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Turning Foreign Verse Into English Prose *Grammy-Show Performance Highlights The Difficulties Of Adapting Lyrics*

By JIM BESSMAN

NEW YORK - For Roxanne Seeman, Alejandro Sanz's performance of "Quisiera Ser" (I'd Like to Be) with Destiny's Child at the Grammy Awards show illustrated the challenge facing English-language lyricists who adapt a foreign-language song into English.

"In addition to finding a passionate way of adapting the Spanish meaning into English, having the words fit the musical notes, and having the accent of the words in the right places musically, one also has to consider a rhyme scheme," says Seeman, who wrote the English lyric to the Sanz original and has penned other songs for the likes of Barbra Streisand, the Sisters of Mercy, and Earth, Wind & Fire. "Sometimes it's also nice to try and match the sounds of the original language and to have internal rhymes and alliteration."

Seeman notes that a typical problem for the English adaptor is exemplified by the English word "light." "In English, it's one syllable," she explains, "but 'light' in French is 'lumiere'—'lu-me-air-re'—four syllables. Or the word 'love' in English is one syllable, but the Spanish 'amor' and French 'amour' are two

than one syllable also has to match with the accent of the notes in the melody."

Returning to "Quisiera Ser," Seeman says that the literal translation of the lyric "Son esos besos que ni frio ni calor/Pero si son de tu boca/Tambien, los quiero yo" is "They are the kisses that are neither cold nor hot/But if they are from your mouth/Also, I want them." But when it was performed by Destiny's Child on the Grammy Awards telecast, the English lyric became, "And if your kisses

Tahitian words "noa noa" in her lyric. She believes that the words mean "fragrant country," and she has since given the name to her publishing company (Noa Noa Music [ASCAP]).

GLOBAL EXPERIENCE

Well-traveled and conversant in seven languages, Seeman has taken inspiration from her global interests and experiences. She says literature, as well as visual images, inform her work. "My lyric for the song 'Hong Kong Bay (Love Without Pain)' was inspired by a sunset cruise of the Hong Kong harbor on a Chinese junk and the lines from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, 'Without suffering what would be the pleasure of life?/Life would be transformed into an endless church service; it would be holy, but tedious.'"

In 1991, Seeman and Hughes scored the top-selling international single in Japan with Hughes' recording of "Welcome to the Edge," which was covered in Japanese and taken to No. 1 by female duo Wink. Other significant songs co-written by Seeman include her original English lyrics for Streisand's "Let's Start Right Now"—a version of



Seeman

syllables, and in Italian, 'amore' is three syllables."

Or take this line from the lyrics to Rafael Hernandez's tropical Latin song "Silencio," as recorded by Ibrahim Ferrer of the Buena Vista Social Club: "Yo no quiero que las flores sepan los tormentos que me da la vida."

"It's 20 syllables," Seeman notes, "while the literal English translation is 'I don't want the flowers to know of my life's torments'—13 syllables—which doesn't convey the poetry and passion [that is] natural in the original Spanish lyric."

Adapting a song from a foreign language into English, then, is not a matter of simple translation, especially considering that songs in foreign languages often have more notes to accommodate the words—which, as noted, often have more syllables than the same word in English.

Keeping The Beauty

"Some words, phrases, or ideas in a foreign language have their own meaning and beauty but do not translate well into English," Seeman continues. "And again, the statement one would use in English now has to be fit to the notes. And if you're to preserve the original intent of the author, you have to find another way of saying the same thought that will not only fit to the musical notes, but the natural stress or accent of a word in English with more

leave me wanting more and more/ Still because they are yours/I want them even more."

Seeman stresses here that her work is an adaptation—not a translation. "Take 'My Way,' " she says, speaking of Frank Sinatra singing Paul Anka's rewritten English lyric for the French song "Comme d'Habitude." "He says, 'I chewed it up and spit it out'—which isn't really very French. They'd never say something like that. But it was a big hit."

Seeman likens the process of adapting foreign-language lyrics into English to writing lyrics for instrumental songs. "Instrumentals, and especially jazz instrumentals, have many notes requiring more syllables—and thus more words—than a pop song might."

A jazz pianist who studied with Sir Roland Hanna, Seeman got her first break in 1979, when Dee Dee Bridgewater recorded Ramsey Lewis' jazz instrumental "Tequila Mockingbird," adding Seeman's lyrics to the music composed by Larry Dunn of Earth, Wind & Fire. This led to Seeman being asked to write a lyric for the Deodato instrumental "Tahiti Hut," which he had written with Earth, Wind & Fire's Maurice White.

Coincidentally, Seeman had just been to Tahiti and included the

the Portuguese-language Brazilian song "Raios de Luz" (Ray of Light)—and Diane Schuur's "I'd Fly," a version of Richard Cocciante's French hit "Pour Elle" (For Her).

She collaborated with Hughes and Sisters of Mercy vocalist Andrew Eldritch on the English goth group's international hit "Under the Gun" and on Bette Midler's "Night and Day." Her work with French composer/songwriter Eric Levi of ambient rock band Era and Bailey became the end-title song for the hit French film *La Vengeance d'Une Blonde*. She also collaborated with Brazilian composer/vocalist Djavan on the song "So Hard to Know" from the Chet Baker documentary *Let's Get Lost* and with Earth, Wind & Fire on "Cruisin' " for the Spike Lee film *Get on the Bus*.

Sensing a post-Sept. 11 interest among international acts in crossing over to an English audience, Seeman now looks to increase her involvement in facilitating it.

"They're trying to find a way for their music to be adapted while still retaining their identity," she says. "They want to be understandable and appealing to the English-speaking audience, and the U.S. is becoming more sensitive to the rest of the world because it's no longer impregnable. The world is gathering closer together and is sensitive to other countries in ways they never were before."