

# Translating without the tools of the trade

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**Abstract:** Both the general translator and specialist, on the one hand, and the writer in a language other than his own, on the other, need the basic tools of the trade, a range of comprehensive, reliable dictionaries. For translating between Portuguese and English the currently available dictionaries, both general and specialised, are limited in their usefulness. This paper explores these weaknesses above all with regard to translating texts on various aspects of 'classical' music, and proposes ways forward.

Key words: translation, music, dictionary

## Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years, during which I have pursued, in parallel, the two professions of teaching English and being a musicologist, specialising particularly in aspects of the history of music in Portugal, these two essentially distinct areas have come increasingly together in the translations into English I have been asked to do by Portuguese musical and musicological colleagues, and the texts I have found myself writing in Portuguese. For although translation and writing in another language differ in terms of the origin of the content – an existing text in the case of translation, the mind of the writer in the case of writing – they share a good deal. If writing is a creative process, translation also demands a degree of creativity. More particularly, they are both dependent on the same kinds of tools: dictionaries and other reference works. And although it has grown easier, as I have gained in knowledge and experience, these tools have been a constant source of frustration, as well as support.

In this paper I would like to analyse and thereby share some of these frustrations, and although my examples will be taken largely from the world of music, the approach I have chosen is deliberately designed so that it may be generalised to other very different fields of knowledge. The analysis will be followed by a proposal for remedy.

## The frustrations

For music, as with a number of other areas, there is a specialised dictionary, in this instance the *Dicionário de Termos Musicais*, by Henrique de Oliveira Marques, published

by Editorial Estampa in 1984. This dictionary is one in a tradition of polyglot dictionaries in the field, its most notable predecessor being the *Terminorum Musicae Index Septem Linguis Redactus*, jointly published in 1978 by the Association Internationale des Bibliothèques Musicales and the Société Internationale de Musicologie, at Budapest, Kassel, Basel, Tours and London. The Oliveira Marques dictionary provides equivalent terms for Portuguese, English, French, German and Italian, with a glossary of many of the terms in all five languages. It stands as a monument to patience and dedication, and all Portuguese musicians who need terms in these languages would be desperate without it. The faults in it I would identify, therefore, should be seen entirely in terms of improvement to an already solid work. The points, however, are worth making because they involve broader principles that apply in any field.

I would identify the following main areas as needing consideration:

1. inclusion and omission;
2. imprecision;
3. language issues.

The decision as to what to include or omit in a specialist dictionary depends very much on the parameters that the field itself defines for itself. In the case of music, it includes all the language required to describe music in analytical terms, the graphology of music, the instruments and their taxonomy, voices, genres, and so on. These kinds of things are obvious. But it requires more. Sacred music, for example, is intrinsically tied up with liturgy, so this must also be included. In broad terms Oliveira Marques is to be praised for his good sense in the coverage of these areas. He will tell you, for instance, that *forma sonata* and *sonata form* are equivalent, as are *armação* and *key signature*, *fagote* and *bassoon*, *someiro* and *windchest* (part of an organ), *meio-soprano* and *mezzo-soprano*, *ladainha* and *litany*. For most musicians and translators, most of the time, then, here is the answer.

There are, however, questions I would take issue with. First is an area that the author went to some pains to include: the equivalents of organ stops or registers. This is extremely problematic, because although the principles involved in organ building are universal, the existence of national schools leads to considerable diversity in traditional conception and construction. The proportions of different types of stops also vary from country to country in a kind of vicious circle of collusion between organists, composers and builders. The result is that the instruments in England, France, Germany, Italy and the Iberian Peninsula, and the repertoire for which they were designed, each have distinct characteristics. At the level of the individual stop, although equivalent in

conceptual terms, the sound of a *Flautado aberto* on a Portuguese organ, for example, and an *Open Diapason* on an English one is not quite the same, the Portuguese stop having typically a fuller, more rounded sound than its English equivalent. In actual fact, stop names should simply not be translated, a policy I found myself in happy agreement on recently, when I was asked to translate a book on the organs of Madeira.<sup>1</sup> The author, like me, being an organist, was well aware of the problem.

On the other hand, there are a number of noticeable omissions. These result essentially from variants of a single question. What exactly is the dictionary's scope? For example, though Oliveira Marques includes *composição* and *composition*, as well as the near synonyms *peça* and *piece*, for some strange reason *obra* and *work* are omitted. General though these words are, and to be found in even the worst general dictionary, they do form part of the normal musical vocabulary. At the other extreme, many more detailed technical terms are missing, just by way of example: *nota antecipada* and *anticipatory note*, *word-painting*, where Portuguese uses the English term, and all but the most basic taxonomy of instruments. Anyone translating a text involving harpsichord construction would be at a complete loss, as indeed happened to me a number of years ago.<sup>2</sup> Then the dictionary is of no use and the only solution is to find texts in both languages and try to match them, not always an easy task even now when the internet is able in part to compensate for the woeful deficiencies of this country's libraries.

Another area where the scope of the Oliveira Marques dictionary is limited is in terms of historical time, the extent to which it takes into account changes in usage over time. To take a simple example, two hundred years ago the *clarinet* was generally known in Portugal not as *clarinete*, but as *clarino* (using the Italian) or *clarim*, but the only English equivalent he gives for these two words is *military trumpet*, not even the cognate *clarion*, which is indeed a type of trumpet, equivalent in some contexts. There is no mention of *clarinet* at all.

Coming back to the present, obviously, coinages since the dictionary was published are not to be found in it. Two years ago I was asked to translate a text analysing some motets by the seventeenth-century Portuguese composer Frei Manuel Cardoso.<sup>3</sup> The author had taken a certain amount of new terminology from a recent text

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard Doderer, *Organs in Madeira*, in preparation.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Doderer (ed.), *Libro di Tocate Per Cembalo – Scarlatti*, facsimile edition, Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica, Lisbon, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> João Pedro d'Alvarenga, "Para uma compreensão da polifonia portuguesa pós-tridentina, a propósito dos motetos de Fr. Manuel Cardoso," in *Estudos de Musicologia*, Edições Colibri/Centro de História da Arte, Universidade de Évora, Lisbon, 2002.

in English<sup>4</sup> and had converted the terms into Portuguese. On the one hand, no dictionary could help me on these and, on the other, I couldn't just invent new English equivalents, as the author had done for Portuguese, but had to obtain the original English text and use the terms employed there.

But there is one area of omission I find especially striking, and common to dictionaries in general till very recently: the omission of all proper nouns. In general terms, but also affecting texts related to music, there are all the place names and names of institutions. Capital cities and major international organisations can be found with relative ease, but how is one supposed to guess, for example, that the Italian city of Livorno is known in Portuguese as *Leorne* and in English, of all things, as *Leghorn*? Certainly no dictionary will tell you. Another case is Saints' names and corresponding institutions. What dictionary will tell you that the celebrated Roman basilica of S. Giovanni in Laterano is known in Portuguese as *S. João Latrão* and in English as *St. John Lateran*?

Returning to music is the specific problem of the titles of works. Many translate easily enough, but others are not so straightforward. Apart from the need simply to know that in English you say *The Marriage of Figaro*, not *Figaro's Marriage* or *Wedding* and in Portuguese it is *As Bodas*, rather than *O Casamento, de Figaro*, what about *A Noiva Vendida*, which in English is rendered not as *The Sold Bride*, but *The Bartered Bride*, using a lexical item rarely used outside this context? You would have to know the plot to guess that Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* and *O Navio Fantasma* are equivalent. In films, of course, the problem is often far worse. And leaving operas, I will never forget the time when a colleague, who was a professional translator, called me in desperation about *O Cravo Bem Temperado*. He had fortunately realised that an English translation based on cloves (*cravinhos*) and seasoning (*temperos*) was unlikely to fit the bill, but nowhere could he find Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*. The fact is, however, that musicians and translators of musical texts need a ready reference tool to find the equivalents for titles of works.

Let me move on to the problem of imprecision. The Oliveira Marques dictionary unsurprisingly gives the equivalent names for the notes of the scale, but it fails to take things one stage further, for example, by giving *dó central* and the English equivalent, *middle C*, a common term that the non-specialist would not easily guess. Nor does it

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<sup>4</sup> Dolores Pesce (ed.), *Hearing the Motet, Essays on the Motet of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997; particularly Joshua Rifkin's essay "Miracles, Motivicity, and Mannerism: Adrian Willaert's *Videns Dominus flentes sorores Lazari* and Some Aspects of Motet Composition in the 1520s".

make any reference to the different national systems of indicating which octave a note belongs to, in Portuguese by numbering the octaves with digits, in English by a distinction between capital and lower-case letters and the addition of apostrophes. Another case of not extending a term to its logical conclusion is the Portuguese word *parte*, where the dictionary distinguishes carefully between the senses of 'section', 'role' and 'the number of instrumental or vocal parts a work is written for', providing the equivalents for each in the other languages. However, the common, more precise term *parte cava*, used in Portuguese to refer to a written part for an individual instrument or voice is missing.

There is also imprecision of other kinds. *Dissonância* in Portuguese is given two equivalents in English, *discord* and *dissonance*, without, however, making any kind of distinction between them. Yet there is a difference, at least in terms of register, if not exactly in terms of meaning, namely that *discord* is a word used in common parlance, while a technical analysis of a piece of music would talk in terms of the frequency and use of *dissonance*, how the *dissonances* are prepared and resolved, and so on.

Some years ago I found myself having to criticise in a review a very good piece of research on the Portuguese salon songs known as *modinhas*, because of its poor English translation.<sup>5</sup> Apart from grammatical incorrectness, what offended me particularly was the use of the word *pianoforte*. Let me explain that *pianoforte* in English is the, if you like 'official' name for what is more typically just called a *piano*, that is to say the modern instrument found everywhere from concert halls and music schools to bars and private homes. In Portuguese, however, these two terms are not synonymous. While *piano* is always used to designate the familiar instrument, *pianoforte* refers to its predecessor, what in English is known as the *fortepiano*, borrowing the Italian term, and commonly known in eighteenth-century Portuguese as *cravo de martelos*. Thus when *pianoforte* in the original Portuguese text was left unchanged in the English version, something for which the Oliveira Marques dictionary may well have been responsible, since it fails to make the necessary distinction, the English-speaking reader would be led to believe that these songs were accompanied at a remarkably early date by modern pianos, instead of the more restrained, more 'twangy' sound of the *fortepiano*.

So I come now to the third area of frustration, what I have designated as 'language issues'. This is the point where I begin to think less as a musicologist and more as a

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<sup>5</sup>The work in question was *Maria João Durães Albuquerque* (ed.), *Jornal de Modinhas Ano I*, facsimile edition, Ministério da Cultura/Instituto da Biblioteca Nacional e do Livro, Lisbon, 1996. The review appeared in *Revista Portuguesa de Musicologia*, Nos. 7-8, Associação Portuguesa de Ciências Musicais, Lisbon, 1997/98, pp. 211-12.

language teacher. Have you noticed how up till now every term I have referred to was some kind of noun? What about all the other parts of speech? Oliveira Marques deserves praise for actually going so far as to indicate the part of speech for each entry. Nevertheless, there are very, very few adjectives or verbs to be found. The lack of attention paid to these other parts of speech may, in part, account, for example, for the very poor way in which his dictionary deals with adjectives to do with tuning. For equivalents of the Portuguese *desafinado*, for example, he gives *out-of-tune* and *mistuned*, the first of which is often a good equivalent, the second only very limited in its use, a difference that the dictionary once again fails to explain. But where are the adjectives *sharp* and *flat*, which a choir director or conductor would commonly use to describe what was wrong with a note, and the verbs *sharpen* and *flatten* which is what the musicians would need to do to the notes to put them right?

I wonder too if the absence of the adjective *stepwise* when describing a melody as 'falling/rising in stepwise motion' has more to do with its being an adjective than its being too technical a term. It was my students who taught me that in Portuguese you say that the melody 'desce/sobe por graus conjuntos'. No dictionary could tell me this. You will notice too, in this context that the Portuguese equivalent of *fall* is not *cair* but *descer* and of *rise* is not *levantar-se* but *subir*. This collocational, semi-technical language is lost between the general dictionary and the technical. In my experience, all the existing bilingual Portuguese and English dictionaries are particularly poor at providing context and collocation, even if the recent Verbo dictionaries begin to take this problem more seriously.<sup>6</sup>

### A proposal for remedy

Henrique de Oliveira Marques, in the Author's Note that prefaces his dictionary, tells us how he began simply by preparing, for his own use, parallel lists in Portuguese and English, and how, under pressure from potential publishers, this bilingual word-list was extended to include the other languages. Given how important French, German and Italian are in the world of music, this makes entirely good sense. It does mean, however, that attention gets divided, and it limits the scope and size of entries if the volume is not to reach impossible proportions. In my view, and I would hasten to add that a number of musicological colleagues I have spoken to recently share this view, English, over the last

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<sup>6</sup>João Bigotte Chorão (director), *Dicionário de Português-Inglês*, Editorial Verbo, s.l., 2000; Dicionário Verbo Oxford: Inglês-Português, 2nd edition, Verbo, s.l., 2003 (based on an earlier edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997).

twenty years, has come to have such an overwhelming importance in the field that a detailed, comprehensive bilingual Portuguese and English musicological dictionary has come to be essential. The present omissions have to be supplied, the dubious inclusions removed, and the imprecisions clarified. Proper attention must also be given to linguistic questions: due importance given to all parts of speech, to collocation and to context. This means taking into account not only musicological texts, especially those that exist in both languages, but also the outstanding work being done in monolingual lexicography through the use of language corpora, the full impact of which has yet to be felt in the currently available bilingual Portuguese and English dictionaries. Similarly, the increased recognition in monolingual lexicography that proper nouns cannot be ignored, doubtless led by the dictionaries of language and culture for learners of English,<sup>7</sup> has profound implications for bilingual lexicography.

All this is true of musicology, and I have very much the impression that it is scarcely less so in most other fields, even in the language of more general use.

It is perhaps a truism to say that while a dictionary may be finished, in terms of its being ready for print, it is never complete. With modern technology and the possibility of on-line dictionaries, this paradigm changes. The dictionary is never finished and gains constantly in completeness.

Aware as I am of what is required, I leave you to guess how I expect to be spending much of my time over the next few years.

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<sup>7</sup> The pioneer in this shift of paradigm was the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture, first published in 1992, and now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.