

## ASPECTS OF TRANSLATING THE LITERATURE IN THE FIELD OF MUSIC FROM ENGLISH TO SERBIAN



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**Abstract.** *English is, so to speak, the lingua franca of musicology today. While knowing German, French, Spanish, or other languages is certainly appreciated, especially for scholars from non-English-speaking backgrounds, it has become nearly impossible to pursue a scientific career in this field without a strong command of English. But what about those who are not professionals or experts, yet still wish to explore the history of music, its compositions, and their creators in their own language? They often rely on translations of books, whose content is not always faithful to the original. For instance, an analysis of the book *Classical Style – Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* by Charles Rosen (Belgrade, Nolit, 1979), which has been a key text on 18th-century music in Serbia for decades, reveals numerous translation errors. These include formulations with inaccurate or awkward expressions, which sometimes verge on the absurd. Why is it important to translate books from foreign languages into the "local" language? How crucial is it for translators to be familiar with the specialized field the book addresses? Which publishing houses in Serbia are committed to translating publications on music? These are some of the questions this paper aims to address.*

**Key words:** *translation, music, English, Serbian, publishing houses.*

The book *Classical Style – Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* by Charles Rosen, published in 1971,<sup>1</sup> is well known to older generations of musicologists, music theorists, and those professionally or amateurly engaged with music in the former SFR Yugoslavia during the second half of the 20th century. In 1979, it was translated into Serbian-Croatian by Branka Lalić and Ivan Stefanović for the Belgrade publishing house Nolit. This publication, part of the *Literature and Civilization* series, is one of the few works from that era that allowed

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*. New York, The Viking Press, 1971.

Charles Rosen's views on the famous Viennese trio to be read in Serbian-Croatian, just eight years after the original was released.

However, there is no critical review of this book that addresses its translation. The translation contains numerous errors, both grammatical and semantic. For example, the term *crescendo* was translated as *kreščendo* instead of *krešendo* (p. 52),<sup>2</sup> *reprise* is often translated as "recapitulation" (in Serbian „rekapitulacija”, p. 62)<sup>3</sup> even though no theoretical book in music uses this term in Serbian language, sometimes in quotation marks, sometimes not—similar to terms like *exposition* or *development section*, as if these two would be “special” metaphorical categories that should be placed in quotation marks. Bach's *Musical Offering* (Das musikalische Opfer) is translated wrongly as *Musical Testament* (Serb. Muzičko zaveštanje, p. 144). The term *keyboard concerto* (Serb. klavijaturni koncert, p. 235) appears instead of *piano/cembalo concerto* or *concerto for piano/cembalo, ornamental bass* (Serbian „ukrasni bas”, p. 237) instead of *basso continuo, dominant seventh* (Serb. dominantna septima) instead of *dominant seventh chord* (Serb. dominantni septakord, p. 237), and *part* instead of *section* (Serb. partija instead of deonica, p. 237), among others.

Unusual formulations also appear, such as when it is stated that “the conductor conducted from the keyboard” (Serb. „klavijature”,<sup>4</sup> p. 242) although no one uses this term when speaking about an 18th century concerto for cembalo. One might jokingly suggest that Alois Hába's quarter-tone composing system was inadvertently mentioned as “syncopated quarter-tones” (Serb. „sinkopirani četvrtinski ritam”, p. 288), when it should have been “syncopated quarter-note rhythm” (Serb. „sinkopirani četvrtinski ritam”). Perhaps the most unusual translation is the famous Bach collection *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, rendered as *The Well-Tempered Keyboard* (Serb. „Dobro temperovana klavijatura”,<sup>5</sup> p. 456), while a serious mistake occurred when referring to the *Mass in B minor* as the *Mass in B flat* (Serb. Misa u b-mollu, p. 72), likely because the translator was unfamiliar with the English practice of writing *H* as *B flat*, thus “transposing” Bach's work a half-step lower in the Nolit edition.

It is important to emphasize that there is no intention to undermine the dedicated work of the two translators, particularly given that this edition is nearly half a century old. Language is a living entity that evolves continuously. The purpose here is to highlight the importance of involving as many experts as possible in the complex process of publishing a translated edition to ensure it is as faithful to the original as possible. Despite the time gap, the translation of Rosen's landmark work contains shortcomings that likely stem from the translators' lack of immersion in the subject matter. It appears that Branka Lalić, an esteemed Yugoslav translator of the second half of the 20th century, did not consider it necessary to involve a musicologist in the preparation of this edition, instead serving as the reviewer herself. It is difficult to assess today why this decision was made, as there could have been various reasons—such as financial constraints or the publisher's policy. Nonetheless, these issues underscore the importance of meticulous care in the process of

<sup>2</sup> In Serbian language the Italian word *crescendo* is used in – Italian. However, it sounds as *krešendo*, but not *kreščendo*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rosen 1979:62 and onwards. This is not an inaccurate translation – it indeed refers to the third section of the sonata form. However, the consistent use of the term “recapitulation” shows that the concept of “reprise” is not “domesticated” in the language and that it is not common in the vocabulary, while a musician from the former Yugoslav regions would undoubtedly use the word “reprise” as the standard term.

<sup>4</sup> In Serbian, the term „klavijatura” in slang mostly refers to a synthesizer used in pop and rock bands (e.g., “he plays the keyboards”).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

translating and publishing literature in specialized fields like musicology, or any other narrowly defined professional domain.

In order to properly navigate the field of translation, it is essential to first understand some of its basic definitions. "Translation is certainly most similar to acting, playing, and singing," notes Branimir Živojinović, a respected Serbian translator (Živojinović, 1981:6). "However, while actors reproduce the words of their language, and instrumental and vocal artists reproduce tonal values fixed in notes, a translator must, based on a set template, reconstruct and recreate not only meaning and emotions but also melody, and then convey it all again through a carefully chosen set of words that mediate the shaped aesthetic quality. That is, a translator must simultaneously be both an actor and a musician, while these two do not need to be translators (in the narrower sense of the word)" (Ibid). Barhudarov, on the other hand, emphasizes that "translation is the process of recreating a speech creation in one language into a speech creation in another language, while maintaining the unchanged plan of the content" (Barhudarov, 1975:11). Translation is essentially a process of creation that involves transformation and modification. "Translation transformation is the encoding that enables the intentions expressed in one code (the source text) to be re-realized in a message expressed in another code (the target text). Translation modification is the process in which the intentions of the source text change and combine with transformation within the same text" (Hlebec, 2018:5).

Translation is also closely tied to semiotics, the science of signs and meaning, as emphasized by Suzanne Bassnett-McGuire. She argues that "the first step in studying translation must consist of accepting the fact that, although linguistic activity is at the core of translation, it primarily belongs to semiotics, the science that studies sign systems and structures, sign processes, and sign functions" (Bassnett-McGuire, 1980:13, as cited in Hlebec, 2018:8). However, to properly understand and interpret the source text, "knowledge of the source code system or codes is not enough, although it is a necessary condition. The translator must also possess competence for textual analysis of the original, literary competence for interpreting artistic texts, and an understanding of the extralinguistic situation referred to in the original" (Hlebec, 2018:10). Peter Handke compares the translator to a diver, stating that "translation is a type of writing in which 'the object of description' is seen only faintly as it shimmers in the water, somewhere beneath the surface. You can dive down, see where you are going, and find it as you dive" (according to Đerić, 2020:16). Gordana Đerić cites Arijana Božović, who asserts that "the translator, being present in both spirit and body in every sentence, cannot be anything other than a co-author of the work they have translated into their language" (Ibid, 17).

Through the views of respected translators, it becomes clear that translation is not simply a mechanical transfer of content from one language to another, but a complex process in which the translator must not only be familiar with the language they are translating from but also understand its idioms. They must recognize that situations addressed in the original language might require entirely different solutions in the target language. When it comes to the musical arts, as previously discussed, the task becomes even more complicated, as is the case with any specialized text. The first "collision" with this challenge occurred decades ago when a professional translator mistakenly translated the string of a violin as "wire" (the type used for conducting electricity). Experience has shown that for translating English texts on music into Serbian, it is better to choose a highly educated musician who is an expert in the language from which the translation is

made, rather than a professional translator who may not be as familiar with music terminology.<sup>6</sup>

The respected composer and translator Miloš Zatkalik addresses the challenges of translating musical texts in his article *Terminus – Terminal – Terminology* (Zatkalik, 2019). Zatkalik discusses the “elusiveness” of musical terms, as they originate from an art whose meaning is difficult to verbalize: “It could be argued that, of all the arts, music is closest to the earliest (primal) modes of mental functioning, which are governed by primary processes. Since these are unconscious and preverbal, they are extremely elusive when the subject is verbal, conscious interpretation” (Zatkalik, 2019:1). He cites terms like *figura*, *passage*, and even the names of certain compositions—such as Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony—as striking examples of the ambiguity or even caricature of meaning. He warns that translating musical texts, especially when relying on online tools like Google Translate, artificial intelligence such as ChatGPT, or other digital aids, can lead to incomprehensible nonsense. One such example is the translation of the phrase “major and minor key” from English, which, without expertise, becomes “small and large key” instead of the correct “major and minor tonality” (Zatkalik, 2019:4).

Besides the fact that *key* can become a tool for “locking and unlocking doors” (Zatkalik, 2019:7) for those unfamiliar with music, the confusion deepens when considering that in English, *key* can also mean *tonality*, while in Serbian, *key* (Serb. *ključ*) can refer to an octave in which some musical content is presented, such as the bass clef. These examples highlight the critical importance of careful and accurate translation, particularly when dealing with specialized musical terminology.

In recent decades, only a few publishing houses in Serbia have focused on publishing translations of books on music-related topics, and these tend to be older editions. The reasons for this are clear: for the copyright of “newer” sources, the costs can sometimes exceed the cost of translation itself, making it a financially burdensome endeavor. Additionally, it is likely known in advance that specialized books will not be published in large quantities, making their release unprofitable. To overcome the first challenge, publishers often turn to translating works that are over 75 years old. These are sometimes truly valuable sources worth translating. One example is *Sergei Rachmaninoff: A Life in Music*, originally published in the USA in 1956,<sup>7</sup> which was released in 2020 by *Službeni Glasnik*, translated by the author of this paper.

While this book presents numerous challenges related to meaning and interpretation, it does not contain ideological barriers that could complicate the translation process. The most difficult and “unnatural” linguistic issue in this publication arises from the fact that it was written in English, where there is no distinction between the formal “thee” (Serb. *Vi*) and informal “you” (Serb. *ti*). In English, it is always “you”, as the text comes from the relatively “modern” time of the early 20th century. However, the book includes many intimate letters to and from the famous composer, where the formal “you” would have been used. The question

<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the journal *New Sound, Belgrade*, for example, often applies this practice. We would like to highlight the late composer Goran Kapetanović, who proved to be an exemplary translator for this journal. Also, the translations of the musicologist Vesna Mikić's books are marked by consistency and expertise. Composer and translator Miloš Zatkalik dedicated significant attention in his professional career to translation, as well as to theoretical considerations of this responsible task. Among younger translators, the efforts of musicologist Ivana Medić in translating relevant topics in this field particularly stand out.

<sup>7</sup> Sergei Bertensson and Jay Leyda, with the assistance of Sophia Satina, *Sergei Rachmaninoff A Lifetime in Music*, NY: New York Univ. Pr. 1956.

then arises: how should one decide which letters to translate using *Vi* (formal) and which with *ti* (informal), particularly when, for example, correspondence that was initially formal later became more casual over time, such as in the case of the composer's letters to his future wife?

There are also valuable editions that require careful handling due to the political climate in which they were created. One such example is the book by Walter Niemann, *Masters of Pianism: Pianists of the Present and Recent Past*,<sup>8</sup> which *Službeni Glasnik* has begun translating from German.<sup>9</sup> The first thing that stands out about the edition is that it dates from 1920, or more precisely, 1921. This is "convenient" because, if prepared for printing in 2027, there will be no copyright costs. However, Niemann's book has an ideological tone. Fortunately, it is not centered on National Socialist ideas; rather, it takes the opposite stance. Throughout the text, a strong pacifist tone emerges, with the author, acknowledging Germany's guilt in provoking the catastrophe of World War I, addressing "all nations" in the introduction and emphasizing music as a theme that transcends all conflicts (Niemann, 1920:7).

The Belgrade-based publishing house *Službeni Glasnik* can take pride in its high-quality publications in the field of musical arts. This includes the *Violin Key* series, edited by Petar Arbutina and Aleksandar Gatalica. Over the past five years, they have published works such as *Frederic Chopin: Letters* (2023, translated by Natasha Gatalica), *Edwin Fischer: Beethoven's Piano Sonatas* (2022, translated by Dragan Šobajić), *Alfred Brendel: Music, Meaning, and Meaninglessness* (2022, translated by Dragan Šobajić), *Carolina Buasje, August Gelrich, Alexander Ziloti: The Constellation of Franz Liszt* (2021, translated by Dragan Šobajić), and *Modest Tchaikovsky: Life and Letters of P.I. Tchaikovsky* (2020, translated by Natasha Gatalica), to name just a few. In the past five years, eleven foreign books—mostly in English or German—covering topics such as pianism, music criticism and aesthetics, and composers' poetics, have been published. This is a remarkable achievement compared to previous decades when the publishing house did not place much emphasis on translation.

Another publishing house worth mentioning as a case study is *Studio Lirica*.<sup>10</sup> This company is particularly dedicated to publications about solo singing and the culture of nurturing the singing voice. However, over the last two decades, it has also expanded its scope to include books on the art of playing various musical instruments. Among their printed editions are *Carl Flesch: The Art of Playing on Violin – General Technique* (Serb. *Sviranje na violini*, i.e. The Art of Playing on Violine, Belgrade, 2021), *Josef Hofmann: Piano Playing* (Serb. *Sviranje na klaviru* i.e. Playing on the Piano, Belgrade, 2017), and *Joseph Levin: The Principles of Piano Playing* (Serb. *Principi sviranja na klaviru*, i.e., Principles of Playing on the Piano, Belgrade, 2016), to name just a few. Dragoslav Ilić is credited as the translator for these publications.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Niemann, *Meister des Klaviers, die Pianisten der Gegenwart und der letzten Vergangenheit*. Schuster & Loeffler, Berlin 1919, 1921 (14. Aufl.).

<sup>9</sup> This work has been delayed due to a change in leadership at this publishing house.

<sup>10</sup> The Belgrade publishing house Clio is also dedicated to publishing books in various artistic fields, but it is not directly specialized in music. Therefore, although a certain number of its publications are related to musical topics, it will not be discussed further here.

Without aiming to critically evaluate the translations of all these works, attention should be drawn to the titles of these books, which often feature awkward language formulations. For example, one does not “play on the piano,”<sup>11</sup> but rather plays the piano—or the violin. Theoretically, using a humorous approach from Miloš Zatkalić, it might be possible to “play on the piano”—but on some other instrument, perhaps. For instance, one could sit on the piano and play the flute—or the violin. Thus, the translations of the titles themselves invite critique.

An insight into the translation activity in the field of music art will end with one potential provocation. There are areas sources in contemporary music theories, such as music semiotics, that are almost untranslatable into Serbian. Take, for example, Ratner’s (Leonard Ratner) theory of topics and tropes. Musical terminology in Serbian predominantly relies on foreign words, mostly from Italian, German, and sometimes English. In these number of terms, it should be reminded that tropes originally referred to the insertion of new text and the addition of new musical content at the end of an already existing one, which was characteristic of the practice of “composing” medieval Catholic church music. With the emergence of semiotics and Ratner’s topics and tropes, a completely new meaning is introduced into the already complex linguistic terrain in our literature. Anyone who tackles some of this music semiotics theories become its “slave”, and only the most persistent can easily move from one theory to another. Those on the outside look on in wonder at these “musical Esperantists”, whose clumsy language gets lost in an abundance of often insufficiently explained words and concepts.

Finally, something should be said, in the context of translation, about the nurturing of music science in the “local” language. When it comes to translating specialized music texts, the categorization of scientific works in Serbia, which directly harms the scientific discourse of musicology established in the Serbian language, must be mentioned. Why should it be formed, and for whom, if the publication of works in English or some other foreign language is favored in internationally recognized journals? Thus, on one hand, there is a persistent insistence on preserving the language and Cyrillic script, while on the other hand, scientific thought developed in that same language is marginalized. Scientists are, in a certain sense, caught between their responsibility to develop science in their native language and the need to find their place in the “world’s” scientific community. The “local” language of science must be developed, and if the writing and publishing in a global language are favored, the result will be the disappearance of scientific terms and the overall scientific discourse of the relevant field in the “local” language. This, of course, does not mean abandoning publications in English, but rather, being persistent in printing bilingual publications that would allow both visibility on a global scale and the development of scientific discourse in the native language.

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<sup>11</sup> If the contents were translated literally, this would, of course, be in accordance with the original. However, translating a text is not just a mere transfer of its meaning; it is also a re-signification in the spirit of the new language.

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## NEKI ASPEKTI PREVOĐENJA LITERATURA IZ OBLASTI MUZIKE SA ENGLESKOG NA SRPSKI JEZIK

Engleski je danas – mogli bismo reći – *lingua franca* muzikologije. Iako je poznavanje nemačkog, francuskog, španskog ili bilo kog drugog jezika dobrodošlo, naročito za istraživače koji dolaze iz zemalja gde se ne govori engleski, bez čvrstog poznavanja engleskog jezika gotovo je nemoguće razviti naučnu karijeru u ovoj oblasti. Ali šta je sa onima koji nisu profesionalci ili eksperti, a ipak žele da čitaju o istoriji muzike, kompozicijama i njihovim autorima na svom jeziku? Oni čitaju prevode knjiga čiji sadržaj nije uvek dosledan originalu. Analiza publikacije *Classical Style – Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven Čarlsa Rozena* (Beograd, Nolit, 1979), na primer, koja se decenijama koristi kao važna literatura o muzici 18. veka u Srbiji, otkrila je brojne nedostatke u prevodu. Postoje formulacije koje sadrže mnoge netačne ili nezgrapne izraze čije se značenje gotovo graniči sa karikaturom. Ova izjava nije data s namerom da se kritikuje prevod urađen pre pola veka, već da se skrene pažnja na potrebu za većim fokusom na prevođenje literature o muzici u našoj zemlji. Iskustvo pokazuje da se u poslednjim decenijama u Srbiji uglavnom prevode starija izdanja knjiga, zbog isteka autorskih prava i finansijske održivosti takvih projekata. Plaćanje autorskih prava za aktuelne publikacije često je nerentabilno za tiraže malih zajednica zainteresovanih za muziku. Međutim, starije knjige o muzici nose 'teret' jezika koji je 'star' ili čak ideološki 'teret' u svom sadržaju. U Srbiji postoji vrlo malo izdavačkih kuća koje su fokusirane na izdavanje knjiga o muzici. Kao studije slučaja treba pomenuti *Službeni glasnik*, koji je državni izdavač, i *Studio lirica*, koji je privatno finansiran. Ove kuće nedavno su izdale desetine 'muzičkih' knjiga u prevodu, uglavnom starijih datuma. Prevodioci u tim knjigama su stručnjaci koji su pre svega muzički obrazovani, bez obzira na njihovo znanje engleskog jezika. U nekima od njih, čak i u samom naslovu, mogu se primetiti jezičke nejasnoće ili gramatičke greške. Ipak, ovo su vredni koraci ka obezbeđivanju knjiga o muzici u našoj zemlji. Uprkos svim naporima da se knjige o muzici prevedu na srpski, mora se naglasiti da su sadržaji iz nekih oblasti teško prevodivi. To je slučaj sa muzičkom semiotikom, na primer, čija je terminologija izuzetno složena čak i na engleskom, zbog čega je njen prevod gotovo nemoguć. A kada već govorimo o prevodima muzičkih knjiga, nije ništa manje važno izdavanje naučnih dela iz oblasti muzikologije naših stručnjaka na srpskom, a ne na engleskom jeziku. Strogi zahtevi naučne zajednice za citiranošću u međunarodno

*priznatim naučnim časopisima ponekad smanjuju 'prostor za manevrisanje' istraživačima koji žele da objavljuju na svom jeziku. Promocija nauke na lokalnom jeziku ostvaruje se i kroz njenu produkciju. To su važni aspekti muzikološke aktivnosti koji ne treba da se zanemaruju u kontekstu govora o prevođenju knjiga u oblasti muzike.*

Ključne reči: *prevod, muzika, engleski jezik, srpski jezik, izdavačke kuće*