Transference

Volume 7
Issue 1 | Fall 2019

Article 3

2019

Liking Mozart by Chen Chia-tai

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Recommended Citation

Wong, Elaine (2019) "*Liking Mozart* by Chen Chia-tai," *Transference*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol7/iss1/3

Elaine Wong
Liking Mozart

Chen Chia-tai
莫札特讚

A ride on a classical time machine
plays the drizzling sighs of Salzburg
and zooms in on a plaza of strolling pigeons.
Tuneful bells strike in a commotion,
flaunting plenty of Mozart—
where Mozart appears, darkness clears.

By a flowing creek, red flowers and white geese
nibble at the prodigy's childhood days:
the marching song, gone viral via horse carriages,
dropped him off in Vienna early on.
A personal request by the Austro-Hungarian king:
an Italian opera, which he adorns with arias.
His Turkish-style rondo puts
Oriental sentiments on loop.

Mozart appears in a violin
thick with cheers, glissando, pizzicato, saltando.
Princes and dukes bawl in astonishment,
gentlewomen laugh without restraint—
they hear Mozart move from the clarinet and bassoon
to the slurring trombone,
traveling back and forth
on his straitened journey.

A rhythm lights up the sacred flame. A theme
unveils the Apocalypse. The Black Forest goes all out
to fix a counterpoint of bird chirps.
Mozart appears in a rest—
the musicians hear the score from within.
The sadder they feel, the harder they play.
Gardens and fountains give opera endings away
as often as they display permanence and transience.

The insignificant body is
a vessel borrowed from God.
So unparalleled is a gift that soars and dives
there is no place for visionary dreams—
Mozart appears in a watermark.
Eighteenth-century aesthetics,
sometimes obscure, sometimes sheer, have never
been cut off from eternity.

A C-minor vast as the horizon,
a D-minor swelling with destiny.
Like a magic flute, the notes drive off the trends.
And now, only a half antique piano is in his hands.
Turning away from splendor,
history coughs up blood.
The definition of *genius*
takes the salute and retires—

Mozart appears as time disappears.
Frenzied singing, quiet hums; faraway wishes, lingering.
He calls on the blue sky and purple clouds,
tears burying his face like a dark rain.
The requiem draws to a close,
composed for a mysterious figure
but performed for himself.
There he is, in the toll of a bell at a misty nightfall.

At a grassy cemetery for the common folk,
sorrow and joy play a constant tug-of-war.
A flimsy back view
is in the hug of the Danube.
A flash of lightning
illuminates Mozart's profile—
that of a sad sculpture, timeless,
concealed in an ineffable, sacred glimpse.

The spirit of Salzburg makes a sound. The earth
opens its ears to Amadeus
as it does to dewdrops, smiles, happiness.
Mozart appears always—
here and there, now and then.
Mozart appears—far and near, with or without music.

Commentary

Chen Chia-tai 陳家帶 was born in Keelung, Taiwan and lives in Taipei, Taiwan. After a long career in newspaper journalism, he is currently a part-time lecturer of journalism and literature. Chen has published five poetry collections and has received a first prize of the Taipei Literary Award in modern poetry, a Golden Tripod Award in news editing, and a China Times Award in narrative poetry. A lover of classical music and classical cinema, Chen often engages these subjects in his poems.

As implied by the title, "Liking Mozart" is a reflection on Mozart with a contemporary twist. The character 讚 *zan* in the original title 莫札特讚 means "praise" or, in classical Chinese, "commendation." In contemporary Taiwan, *zan* is a slang term meaning "awesome" (as an adjective) and is also the Chinese word for "like" (as a noun) on social media. While the Chinese title retains all of these senses, in the translation I highlighted the contemporary aspect to strengthen the poem's relevance to our time and to anticipate the poem's playful element. My choice was reinforced by Chen's use of two social media-inspired expressions, the local neologism 放閃 *fang shan*, meaning "flaunt," (line 5) and the Chinese translation of "go viral," 瘋傳 *feng chuang* (line 9).

The poem evolves around Mozart's lasting influences after a life of talent and misfortune. When I first read the poem, I was strongly impressed by its structural coherence. Several elements work together to create the tight structure, and the one that stands out to me most is a recurring syntactic construction that uses the Chinese locative coverb 在 (*zai*, meaning "be at/in") to describe Mozart's presence in figurative locations (e.g. line 15, 莫札特在一支小提琴裡 and Line 26, 莫札特在一只休止符裡). Other elements include consistent stanza lengths, the relatively short lines that are mostly self-contained phrasal units, and the use of parallelism. It turned out that recreating the structure was the biggest challenge in my translation.

The recurring pattern of the locative phrases involving 在 (*zai*) is challenging to translate because Mozart's presences as described in the poem are abstract and felt rather than existent. I settled on the word "appear" to foreground a tangible

perception of Mozart's presence without denoting an actual existence. In addition, *zai* is at times juxtaposed with its negative form 不在 (*bu zai*) in the same line, as in 莫札特在黑暗不在的地方 (line 6), resulting in a subtle but appealing sound pattern. I tried to recreate the effect through an internal rhyme with "appear" and was pleasantly surprised by the way the internal rhyme bolstered the structural recurrence of the word.

The self-contained phrasal units in most of the lines contribute to the structural coherence in the Chinese poem, but they may not lend the same effect in English. In Chinese, contextual cues play an important role in textual understanding. For instance, optional omission of the grammatical subject is common in Chinese and the subject can usually be implied in the context. The practice of integrating implicit contextual information into textual interpretation, alongside explicit lexical and grammatical details, is pivotal in bridging topical shifts when reading Chinese, especially for texts created with formal compactness like the phrasal units in "Liking Mozart."

The first two pairs of lines in stanza 5, each making a complete semantic unit, can be an example: in the original poem, line 1 is a noun phrase, line 2 is a complement, line 3 starts with an adjective phrase without a grammatical subject, and line 4 is a complete sentence (微賤的肉身/向上帝借來的容器/崇華幽邃, 已列極品/再無高靈可托夢—). It is the context of Mozart's life that holds the lines together. Their verbal compactness is also poetically appealing. Yet translating these Chinese phrasal units into their English counterparts would make them fragmentary. To achieve an overall structural coherence in the English translation, I opted for syntactic coherence among these lines and throughout the poem. I supplied the missing syntactic categories as necessary while balancing it with an openness in meaning as would be the case with contextual cues, as well as with compactness in style.

Source text:

Chen, Chia-tai. "Mozhatezan" (莫札特讚, Liking Mozart). *China Times*, 24 July 2018, https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20180724000833-260115?chdtv.