Studia Translatorica 15, 2024

Reviews

Johan Franzon
University of Helsinki/Finland

Beat music, sláger, and different song translations in Socialist Hungary[1]

DOI: 10.23817/strans.15-15

Received: 27.06.2024
Accepted: 2.07.2024

The publication series "Jazz under State Socialism" started in 2011, with its base at Freie Universität, Berlin, edited by Gertrud Pickhan and Rüdiger Ritter. In five monographs and six edited collections, it has covered most of the former Eastern bloc of Europe and some countries and times beyond it, combining musicological analysis with social, political and cultural perspectives. From topics such as "National styles in jazz after World War II" and "The jazz section – a platform of freedom in Czechoslovakia" (in its first volume *Jazz behind the Iron Curtain*, Pickhan/ Ritter 2011), the focus has gradually broadened to other music genres as well; volume 11, published in 2024, covers fusion, rock and ethnic music. Most contributions are in English and some in German.

Volume 8, *Translation, adaptation, and intertextuality in Hungarian popular music*, is the first one to carry the term *translation* in its name. It is edited by Ádám Ignácz, affiliated with The Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest. But as the introductory essay, written by him and Emília Barna, indicates, the theme that connects most of the content may be "popular music adaptations" (p. 13). From a generous amount of angles it explores musical eras and musical imports happening in Hungary, and some neighboring countries, during the latter half of the 20th century, but especially the 1960s and 1970s. 13 scholars have contributed 11 well-researched papers, a foreword and an introductory essay. Five of them were translated into English by Boldizsár Fejérvári and Noah Harley.

Coming from translation studies, most of interest may be found in the article by András Kappanyos, titled "All together now: the translatability of the popular

1| Ignász, Ádám (ed.) (2023*). Translation, adaptation, and intertextuality in Hungarian popular music*. (Jazz under State Socialism. Volume 8). Lausanne et al: Peter Lang. Pp. 282.

song in Socialist Hungary" (p. 129). The study is founded on a simple division into two music genres: *sláger* and beat music. The former represents the old-fashioned *Schlager* era (taking the style and word from Germany), the latter the rock'n'roll-inspired styles that hit Hungary hardest in the years 1960–1965. Kappanyos catalogues different ways in which both the linguistic and political problem was solved: just playing instrumentals, translating just the songtitles for radioplay, singing with altogether different (innocent) lyrics, and making what he calls "campfire versions" (p. 138). Those were for example Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the wind" and John Lennon's "Give peace a chance", both popular and tolerated due to the general anti-war message, but with Hungarian lyrics that diluted or softened the political edges in them. It is not quite clear how László Földes fits into that catalogue with his Hungarian covers of rock hits such as "Johnny B Goode" and "Hey Joe", which were "not philologically accurate or very artistic from a poetic point of view" (p. 143). That same quality statement seems true also for Káti Kovács' cover of Tina Turner's hit "River deep – mountain high" from the late 1960s. Yet, it was "mediocre, forgettable" (p. 137, in spite of her being a good vocal match for Turner), while Földes, a decade later, "managed to retain coolness" (p. 143). Obviously, there are many factors at play here: the *sláger*-style sentimentality of the lyrics Kovács sang, ringing false against the music; the persona of the singer-lyricist Földes, apparently more in tune with the attitude of American rockers. Kappanyos is generous with subjective value judgments, but a more systematic comparison would have made it clearer what was lost or found in the 11 translated songs he cites. Still, his discussions paint an engaging picture of a music market both affected by and affecting the political scene. The evidence supports his conclusion: that the powers, under the repressive Kádár regime, caused a "soft domestication" (p. 147) or "premeditated mistranslation" (p. 148) of the music imports of the 1960s, allowing a small stream of covers that were shaped to sound like traditional, harmless *sláger*, but hindering and discouraging the artists and bands that might have turned them into a provocative youth movement or counterculture.

Also enlightening is the section named "Beatles adaptations" (p. 197), under which the popularity and musical imports of songs by the Beatles (all or some single ones of them) are discussed in four papers. They are written by Ignász describing Socialist Hungary, Jan Blüml Communist Czechoslovakia, Michael Rauhut the German Democratic Republic (DDR), and Alexandra Grabarchuk the Soviet Union. They seem to share this unstated assumption: the enduring popularity and hunger for Beatles music was equally big in all four countries. Most interesting are the differences. Regarding Hungary, Ignász catalogues 26 Beatles covers in the years 1965–1990, but only four with lyrics in Hungarian. Contrastingly, Blüml found 173 covers, 1964–1999, and says that most were

double versions, recorded both in Czech and in English, for export to other Eastern bloc countries. In East Germany, Beatles songs were relatively freely played and covered (for example "Yesterday" as the phonetically similar "Gestern noch"), using the motivation that their Liverpool working class perspective was critical of capitalist society. But in the Soviet Union, most of the spreading of records and recordings seems to have gone through underground channels, for example recording on X-ray film taken from hospitals ("music on bones", p. 224). With his systematic approach, Ignász makes a useful distinction between two kinds of covers: imitations, aiming to copy both vocal and musical style, and interpretations, putting their own spin on things. After 1980, the latter kind dominates.

Ferenc János Szabó's article on "operetta adaptation" (p. 37) gives a useful glimpse of the rather under-researched topic of operetta translation, which may differ from translation of both opera and musicals – at least as we know it today. Operettas, when revived and exported, regularly got changed, rewritten and updated a little or a lot. Szabó gives us interesting facts about the thoroughly domesticated version Franz Lehár made of his operetta *Zigeunerliebe* (1910) for its Hungarian premiere in Budapest in 1943, a film version of Jenö Huszka's operetta *Bob herceg* in 1941, and a radio version of Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe* in 1941.

The remaining five articles involve some international influence but focus mainly on the internal history of Hungarian popular music and culture. From Barbara Rose Lange and Anna Szemere, we learn about Katalin Karády, a film star and *sláger* diva of the 1940s, who was subject, first to a politically tarnished reputation, then a nostalgic rediscovery. Dániel Szabolcs Radnai studies how the beat-rock music legend János Bródy through his catalogue of songs constructs both himself and a history of the genre, developed despite limited access to Western music. József Havasréti interestingly analyses the concept of cover and describes how the band P. Mobil in a cover album in 2019 created a "hard rock canon" (p. 109) that included some "appropriation of folk music" (p. 119). Zsolt K. Horváth sketches a history of the band Gerilla, 1965–1971, focusing on "pol-beat", the "somewhat domesticated" (p. 158) version of the anti-war protest song movement – the fact that the band's songwriter also translated songs by Tucholsky, Mayakovsky, "Guantanamera", and "Little boxes" is mentioned all too briefly. Finally, Eszter György explores the concepts "authenticity and hybridity" (p. 177) when discussing the special status, expressions, and injustices experienced by the Roma folk musicians of Hungary. This is all useful information for anyone interested in knowing more about European pop culture, music trends, genre histories and international exchange of pop songs that could not be hindered by political dictatorship.

To make this admirable collection of solid case studies even more ideal, what one could wish for would be an attempt to overview and compare the disciplines

of popular music studies and translation studies. The former is a sturdy and diverse research field, whose history can be explored in journals such as *Popular Music and Society*, since 1971, *Popular music*, since 1981, and *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, since 1988. There, one will find occasional studies touching upon translingual dissemination of pop music material, globally and locally. But a more deepgoing interest in translation studies is yet to be seen. In the volume at hand, the references to works in translation studies are restricted to Roman Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, an article by Isabelle Marc (2015), and the books by Șebnem Susam-Saraeva (2015) and Lucile Desblache (2019). Most of the reading of them appears to have been done by the editor Ádám Ignász.

However, reading the classic books of popular music studies, such as the ones by Richard Middleton (1990) and Simon Frith (1996), one easily gets the impression of popular music being a primarily, even exclusively, Anglo-American affair. Studies like the volume at hand are important to counter that impression. Doing that, it is more in line with another seminal book, Regev (2013) – although it is not referenced. Motti Regev prefers to paint a picture of cosmopolitanism and local networks transforming international influences. He uses terms such as hybridization and transposition – also used in this volume – more often than translation and adaptation. Regev also raised an idea of archetypes concerning artists and genre identities. We hear about the phenomenon of "copycat bands" (i.e. p. 156, p. 266) in Hungary, but we also learn about archetypes we may surely recognize from elsewhere – the tragic diva, the rock auteur, the hard rock rebel, the "authentic" folk minority. Here lies an opportunity to extend the discussion with more international comparisons, without seeing them as American imperialist or colonizing influences. Does every country make its own "translation" of a globally shared pattern of pop/rock archetypes?

A few of the authors in the book find reason to distinguish between translation in the sense of an imported trend or influence and "actual translation", that is of song lyrics (Kappanyos, p. 129). As for the concept of *adaptation*, the book demonstrates the difficulties – I would like to say: impossibility – of using that term with precision. In some articles, adaptation mostly means 'adoption of a foreign influence' (Horvath, Kappanyos). Some use it as a simple synonym for a cover recording (Ignácz, Blüml), another more to highlight the creative reworking of some such covers (Havasréti). In one study it is the hyponym for either a change of language or a change of medium (Szabó). This is of course not a fault of the authors, but of (the English) language and the incurable, interdisciplinary confusion. Perhaps wisely, the editor expressly abstains from providing a definition in his foreword. Concepts used in the book with more explanatory power are *domesticating*, meaning roughly 'making changes to fit target culture norms' (Ignacz, Kappanyos, Horváth – without referencing Venuti 1995), and *appropriating*, a practical term for the 'taking and using' of songs –

to either sing, sell or enjoy them (Kappanyos, Havasréti, Blüml, György, Lange/ Szemere).

Concludingly, the collected volume offers many insights and much information, empirically founded, that is valuable for anyone academically interested in the international exchange of pop song, memes and movements in the 20th century. They still wait, however, to be fully integrated with song translation studies.

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Johan Franzon
University of Helsinki
Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian Studies
PB 24 (Unionsgatan 40)
00014 Helsingfors universitet
Finland
johan.franzon@helsinki.fi
ORCID: 0000-0002-6961-8875