



Lost in Translation

The Rilke Poems in Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony

by Richard G. J. Nowak

When looking for foreign poems to set to music, Shostakovich typically used existing Russian translations. As such, the study of these translations is important to the analysis of his work. This article examines the Russian translation of the two Rilke poems that Shostakovich used in his Fourteenth Symphony.^{1,2} In particular, it shows what the composer missed—nuances of the original-language text—by relying on a translation. The article also provides some background information on the symphony and its linguistic variants.

1.1 Background

Shostakovich wrote his Fourteenth Symphony for soprano, bass, and chamber orchestra during his stay at the Moscow Kremlin Hospital in 1969.³ Dedicated to Benjamin Britten, the work consists of 11 songs on poems by Lorca, Apollinaire, Küchelbecher, and Rilke.⁴

The composer wrote to his friend Isaak Glikman about his selection of poems:

It occurred to me that there exist eternal themes and eternal problems, amongst which are those of love and death. I had already turned my attention to the theme of love...but I had not touched upon the theme of death...My choice of poems is probably quite random. But it seems to me that they are given unity through the music.⁵

Before the first (closed) performance of the Fourteenth Symphony, Shostakovich is remembered to have said, "Death is terrifying, there is nothing beyond it."⁶

As usual, Shostakovich chose poems for the symphony from existing Russian translations.⁷ He selected the two Rilke poems, which occur as the last two songs of the work,⁸ from a 1965 translation by Tamara Silman.⁹

1.2 "Retranslations" of the Russian into German¹⁰

Shostakovich preferred for vocal texts to be performed in the language of the audience, as he hated hearing the audience turn their programme pages during a concert.¹¹ For the German performance of the Fourteenth Symphony, a translation of all the poems (except those by Rilke) was made by Jörg Morgener (pseudonym of Jürgen Köchel).¹² These German translations were authorised by Shostakovich and published by Sikorski Verlag.¹³

Remarkably, another German-language version was made by conductor Thomas Sanderling and the East-German poet Waltraut Levine. Shostakovich also

authorised the use of this version for a German-speaking audience.¹⁴ These translations are not published, but Sanderling still uses them when conducting the German-language version of the symphony.¹⁵

A translation made for a vocal score needs to follow the accents and effects of the original text setting. As Sanderling writes, "In the original Russian, Shostakovich often added an accent to create a special effect, so as to emphasise a particular word or syllable. The musical effect, whether it is made through an accent, a tremolo, or orchestral colouring, loses its meaning if it is not retained in translation. So certain words had to remain on certain notes. We took a lot of trouble to get this right."¹⁶

In the case of the Rilke poems, the original poems were used for the German audience, and Shostakovich therefore agreed to add a few notes to adapt the prosodic structure of the vocal line to the original text (i.e., instead of adapting the prosodic structure of the original text to the vocal line).

But no matter how much care is given to a translation, an important quality of the original text setting is inevitably lost: the *sound* of the words. As David Hurwitz rightly notes, this is very much part of the musical conception.¹⁷ This point applies equally to a performance in any original-language version, when the original text has to be moulded in the prosodic structure of the vocal line.

2. The polyglot version of the Fourteenth Symphony

After preparing the German-language version for Sikorski Verlag, Jürgen Köchel made another setting with texts in the original languages. The translations used by Shostakovich preserved, to a large degree, the rhythm of the original text; no musical or compositional changes were necessary.¹⁸ Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was very much interested in this version, and Shostakovich authorised it in 1971.¹⁹

The work was recorded by Bernard Haitink with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Julia Varady in 1980. Michael Mishra remarks that the texts used in this recording are not the original-language versions of the poems, but "back-translations" of the Russian translations.²⁰ This is incorrect: all poems are in their original-language versions, with one notable exception: "La Loreley."

Apollinaire's French poem "La Loreley," based on Brentano's German poem with the same title, was performed in Köchel's *German* translation. The German language version of "La Loreley" (as part of the polyglot version) was published by Sikorski Verlag. When trying to align the original French version with the music on which the Russian translation was set, Köchel found that there



was no “sprachlich-musikalische ‘Deckungsgleichheit’ (im Blicke auf Akzente, Pausen, Steigerungen, Betonungen usw.)”²¹ i.e., there was no one-to-one mapping of the language to the music. In still other words, the original French text could not be aligned with the way the composer originally set the Russian translation to music. This is why Köchel suggested using his German translation, which he thought fit better with the way in which Shostakovich had set the Russian translation. All parties agreed to this exceptional solution.²²

3.1 The Russian translations of the Rilke poems

In 1965, Tamara Silman published her Russian translation of a selection of Rilke’s poems—the first translations of Rilke ever to appear in Russian.²³ The Soviet system considered Rilke a bourgeois poet *par excellence*, and Silman encountered many difficulties when trying to have her translations published.²⁴ Only in the 1970s and 1980s were new translations finally published.

In his memoirs, Admoni writes that he had sent a copy of the translations to Shostakovich (probably shortly after their publication in 1965) and quotes an undated letter from the composer thanking him for this gift.²⁵ The notes in the 1980 Moscow score (prepared by, *inter alios*, the composer’s wife Irina) confirm that Shostakovich’s private library contained a copy of the selection with a complimentary inscription by Silman and Admoni.²⁶

It appears, however, that Shostakovich had not procured Silman’s approval to use her translations. She discovered that he had used them only at the Leningrad premiere of the symphony in 1969. After the concert, she went backstage to thank Shostakovich for using her translations, but according to Admoni, the composer replied that it was he who should thank her and that she was the incentive (*tolčok*) for his selection of the Rilke poems.²⁷

On the other hand, Lidia Čukovskaja stated in her memoirs that Akhmatova found Silman’s translations of poor quality (*plochoj*).²⁸ In order to evaluate this claim, I will examine the translations. The text of the original poems is given below, followed by Silman’s translations in Russian, and then my word-by-word translations of the German poems and of Silman’s translations.

3.2 Comments on translation of “Der Tod des Dichters”

Rilke wrote this poem in 1906. It was incorporated into the *Neue Gedichte Erster Teil*, published in 1907. According to Engel and Fülleborn, the poem was inspired by the death mask of the Ukrainian national poet Tarash Shevčenko (1814–1861).²⁹ The poem consists of three stanzas in 5, 4, and 5 iambic pentameters respectively (except for line three, which consists of a tetrameter), with a slightly irregular rhyme scheme in the last stanza (abbba/cddc/effef). The Russian translation has exactly the same metre and rhyme scheme³⁰—an admirable *tour de force*—but it necessarily deviates in substantial ways from the original poem.

In the first line, the composer changed the text. Silman translated *Er lag* (He lay) as *Tak on lezhal* (Thus he lay). In a letter to his wife Irina dated 16 February 1969, Shostakovich stated, “In the poem “Death of the poet,” I really wanted to change the first words *Tak on lezhal* to *Poet lezhal* (The poet lay) or *Poet byl mērtv* (The poet was dead). In the text, the word ‘poet’ does not occur, but it is inevitable (*neobchodimo*).”³¹ Shostakovich chose the latter variant: “The poet was dead.” In fact, there are two changes here. First, Shostakovich replaced “he” by “the poet.” He may have felt that the title did not explain clearly that the “He” in the first line refers to the poet who had died. Second, he replaced “lay” by “was dead,” possibly feeling that the listener might think that, at that moment in the poem, the poet was not yet dead but only lying ill. It may be assumed that Shostakovich had not asked Silman’s permission for this change, but that she tacitly agreed when thanking the composer back stage for using her translations.

The most important difference in the first two lines is that the translation lacks the vivid poignancy of a body lying in state, evoked by a “swollen” face lying in “pillows” that are “steeply” piled up. Furthermore, the translation states that the poet’s face after his death had “the same paleness” (as before), whereas Rilke only says that the poet’s face was pale (after his death). Given the fact that the poem deals with the *transformation* of the poet’s face after his death,³² the translation is inappropriate. The translation also suggests that the face “denied something,” whereas Rilke writes that the face was in a “state of denial” or non-acceptance (i.e., of death). Rilke uses the word *Antlitz* (face, countenance), which is translated as *lico*. And later in the poem, he uses the word *Gesicht* (lines 10 and 11), which is also translated as *lico*. A famous later translation of the *Neue Gedichte* by Bogatyrëv has the literary archaism *lik*,³³ which is a better translation for *Antlitz*. The difference in German between *Antlitz* and *Gesicht* is that *Gesicht* (also) contains the notion of seeing and foreseeing (*Schauen*), which is lost in Silman’s translation (but hard to maintain in any Russian translation).

In lines 3–5, the text takes a new grammatical subject: the world and the poet’s knowing about the world. The world and the poet’s knowledge of the world are “torn off from his senses” by death—death causes a rude, immediate, and definitive disruption between the poet and the world. The translation misses the power of the metaphor and merely states that the poet’s knowing about the world has extinguished.³⁴ What is most striking in the second stanza is the repetition of the word *diese* (this, these). It occurs five times in three lines (seven times in the entire poem). This is an expressive way (“Here! Look at it!”) to point out that the world is around us, visible, almost tangible for the writer and the reader—but not anymore for the dead poet (who was closest of all to the world before his death). In the Russian translation of the stanza, the word does not occur even once.³⁵ In the last stanza, Rilke



Der Tod des Dichters

Er lag. Sein aufgestelltes Antlitz war
bleich und verweigernd in den steilen Kissen,
seitdem die Welt und dieses von-ihr-Wissen, von
seinen Sinnen abgerissen,
zurückfiel an das teilnahmslose Jahr.

Die, so ihn leben sahen, wussten nicht,
wie sehr er Eines war mit allem diesen;
denn Dieses: diese Tiefen, diese Wiesen
und diese Wasser *waren* sein Gesicht.

O sein Gesicht war diese ganze Weite,
die jetzt noch zu ihm will und um ihn wirbt;
und seine Maske, die nun bang verdirbt,
ist zart und offen wie die Innenseite
von einer Frucht, die an der Luft verdirbt.

Death of the Poet (literal translation Nowak)

He lay. His swollen face was
pale and defiant in the steep pillows,
since the world and this knowing-about-it,
torn off from his senses,
fell back to the indifferent year.

Those who saw him at life did not know
how much he had been one with all this;
for this: these valleys, these meadows,
and these waters *were* his face.

Oh, his face was this entire vastness
that still seeks him and woes him;
and his mask, which now anxiously dies,
is tender and open like the inner side
of a fruit that decays in the air.

Schlußstück

Der Tod ist groß.
Wir sind die Seinen
Lachenden Munds.
Wenn wir uns mitten im Leben meinen
wagt er zu weinen
mitten in uns.

Closing piece (literal translation Nowak)

Death is great.
We are his
With laughing mouths.
When we deem ourselves in the midst of life
He dares to cry
In the middle of us.

Смерть поэта (translation Silman)

Так он лежал. Лицо его, храня
все ту же бледность, что-то отвергало,
оно когда-то все о мире знало,
но это знание угасало
и возвращалось в равнодушие дня.

Где им понять, как долог этот путь:
о, мир и он — все было так едино:
озера, и ущелья, и равнина
его лица и составляли суть.

Лицо его и было тем простором,
что тянется к нему и тщетно льнёт, -
а эта маска робкая умрёт,
открыто предоставленная взорам, —
на тленье обреченный, нежный плод.

Death of the Poet (literal translation Nowak)

Thus he lay. His face, preserving
the same paleness, denied something,
it once knew all about the world,
but this knowing extinguished
and returned to the indifference of the day.

How could they understand how long this road is:
oh, the world and he – everything was so much the
same: the lakes, and the clefts and the plains
were the essence of his face.

His face indeed was that vast space
that reaches toward him and flatters him in vain,-
and this timid mask will die,
openly exposed to glances,
doomed to rot, a tender fruit.

Заключение (translation Silman)

Всевластна смерть.
Она на страже
и в счастья час.
В миг высшей жизни она в нас страждет,
ждет нас и жаждет –
и плачет в нас.

Conclusion (literal translation Nowak)

Almighty is death.
He stands guard
Also at the time of happiness.
At the moment of higher life, he suffers in us
He waits for us and hungers –
And cries in us.



completes his oft-used triad *Antlitz-Gesicht-Maske*.³⁶ In line 13, Silman writes that the mask is “openly exposed to glances,” whereas Rilke writes “open,” which, given the comparison with a fruit, reads as “opened,” “laid open.” The strikingly bold and complex comparison of the poet’s face or death mask with the inner side of an opened fruit is lost in the translation.

3.3 Comments on the translation of “Schlußstück”

This poem was written in 1900/1901 and first published in the third edition of *Avalun, Ein Jahrbuch neuer deutscher lyrischer Wortkunst* (München 1901). This limited edition contains just six poems by Rilke, of which *Schlußstück* is the last. It had no title then, as was still the case when it was published in *Das Buch der Bilder* (1902).³⁷ The poem is set to music by a number of other composers.³⁸ The rhyme scheme is xab/aab. The poem includes six short lines with a more or less symmetric division of accents.³⁹ Lines 2 and 3 are identical with lines 5 and 6, respectively, in metre and rhyme. The first and fourth lines are stressed to a high degree—the central axis of the poem is the fourth line.⁴⁰ The translation maintains the rhyme scheme, but does not always follow the number of syllables contained within the original. One of the issues with translating this poem is the gender of death. In the Germanic languages (German, English, Dutch), death is masculine, whereas in the Roman and Slavonic languages, death is feminine. The adjective associated with death is “almighty” in the Russian translation,

which is more than the German “groß” (great, grand)—an epithet for God. Furthermore, in both English and in Russian, the word “almighty” is typically used in combination with God. Finally, the inversion of subject and predicate in the translation creates a false opposition: *almighty* is death (not powerless).

The fourth line refers to the *topos* of death surrounding us even in the midst of our lives (*Media vita in morte sumus*), which comes to us from Luther’s translation of a 7th-century antiphon. The translation misses this allusion. In the last three lines, the effect of what death does when we think we are in the middle of life, is watered down in the translation by the use of four verbs (suffers, waits, hungers, cries) where the original has only one (cries). Furthermore, the important notion of death “daring” to cry in the middle of us is lost in the translation.

A final remark on this poem. August Stahl remarks that the poem’s tone is quiet and its parts well-balanced. He argues that the aim of the poem is to take away the strangeness of death and to soften its hardness.⁴¹ If this is true, it is ironic that Shostakovich chose this poem to articulate his view that death is terrifying.

Conclusion

Akhmatova was probably right: Silman’s translation is not a very good one, as it loses much of the power and directness of the original poems. But if these translations had not existed in 1969, there would have been no Rilke poems in Shostakovich’s Fourteenth Symphony.

Notes:

1. I thank my son Alexander for reviewing the language in an earlier draft of this article.
2. Hopefully, future research will deal with the Russian translations of the other poems in the Fourteenth Symphony (i.e., those by Apollinaire and Lorca), to which Shostakovich made major cuts and insertions.
3. For an account of the genesis of the symphony, see Elizabeth Wilson, *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered*, second edition (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 463–77; Krzysztof Meyer, *Szostakowicz* (Warsaw, 1986), 242–46; David Hurwitz, *Shostakovich: Symphonies and Concertos* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 2006), 193–201.
4. The symphony was officially premiered on 29 September 1969 in Leningrad after a closed concert in Moscow on 21 June 1969. Britten conducted the Western European premiere at the Aldeburgh Festival in June 1970.
5. Letter to Isaac Glikman dated 19 March 1969, translation in Wilson, 464. For an edition of these letters, see *Story of a friendship: The letters of Dmitry Shostakovich to Isaak Glikman 1941–1975*, translated by Anthony Phillips (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).
6. Remembered by Mark Lubotsky as quoted in Wilson, 471. Riemer states that the Fourteenth Symphony can be seen as a protest against the power of death. See J. Riemer, *Rilkes Frühwerk in der Musik*, diss. Heidelberg, 2010, 324–25. See also pp. 318–41 for an analysis of the musical *exposé* of the two Rilke pieces of the symphony.
7. The Apollinaire translations used by Shostakovich were made by M. Kudinov and the Lorca translations by I. Tynyanova and A. Geleskul. The poem by Küchelbecher was written in Russian.
8. Shostakovich grouped the eleven parts into four movements: 1–4, 5–6, 7–8 and 9–11, but this should probably be considered to be an afterthought. See Francis Maes, “The Dance of Death as Aesthetic Type: Considerations of Genre and Content in Shostakovich’s Fourteenth Symphony,” *DSCH Journal* 41: 15–28.
9. Tamara Isaakovna Sil’man (1909–1974), poet, playwright and translator. The selection is preceded by a long introduction by her husband Vladimir Grigorievich Admoni (1909–1993), linguist, literary critic and translator, friend of Anna Akhmatova and witness in defence for Joseph Brodsky in the communist show trial of 1964.
10. Sometimes these German translations are referred to as “back-translations,” but strictly speaking they are not. A back-translation in this context would mean a translation of the Russian translations *back into the original language* (which would result in a strange version of the original poems).



11. Sanderling, quoted in Wilson, 475–76.
12. Editor of Sikorski Verlag and friend and librettist of Schnittke.
13. Dmitri Schostakowitsch, 14. Symphonie op. 135, Taschenpartitur (Hamburg, 1970). The Sikorski Catalogue of Works, 2011 (updated September 2014), p. 206 mentions under the heading: Translations “into German by Jörg Morgener and by Waltraut Levine.” [See also the Hulme, Dmitri Shostakovich Catalogue.] The first performance in German took place in Gelsenkirchen in September 1970.
14. Sanderling, quoted in Wilson, 475–76.
15. The same applies to Sanderling’s translations of the texts in the Thirteenth Symphony and the Michelangelo songs (email from Sanderling to the author dated 27 October 2014). See also the interview with Sanderling in *DSCH Journal* 41: 51.
16. Wilson, 475–76.
17. Hurwitz, 200.
18. Köchel, email to the author dated 9 November 2014: “Da die russischen (von Schostakowitsch benutzten) Übersetzungen weitgehend den Sprachrhythmus der Originaltexte beibehielten, war nur an wenigen Stellen eine rhythmische Retusche erforderlich.”
19. Sikorski Catalogue of Works, 2011 (updated September 2014), 206.
20. Michael Mishra, *A Shostakovich Companion* (London: Praeger, 2008), ch. 10, n. 37.
21. Köchel, email to the author dated 15 November 2014.
22. Köchel, emails to the author dated 4 and 15 November 2014. It would be interesting to make a comparative analysis of the texts of Brentano, Apollinaire, the Russian translation which Shostakovich used, and Morgener’s German translation. In this respect, Mr Köchel would be a very valuable source.
23. Elena Lysenkova, email to the author dated 12 September 2014. Lysenkova is the author of a dissertation on translations of Rilke’s work in Russian (Poezia i proza R.M. Ril’ke v russkikh perevodach, thesis in Russian, Northeastern State University, Magadan 2007).
24. T. Silman, V. Admoni, *My vspominajem* (St. Petersburg, 1993), 300–330.
25. T. Silman, V. Admoni, loc. cit. Riemer, o.c. p. 334 suggests that Shostakovich’s interest in Rilke was possibly caused by the fact that he knew Marina Tsvetayeva and that Tsvetayeva (and Pasternak) were involved in a correspondence with Rilke. The fact is correct (see the publication of this oscillating correspondence by Jevgeni Borosovich Pasternak e.a., Insel Verlag 1983 (German translation) and Moskva, *Kniga*, 1990 (Russian translation)). However, I fail to see a causal link in this respect.
26. D. Shostakovich, *Sobranje socinenij, Tom vos’moj*, edited by O.M. Komarnickij, I.A. Shostakovich, D.G. Byazrov, Moscow 1980, (“the 1980 Score”), Notes to the 14th Symphony: “This selection with a complimentary inscription [s darstvennoj nadpisyu] by T. Silman and V. Admoni is in the composer’s private library.”
27. T. Silman, V. Admoni, *My vspominajem*, St. Petersburg 1993, p. 335. The authors also sent a copy of the translations to Ruth Rilke, with whom they had a long-lasting correspondence.
28. Lidia Čukovskaja, *Zapiski ob Anne Achmatovoj*, tom tretij (Moskva, 1997), 281, adding that Akhmatova emphasised that she was fond of Silman and Admoni.
29. *Rainer Maria Rilke Gedichte*, ed. Manfred Engel and Ulrich Fülleborn (Insel Verlag, 1996), 929. See for an analysis of Shostakovich’s interpretation and use of the two poems: Riemer, 324–25, 340–41.
30. In two places, a difference in syntax between the Russian text and the German original created a flaw in the prosodic structure, which caused Shostakovich to add six notes to bar 125 and to make a slight change in bar 129.
31. Source: Notes to the 1980 Score (see note 25). The letters of Shostakovich to his wife Irina are not published.
32. See Müller, *Rainer Maria Rilkes “Neue Gedichte”. Vielfältigkeit eines Gedichttypus* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1971), 55.
33. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Novye stichotvorenija* (Augsburg, 2003).
34. In line 6, the translation states that the poet had a long way to go and that “they” couldn’t possibly (*gde*) understand that. This is not in the poem.
35. Bogatyřev uses this word three times in his translation.
36. See for an analysis of the concepts of face/countenance, true face, life mask and death mask: H.F. Peters, *Rainer Maria Rilke: Masks and the Man* (Seattle, 1960), 26–27, and Brigitte L. Bradley, *R.M. Rilkes Neue Gedichte. Ihr zyklisches Gefüge* (Bern, 1967), 50–51.
37. See also August Stahl, “Schlussstück”. *Rilkes Sicht und Deutung des Todes*. In *Lustrum* 2011 (Budapest), 944.
38. Helmut Paulsen, Ernest Viëtor, Henk Badings, Joep Willem Frederik Straesser, Rolf Wallin, Winfried Zillig. Source: LiederNet Archive, founded by Emily Ezust (<http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/>).
39. Stahl, 960.
40. See I.I. Revzin, “Strukturanalyse eines Gedichts von Rilke,” *Linguistische Berichte* 15 (1971): 63–66.
41. Stahl, 960.

