music. Can we then conclude that the importance of rhymes in songs depends on the language?

PL: That's interesting – there is a cultural expectation, in Brazilian Portuguese, and it actually is in English there was as well, i.e., popular songs have to rhyme. It's no longer expected in English that poetry will ever rhyme, but in the past people would say "that's not a poem, it doesn't rhyme", I mean 200 years ago, and poets were given that status probably because they knew how to do rhyme. In French rhyming is particularly important because it provides some of the rhythm of a poem or song. It is not so important in English, and you can speak for Portuguese. I ask questions like: "Does my target text need to rhyme at all? Is rhyme essential?" And there are various reasons why it might be. Rhymes will make the song more memorable, more euphonic, perhaps more punchy. I think a lot of witty songs are quite like Tom Lehrer – he's partly driven by rhymes, and if you don't rhyme at least half as much your version is going to lose that punch. Now, this means of course that you are deciding to use rhyme at the expense of some meaning – and that's what this chapter here[14] is talking about. I have a defence here on

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[14] See chapter 6 – "Singable translations (B) – rhythm and rhyme" in *Translating Song* (LOW, 2017, p. 95-113).

page 104 of a translation of a Shakespeare song by Schubert, because the word "Kindheit" doesn't mean "kindness", it means "childhood" – but it rhymes perfectly and it fits well enough in my opinion, even though it looks like a mistake. Above that, I've got this important claim: I will stick to a margin of flexibility – the rhymes won't have to be as numerous or as perfect as in the source. The original rhymes may not be observed. If there are, say, eighteen French words rhyming with "amour", that's a sort of virtuoso thing, I can't do this is English, you might be able to do it in some languages, but I will try to get a lot of the rhyming, and if I end up with half the lines unrhymed, maybe that doesn't matter provided the clinching rhymes at the end can give us that particular satisfaction.

LM: Talking about the differences between translations, adaptations and replacement texts,[15] you defend the view that the latter should not be the object of Translation Studies.

PL: Yes. As regards meaning, and although I claim to be an adept of the fidelity paradigm, I agree that some licences can be taken in favour of some other aspect that is more important – but not to the point where translations become adaptations (not to mention replacement texts – which, although a legitimate cultural phenomenon, do not lie within the scope of Translation Studies). Once I had an argument with some academics in Britain about that. I said, "No translating is taking place here, therefore they're not a proper object for Translation Studies". I am not denying the cultural importance of that – and in fact a good song like "Lili Marlene", which has been replaced by many texts. In fact, I'm pretty sure the New Zealand soldiers who marched during the War were singing a replacement text on the tune of "Lili Marlene" – it was not a translation, it was a vulgar anti-German song.

LM: Some authors distinguish translations from adaptations in terms of percentages – texts with a high percentage of sense fidelity between source language and target language would classify as translations, whereas

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[15] See chapter 7 – "The place of adaptations", in *Translating Song* (LOW, 2017, p. 114-127).

those that take too many liberties would be deemed as adaptations. What's your take on that?

PL: I don't take that approach. My approach is this: "If all significant details of meaning have been transferred, it is a translation" (LOW, 2017, p. 116) – and the word significant, of course this is a matter of opinion. But in order to say that this is not a translation, I would have to say, "this reference to her mother's death has been omitted, and that's a significant point, therefore this is an arrangement, an adaptation". In this definition of an adaptation, I've said "some significant details have not been transferred", with the extra proviso, "which easily could have been". I'll take an example from famous French song by Jacques Brel, "Ne me quitte pas". It is significant to me that that is an imperative – "don't leave me". And when the American translator translated it as "If you go away", there was a significant part of the utterance that has been lost. It became a conditional – it assumed that the woman was thinking of going away, but hadn't gone away yet. In order though to prove that this is a mere adaptation, I have to say that you could have easily started with "Don't walk out on me", "Don't leave me", "Don't abandon me". That could have easily been done, and so the other was an unforced deviation, addition or modification. It was a good, successful song in English, but the litmus test was to compare the actual wording. The adaptation has wilfully modified the source text, and the translation has not wilfully modified it. It might have reluctantly or accidentally modified it, of course.

I'm not talking about things like "oh, the word order was changed" – of course the word order was changed, this is a different language! I'm not saying things like, "Oh look, the source text has three words beginning with a 'z', and the target text has only one" – well, hang on, are these three words beginning with a 'z' actually significant as part of the source? And they probably aren't. I've got an example on the next page[16], which is "Frère Jacques". There is a replacement text at the end of the page that goes [he sings to the melody of "Frère Jacques"] "In the forest / In the forest / There are trees / There are trees / Johnny saw a squirrel / Johnny saw a squirrel /

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[16] See LOW, 2017, p. 117.

And some bees / And some bees". That's not a translation – it's a replacement text! I do take liberties with insignificant details in my versions, and I will still call them translations. And if you want to prove I have made a bad translation, you'll have to show that it could have easily been improved. That's pragmatic. But we are not working with perfection here.

But one aspect I don't really cover is that a solo song is often created as a vehicle for a performer to add value to sell it to the audience. Of course, some bad songs get sold so well by a good performer that they become famous. But if you have a translation that your singer doesn't feel able to sell, then you'll have to do better, I think. I know with some translations you sit down with a short story and translate it all on the computer by yourself – but songs are a different matter, there are different people involved, the stakeholders, including of course the performers and the listeners.

I've got a lovely example of an old German song about the woman who gets flea bites. If you sing it in German to an audience who doesn't know German, they are not going to get it, are they? [Sings a fragment of the song in German] – it sounds like German, that's all! [laughs]. [Quoting from his book:] "The notion of 'unforced deviation' excludes normal changes in word-order, or the other standard procedures outlined in textbooks and used regularly by good translators, such as those termed 'transposition' and 'modulation'" (LOW, 2017, p. 116). There is a nice case in English: you don't translate "Village vert" as "Village Green", you translate it as "Green Village" – because a "Village Green", in England, is a strip of grass that is used for the marketplace or for playing cricket on Saturdays – that's the "village green". And of course the word order tells you – in English – the second word is the noun, and the first one is the adjective.

DC: We are reaching the end of the interview. Could you give us your input on the evolution of song translation since you started working and researching it?

PL: I think with novels and short stories that translation theory has improved the quality of what is published. With song-translation I don't see that yet –

indeed I see a confusion of adaptations, good translations, and replacement texts which are not translations at all.

DC: What advice do you have for someone attempting a singable translation?

PL: Recognise that some features of the song will be lost in translation. So examine carefully what the songwriter was *doing* in this particular song, and identify *which* of its features are the most important to retain. This analysis will help you to make the necessary trade-offs in the optimal way. And read p. 109 of my book!

DC: Everything considered, would you like to compose a "coda" for the interview?

PL: My hope is that we the translators of songs can increasingly see our role as making people aware of the artistic output of other languages and cultures – and not (as has often happened) as appropriating, adapting and exploiting their creativity for our own ends.

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