

The play's the thing, so leave the words alone

Our theatre is amongst the best in the world, but prone to cheap, jarring adaptations. Classical texts, like music, should be respected

BY JONATHAN GAISMAN

British people are living through troubled times, but when it comes to the performing arts, they can still hold up their heads. In the realms of canonical theatre and classical music in particular, our cultural centres are among the leaders in the field. But there is a striking and perhaps widening difference in the respective conventions which govern the way in which these two genres are presented; and this difference raises aesthetic questions of importance to both.

Let's start with Büchner's unfinished play *Woyzeck*. This is an extraordinary piece. He wrote it in the last months of a life which lasted for little more than 23 years. Although the fragmentary and episodic text covers only 25 pages, it is huge in scope and subject-matter. It is almost impossible to believe that it was written (in 1836-37) hard on the heels of Goethe's death; it seems to belong to quite another age. The play expresses social and existential themes that more naturally belong in the 20th century, but if it anticipates Samuel Beckett, it also looks back to *King Lear*: *Woyzeck* inhabits the deranged and anarchic world into which that greatest of plays disintegrates in acts III and IV. It is unquestionably a masterpiece.

So when it was announced last year that a new production was to be staged at the Old Vic, aficionados sped to the box office. Unfortunately, they were wasting their time and money. An early sign that all was not well came with the announcement that this was to be a "new version" of Büchner's play. This is a formulation which one has learned to treat with circumspection. In the programme, the play's adapter, Jack Thorne, expressed the desire to create a version—of this most approachable and timeless of plays—which would be accessible to a new audience. The theatre's website spoke of breathing fresh life into "one of the most extraordinary plays ever written", apparently oblivious to the fact that if *Woyzeck* merited that description (as it does), it was in no need of emergency resuscitation.

It is enough to say that what was put on stage was an almost unrecognisable travesty, which appeared entirely to subvert the purposes of the original, as well as profaning its luminous beauty. This was not a case of a writer using another person's work or an existing source as a point of departure to create an original art work of his own. In such a case, the later creation is independent, and seeks to be judged on its own merits. It may be a vast and poetic expansion of the source text, as with *The Winter's Tale*. It may be a reworking of a mythological theme, as with the many iterations of the Faust legend. Or it may be a consciously inferior tribute, as with P.D. James's *Death Comes to Pemberley*. There are many such instances, and they are in principle legitimate. By contrast, what the Old Vic unequival-

ently announced was a new version of Büchner's play. What was actually offered wasn't Büchner at all; it was a desecration.

If Thorne's *Woyzeck* was an extreme case, it is not an isolated one. Adaptations and translations seem particularly prone to theatrical insensitivity or other misguided disregard for the playwright's intentions. Another recent "new version"—of Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* at the Donmar Warehouse—critically undermined a generally excellent production with the baffling introduction of textual material which sought to make Donald Trump a co-villain alongside this closely-plotted play's original targets, Hitler and the Nazis.

This is of course not a criticism of modern productions as such: many are excellent, and though it is in the nature of experimentation that some must fail, a strong play can always prevail against and often be enhanced by a radical interpretation. While *Ui* was playing in Covent Garden, another Brecht piece, *The Life of Galileo*, was on at the Young Vic. Although unconventionally staged, the text itself was essentially respected, and a fine work triumphed as a consequence. It is lack of regard for the text itself which is the line that directors cross at their peril.

All acts of translation are re-interpretations—adaptations even more so—and this can provide the excuse that anything therefore goes. But while questions of taste can be submitted to no ultimate arbitration, there are transgressions which are not matters of taste at all. In particular, the introduction or exaggeration of erotic content is an opportunity which many cannot resist. One hesitates to report that the opening scene of Thorne's take on Büchner's *Woyzeck* involves the protagonist (an English soldier in 1980s West Berlin) teaching his Irish girlfriend German and joking that "Ich liebe dich" sounds like "I lick dick". (Not even true.) Even Robert Icke's straighter adaptation of Schiller's verse drama *Maria Stuart* at the Almeida (2016) had Mortimer informing the Queen of Scots (no doubt to her surprise) that he wanted to "be inside" her. A more borderline case perhaps, but still not an available translation. Icke's vernacular script was a principal reason why this production was a less successful realisation of a transcendent play than Pete Oswald's 2005 version at the Donmar: the latter wisely proceeded on the basis that when you have a sublime original on your hands, you are unlikely to improve on it, and the further you stray, the more underwhelming the probable result. After all, no

sensible translator would debauch, say, a poem by substituting an expression of passionate love with a crude anatomical insertion. Why then is a poetic play a more legitimate target?

'When you have a sublime original on your hands, you are unlikely to improve on it'



Sarah Greene and John Boyega in “Woyzeck” at the Old Vic: Adaptations are particularly susceptible to directorial over-reaching

There is a suspicion that what lies behind Thorne’s and Icke’s misjudgments is a patronising assumption that audiences at classical plays will get bored unless they are titillated by frequent contemporary bonbons, often of a sexual nature. Some translators seem to think that cheap anachronisms are a necessary opiate to feed to theatregoers, the price which has to be paid to gain and keep a collective attention dulled by the excitements of film and television, or salami-sliced by social media. It takes a near-genius to achieve the paradox of restoring an ancient original through a contemporary idiom—Robert Fagles’ translations of Homer are for many an example.

The problem is not confined to translations. Shakespeare himself is nowadays subjected to unnecessary textual fiddlings, or worse. (The RSC’s productions are generally a happy exception.) Adaptations of his works are nothing new: one need only think of Nahum Tate’s version of *King Lear*, written as early as 1681 and admired by Johnson. That fact of itself does not confer any merit on the practice; a long theatrical history of infidelity to the text does not justify its continuance. As will be seen, performers of classical music have recently tended to abandon old habits in favour of a quest for authentic realisation of the score. Current theatrical practice by contrast gives rise to an increasing presumption that there is no inviolable core text at all. Accessibility, not authenticity, is the guiding principle. There seems to be no grasp of the fact that whilst the peaks of high culture must be open to all, we serve no one’s long-term interest by reducing their height. To do so simply restricts the view from the summit.

So, for example, there were several distracting adjustments to the text in Benedict Cumberbatch’s (2015) Barbican *Hamlet*, directed by Lyndsey Turner: audiences were assumed to require simplified translations of lines such as “popp’d in between

th’election and my hopes”; as *Guardian* critic Michael Billington wrote, it is as if we were too dumb to work out the meaning of the original lines. Andrew Scott’s terrific current *Hamlet* at the Pinter theatre (an excellent modern production by Robert Icke) has Guildenstern reporting that the King is marvellous distempered with “anger”—in case the audience might hear the original “choler” as “collar” perhaps. In the National’s recent *Twelfth Night* featuring Tamsin Greig, there was a gratuitous Alan Titchmarsh joke (as if the play were not already funny enough). Rhys Ifans was given carte blanche to insert modern text into the role of the Fool in Glenda Jackson’s *King Lear*. A recent Cheek by Jowl *Winter’s Tale* involved a wholesale re-writing of Autolycus’s part. And this without mentioning the antics of Emma Rice at the Globe, of all places—now fortunately curtailed. The fact that Shakespeare may have had a relaxed and pragmatic approach to his own texts, no doubt because he did not foresee their future canonical status, is taken as conferring a liberty on certain Lilliputian figures in the contemporary theatre scene to adjust as they please, whereas it is not difficult to imagine the regard which Shakespeare would have had for the works of his own heroes—Seneca, say, or Ovid.

It is of course possible to be too rigid in demanding adherence to the original; rules must have sensible exceptions. One of the sharpest jests in *Henry IV Part I* comes when an unwilling Hotspur is bidden to attend to Owen Glendower’s daughter singing in Welsh; he replies that he would rather “hear Lady, my brach, howl in Irish”. Since the word “brach” (meaning “hound”) is now completely obsolete, the joke is lost unless a discreet substitution is made. Maybe there will come a time when “choler” goes the same way, but it hasn’t yet.

Equally, there are other instances of direct violence to the author’s intentions which command more universal ▶



Andrés Schiff: “Why don’t you play what Beethoven wrote? It’s his music, not yours”

acceptance. The most obvious example is the practice of cutting. Most of us are relieved by judicious and sensitive cuts in Shakespeare, though we mind if our favourite lines are omitted. (It is becoming a rarity for lovers of P.G. Wodehouse to enjoy mention of the “quills upon the fretful porpentine” in their original context.) George Bernard Shaw is another case in point: conditions have simply changed too decisively for his loquacious and argumentative scripts to be given to modern audiences at anything like their original length. The choice is either to produce pruned versions, or to produce none at all.

The over-arching criterion should be an attitude of respect for the original, though a more old-fashioned word will be suggested in due course. Too many of those who put on others’ plays feel no necessary regard for the text, however much more incontestably distinguished the author may be than the director or translator. For all that language is a living thing, and that the passage of time may make it harder for a 21st-century audience to recuperate the spirit of a play that is several hundred years old, the text is all that is left to us; it is the best path to follow if the aim is to realise the original creation. No wonder that Beckett, for example, exercises close posthumous oversight over the way in which his work may, and may not, be performed. Who can blame him?

Even if the foregoing remarks are considered excessively purist, what is thought-provoking about practice in the theatre is the contrast, a striking one at first blush, between that practice and the present-day conventions that obtain in the performance of classical music. In the case of the latter, we are again not concerned with the liberties taken in the direction of music for the stage, but with the notes themselves. The comparison is between attitudes to the words in pieces of drama, and attitudes to the notes in pieces of music. What we find is that in recent decades musical performance has pro-

gressed towards an increasing emphasis on authenticity and adherence to the composer’s intentions, at the same time as theatre directors continue to empower themselves to take exactly the opposite course.

To start with the question of cuts, acceptable in the theatre, a different practice prevails with music. Music for the stage comes closest to the dramatic paradigm, so it is not surprising that we still quite often find cutting here. For example, a substantial and disfiguring cut in Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* is widespread (though happily not at Longborough, where Anthony Negus is the most trustworthy of Wagnerians). Likewise, important and beautiful arias are often omitted from *Don Giovanni*. In oratorio too, abridgement is not unusual: the *Messiah* is an obvious instance. But in pure music, cuts and alterations are (with rare exceptions) not adopted. It was not ever thus: Bruckner and Rachmaninov were among those prevailed upon to submit to cuts in their own major works, which are now invariably performed in their totality. Orchestration and scoring too used to be an open field for “improvements”. Schumann’s orchestration was long and widely thought to be in need of rescue, while Mahler and Stokowski were among many who set about re-scoring the symphonies of Beethoven, no less. These presumptions are now regarded as merely quaint or of historical interest.

The reason why performance is given in full of what are, admittedly, shorter works than plays and operas—symphonies, concertos, sonatas, quartets—is one of aesthetic principle: serious musicians revere the composer’s creation, and it follows that they seek a performance that as nearly as possible realises his intention. This desire manifests itself (also in teaching and among informed critics) by a quasi-religious loyalty to the score—to the notes which the composer actually wrote. Hence the concept of the *Urtext*, which reflects the desire among music publishers, where controversy exists, to establish as nearly as possible the true conception of the composer. Of course Shakespeare scholars are no less anxious, in case of doubt, to identify

the most accurate possible version of the text; this is exemplified by the controversy over whether Othello's final speech refers to the "base Indian" or the "base Judean", who "threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe". The difference is that performers of the music perform in the respectful spirit that nothing can be better than executing the composer's original intentions, if one can discern them, whereas the same (self-evidently) cannot be said of today's theatre. It is tempting if facetious to offer up a song of thanksgiving to the Deity that there are no directors to interpose themselves between the notes on the page and the actual performance of a Beethoven string quartet.

This brings us back to our point of departure: concert artists are like translators; to many listeners, the notes in the written score are as inaccessible as is the original of *Woyzeck* to a non-German-speaking audience. In each case, we have to trust in the good faith of the intermediary. Just as a jarring anachronism in translation is an obvious affront to the playwright's intentions, so too is a performance style which is foreign to the composer's idiom. Points of apparent detail matter: they make up the whole. So there is for good musicians no sense of pedantry in paying attention to the closest features of notation—not just tempo and dynamics, but phrasing, slurring and ornamentation. Although the whole question of what constitutes authenticity of performance is itself a matter of vigorous debate, knowingly to impose an inauthentic performance style on a Mozart violin sonata is a sin against the Holy Ghost. To choose to play a wrong note is unthinkable. András Schiff was heard in a master class to reprove a far less serious aberrance by a student, with the crushing but necessary rebuke: "Bloody hell, why don't you play what Beethoven wrote? It's his music, not yours." Of course, the musician must have an imaginative approach to the notation on the page, which can only be an approximation. The soul of the work ultimately lies beyond the printed score. Nonetheless, it is that notation which has to be interpreted, that spirit which must be released—not some vainglorious "new version".

It would be neat to end the discussion here—with the simple conclusion that theatrical performance standards are slawry; that the fact that many more people want to consume Shakespeare than Schumann has given rise among theatre directors to a loose, popularising laziness or sycophancy to the need for accessibility, which the more esoteric academy of classical music performers has wisely eschewed. There is indeed much truth in this view, and young musicians can do no better than to imbibe the categorical imperative of subordinating their own gorgeousness of tone, virtuosity and "ideas" about a given work to a deep understanding of the music, not just the performance instructions on the page but also its overall structure, grammar and harmonic logic.

A minor qualification is however necessary, although it is the exception which proves the rule. The notion that the composer's intentions are both sacrosanct and set in stone is not infrequently belied by composers themselves. This was brought home to the writer most vividly at another master class, which like the first took place at the celebrated Easter seminars at IMS Prussia Cove in Cornwall. György Kurtág was coaching a young quartet in one of his own compositions. At a certain place in the music, he stopped them and urged "No, no—here *dolce*." (The story goes better in a thick Hungarian accent.) The boldest member of the quartet hesitantly said: "Maestro, we are playing from your own manuscript, and at the very point where you stopped us, you have actually written the words *non dolce*." There was an interesting silence, after which Kurtág explained with a beatific smile: "Yes, yes—*non dolce* meaning . . . *dolce*."

Beethoven himself comes closest for some people to the archetypal idea of the Romantic artist whose productions should

be treated as inviolable. For the sculptor Bourdelle, Beethoven was a "*Bacchus, qui pressure pour les hommes le nectaire délicieux*". But whether this metaphor was intended to be apicultural or viticultural, the facts are more prosaic. The case is well-known of the composer being prevailed upon, at the very end of his life, to write an alternative last movement for his Opus 130 string quartet. This is perhaps all the more surprising when one considers to what extent the original finale was thematically integrated into the rest of the piece.

Nor is this an isolated instance. In 1801, Beethoven took a piano sonata he had written three years earlier and rearranged it (in a different key) for string quartet. Not only are many of the notes different, but so also are movement titles, tempo markings, dynamics and slurrings, in ways which were not simply necessitated by the different instrumentation. One particular eccentricity is that there is a held chord in the piano version on which the composer has written a crescendo—an impossible effect for a pianist. Although it is easy for string players to make a crescendo on a held note, by the time Beethoven came to the same point in the string quartet, he omitted the crescendo.

It is clear from these examples, which could be countlessly multiplied, that classical composers often regarded their creations as in some sense provisional, or as not the only way in which the underlying truth of the piece could be pursued or realised. However, it is axiomatic that this does not provide a pretext for others' interference. The composer's liberty is not anybody else's. Unless the manuscript contains what may on reasonable grounds be regarded as an error (there is a clear case of a mistakenly omitted double appoggiatura in the andante of the Schubert E flat piano trio), performers should recognise that they do indeed occupy a position of necessary subordination: as translators, they have poetic licence in terms of how they realise the original, but no licence to depart from it.

Why then do some presenters of classical plays feel no such inhibition? Can part of the reason simply lie in human vanity? Though there are charlatans and egoists in the music world as there are elsewhere, the mature concert artist feels no need to impose himself on the audience by an assertion of his will in opposition to the composer's; he is there on stage, a visible intermediary filling the ears of the audience with sound, acting simply and sufficiently as a conduit who allows the freest flow of the original work into the hearts and minds of those who listen. The director by contrast is not before the eyes of the audience in person. Too many in the theatrical mainstream feel the need to be noticed—to be admired for creating something original—and claim the right to appropriate the text of the play to this greater purpose. Not satisfied with all the opportunities provided by inherent textual ambiguity, costume, scenery, lighting, movement and the rest of the legitimate domain of the director, they must go further. The present conventions of the theatre permit and reward this approach: a cheap laugh garnered from the interpolation of a debunking modernism is seen as a justification for the subversion of the original. The idea of a reverence for the text is as unfashionable as the word itself.

Yet when we consider that the visitor to an art gallery does not wish to experience the curator's improvements to a Velázquez portrait, nor the reader of a Flaubert novel the translator's modish departures from the author's sense and spirit, we may recall Lily Briscoe's vision in *To the Lighthouse*: "Nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint." In adding music to the categories of the changeless, one might conclude that it is not the classical musician's respect for the original which is out of line with aesthetic principle; it is rather the lack of true imagination shown by those in the theatre who presume to place themselves between audiences and the text of the plays which they direct or translate—plays which have endured over decades or centuries, precisely because they are what they always were. ■