



THE USE AND ABUSE OF TRANSLATED HYMNS

“Teach me to sing this in your language.” I raised my head from shuffling paperwork at the prison inmate choir rehearsal. I could not believe what I just heard Mario ask Thien.* During the rehearsal of a new Spanish song, Mario and José normally give pronunciation tutorials to the Filipinos, the Euro-Americans and the Vietnamese in the choir. This is especially necessary whenever we prepare for the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe and sing some bilingual songs but keep the traditional Marian songs in Spanish. For several years, the San Quentin Prison Catholic Chapel Choir has been singing the Vietnamese hymn “*Me Maria/As Lovely As the Dawn*” (BB/MI 705) for various Marian Feasts. This year, for our multilingual Guadalupe celebration, we chose “*Me Maria*” for Preparation of the Gifts. Normally the Vietnamese choir members, Thien, Binh, and Nhan, would sing in their own language and the non-Vietnamese would rotate in with the refrain and verses in English translation. During rehearsal and Mass, Thien usually stands next to Mario so he can follow the Spanish in songs, like “*Las Apariciones Guadalupanas*” (VOZ 558). When Mario approached his fellow inmate and said he wanted to join his Vietnamese brother in singing “*Me Maria*” in Vietnamese, a mutual reciprocity occurred that I, as choir leader, could never have manipulated or imagined.

Publishers are making new resources available: translations of well-known English repertoire into Spanish and other languages and various Vietnamese and Spanish songs in English. Such was *Chung Loi Tan Tung* (OCP 11241TL), which introduce some prison inmates to “*Me Maria*” and other Vietnamese repertoire. What is the purpose of all of this? How should these translations be used and, more importantly, how should they not be used? Before we enter that discussion, let us first review some categories of translated hymns, evaluate their usefulness dependent upon their origin, and then conclude with some pastoral advice for incorporating translated hymns within an intercultural celebration.

TRANSCULTURAL HYMNS

Some hymns become so popular in a foreign language that the connection with the original language

is lost or forgotten. Take for example “*Entre Tus Manos*” (VOZ 633), a popular Spanish song for Preparation of the Gifts. This is a translation of Ray Repp’s “Into Your Hands” written in 1967. While that piece faded from popularity in American repertoire, the Spanish counterpart has endured, so much so that few, if any, Latinos would guess that “*Entre Tus Manos*” is actually based on an English hymn.

BICULTURAL HYMNS

Some hymns develop as strong pieces within various cultural repertoires simultaneously. Within the Spanish/English realm, “Prayer of Saint Francis” (BB/MI 490; VOZ 720) and “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” (VOZ 561) have mutual weight and usage in both languages and both cultures. “*Pescador de Hombres*” (BB/MI 512; VOZ 702) gains popularity in non-Latino communities and may become a future standard sung completely in English.

MULTILINGUAL AND BILINGUAL REPERTOIRE

Unlike the other two categories, music in the multilingual and bilingual categories is conceived of and composed as bridge repertoire. Bob Hurd and Jaime Cortez did the foundational work in this area for English/Spanish communities. Developed as a pastoral response to intercommunity celebrations, “*Ven al Banquete*” (BB/MI 308; VOZ 779), “O Love of God” (BB/MI 301; VOZ 760) and “*Pan de Vida*” (BB/MI 341; VOZ 800) are becoming standard songs within one language group.

As the pastoral need in the United States for multilingual music increases, composers and lyricists are providing new resources. One piece worthy of review is from 2002 World Youth Day: “Jesus Christ, You Are My Life” (BB/MI 501). The verses in French, Spanish, Italian, Vietnamese and English are not translations of each other, but they explore culture-specific expressions inspired by the jubilant refrain.

EXAMINE THE ORIGINS

One challenge in choosing whether to incorporate a hymn translation is trying to evaluate the quality of the translation, even though one does not

*To honor the privacy of the incarcerated, names have been changed.

know that particular language. One guide to evaluating the usefulness is tracing the origin of the translation.

As suggested earlier, some translations come from the minority or immigrant group itself, and the ethnic group self-edits the translation through the passage of time. After visiting various Vietnamese-American communities, I found two different translations of “My God and My All” (BB/MI 446). One composite version was edited and placed in the bilingual songbook *Chung Loi Tan Tung*. A Spanish translation wandered up from Baja, Mexico, and found its way into *Flor y Canto, second edition* (682).

Publishers are now providing translations to serve mixed communities. *One Faith, Una Voz*, OCP’s Spanish/English bilingual hymnal, now offers such standards as “You Are Near” in Spanish (631) and “*Una Espiga*” in English (798). “Open My Eyes” can be found in Spanish (VOZ 289) and in Vietnamese in the latest Vietnamese/English youth collection, *Chon Ngai* (OCP 20180TL). How these translations will be accepted and used will only be known over the course of time.

Let us review other challenges from both sources. Although publishers are now making these translations available, some Latinos find singing their favorite songs in English awkward. For some bilingual people, singing certain Spanish phrases in English can sound clumsy or even silly. Certain key phrases from Spanish repertoire, like from “*De Colores*” or “*Alabaré*,” have an intrinsic poetry and flare that no English phrase can match. Some elderly Vietnamese enjoy singing American songs in their native tongue but find singing their own Vietnamese songs in English disconcerting. For second generation Vietnamese-Americans, bilingual songs are favored as a way of retaining their culture and language, which they fear is being lost to rapid inculturation.

Some translators lack sufficient skills to produce quality editions of English songs, so it is imperative to have the local ethnic group decide if a particular translation is worthy of use. In addition, translations are always compromises if the title has not yet achieved full trans-cultural or bicultural status. These are

just sample pastoral considerations to be incorporated when deciding to use a translated hymn. Most importantly, not all repertoire works in translation.

SOME PRACTICAL HINTS

Some refrains of Spanish standards are very accessible to the non-Spanish speaker, and these can be sung completely in the original language. “*Caminaré*” (VOZ 778), “*Resucitó*” (VOZ 486), and “*Si Yo No Tengo Amor*” (*Cantemos Unidos/United in Song* 297) are examples. In many situations, I ask the mixed community to alternate the verses in the two languages but keep the refrain in Spanish. (The printed English can be a comprehension guide for the non-Spanish speakers.)

Another pastoral consideration is assessing difficulty of language pronunciation. Spanish and Tagalog are relatively simple for any adventurous English singer to attempt. For languages that are more challenging for non-native speakers to read, other patterns could emerge. (For some Asian immigrants, English presents greater difficulties in pronunciation than Spanish.) Often, for Vietnamese songs with English or Spanish texts, I will usually have the assembly sing the refrain twice: the first refrain in the original language, the repeat in the translated language. Verses are divided up according to the demographics of the assembly or the balance of repertoire within the liturgy. If the majority of the assembly is Vietnamese, with a minority of non-Vietnamese, we would sing the refrain twice each pass and have all the verses sung in Vietnamese. If there were a balance of English and Vietnamese hymns through the liturgy, and the assembly was an even mix, we would rotate the verses of the hymn between English and Vietnamese. If this song is the only authentic Vietnamese hymn in the liturgy, I would promote the cultural expression of the minority group and have most of the verses sung in Vietnamese and only a few, if any, done in English.

EXPLORING NEW MUSICAL WORLDS

Musicians of the dominant English speaking culture are sometimes under

pressure to fulfill some multicultural liturgy requirement. Shoved into some intercultural celebration, a translated hymn can be a quick fix, but it is never the final stage of intercultural relationship. Within an intercultural celebration, the translated hymn may serve as an entry point, a welcoming bridge between two language groups or two cultures. Singing “*Las Apariciones Guadalupeanas*” in English is not a goal in itself. But if non-Spanish speakers can be more inclined to attend a Spanish Guadalupe celebration by participating a bit in English, then a translation is useful. Sometimes translations are not constructive, and poor selections and choices may actually extend a superficial sense of community or, worse, be a gesture of unintended dominance of one group over others.

For some reason, European-Americans tend to believe they need to understand everything to be actively involved. One popular American standard among Vietnamese youth is the Eagles’ ballad “Hotel California.” Most of the young adult English students I talk to in Saigon and Hanoi do not understand all the words, and certainly do not grasp the double meanings, but they love the melody, the poetry and the style of the song, and they find it fun to sing in another language. Why can’t the same be true for liturgy? Other cultures bring to the US church the gift of repertoire with various rhythms, forms and melodic phrasing. This is an opportunity for fun, for exploration. Let a translated hymn be the entry ticket, not the finish line. In a gesture of mutual reciprocity, turn to your fellow believer in Christ and request: “Teach me to sing this song in your language.”

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