

Words for music

How does one write about music? And how does one translate writing about music? Angela Dickson translated a book on Russian cellist Berlinsky



Angela Dickson is a French to English medical translator by day, classical musician by evening, weekend and holiday, and hopes to mix the two fields more in the future. She is a teaching fellow at University College London, teaching practical medical translation, and also sits on the ITI board and is seeking re-election this year. She lives in Coventry with her family. Twitter: @AMDTransl.

In 2016 I was approached to translate *Valentin Berlinsky – Le Quatuor d'une Vie* by Maria Matalaev. Two years later, and a year after I handed in my translation, the book is now out, with the title *Valentin Berlinsky – A Quartet for Life* (Kahn & Averill). Translating it has been both complex and rewarding, and a complete change from my routine as a medical translator.

Man, musician and writer

Valentin Berlinsky (1925-2008) was a Russian cellist, who played with the Borodin Quartet for over 60 years. As student, musician and mentor, he knew generations of musicians, had opinions on most of them, and accumulated a treasury of anecdotes.

The quartet famously played at the funerals of Stalin and composer Sergei Prokofiev, who died on the same day. It was the first group to play most of Shostakovich's string quartets, commissioning works from all the major Soviet composers of the day, and many from abroad. The musicians knew everyone, and while many of their friends and colleagues eventually left the Soviet Union, the Borodin Quartet did not (though some of its members did).

In Berlinsky's lifetime he was not known as a writer, but it emerged that he had kept extensive diaries of his experiences, and logs of all the concerts the Borodin Quartet performed. His granddaughter, Maria Matalaev, who was born and lives in Paris, collated his archive material, and combined the diaries with his recollections in later life, with additional interviews between Berlinsky and his close friend Vera Teplitskaya. She even included contributions from some of his

friends, relatives and colleagues, which provide extra perspectives. Maria is an accomplished pianist and a literary scholar, and this shows in her lucid translation of the original Russian texts. My English version is a translation of the French book that resulted from her work.

Writing about music might seem a little like dancing about architecture, but nonetheless people try to do it. The writing about music here takes two forms. There are technical considerations about what a musician does, physically, to achieve a particular effect; these can be of scholarly interest, in the case of

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major works like the Shostakovich quartet, and (I hope) of wider value to anyone who loves these pieces of music. There are also wider observations about what musicians are, what they do, and how they function as members of a society.

The outcome is a mix of contemporary observations, often written late at night after travelling great distances to perform, and later recollections. The interviews with his friend Vera Teplitskaya, herself a pianist, are illuminating because Vera is not an invisible interviewer, and her distinctive personality shines through in places. The pieces by

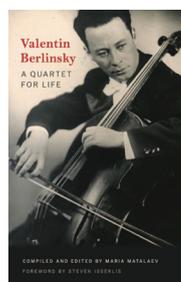
those who knew Berlinsky provide glimpses of what might have been omitted in Berlinsky's own writing; he only briefly touches on the effects of so much touring on his personal life, for example, and his own stance on the politics of the day.

The book also has archival interest, as it contains extremely comprehensive logs of the Borodin Quartet's concerts, recordings and repertoire, as well as the musicians with whom they worked. It's quite a mix, and as I worked so closely with the text, I have to say I no longer have a good overview of how it works as a compilation!

Music, translation and me

I am both a musician and a translator; I never went to music college, but I take my music very seriously and would be lost without it. I have some professional-level training, am sometimes paid to play, and regularly perform for the joy of it, as an orchestral and chamber musician, and occasionally as a soloist. The social side of music provides a balance to my life as a translator, which can sometimes be (too) solitary. I can never aspire to the standards set by those who are immersed in music full-time, but I get as close as I can.

These might seem like two very separate parts of my life, but in the background there's always some interaction. I firmly believe that the key to any translation that works is a grasp of the music of language, in the very broadest sense. This is most obvious in literary translation, in which the rhythm and phrasing of a passage can be as important as lexical meaning, if not more so. Even in seemingly dry and technical fields such as medical translation, where I spend most of my time, this music is still important. I translate a lot of cardiology reports, and this awareness and 'ear' helps me to marshal my knowledge and to remember the more natural formulations in English; the things doctors would say to one another, rather than dictionary renditions. I believe it's no accident that I often think of poor translations as 'cloth-eared' or 'tin-eared' (if you truly are tone-deaf, please don't write in, as it's possible you achieve excellent translations by other means!).



The musical score (used in the French edition) shows changes Shostakovich made to his own work in response to the players' performance of it

My instrument is the viola, and it's not too fanciful to draw parallels between viola players and translators. Violas sit in the middle of the orchestra, where we play the inner harmonies, but occasionally we also have moments to shine and play the melody. We are often overlooked, and often the butt of jokes from the ill-informed, but I for one am very happy in my viola seat and wouldn't want to be anywhere else. Need I draw a parallel with the translator, who mainly works in the background but who occasionally steps into the spotlight to shine too?

And understanding the basics of a string player's life certainly helped with this translation! While there are many tales of touring, of raucous post-concert gatherings, and encounters with major musical and non-musical figures, there is also plenty about the discussions

(arguments) in a professional quartet about the fine details of playing. Which part of the bow shall we use in this passage? How can we make this section more uniform, or make one part more prominent? I played in a touring quartet when I was in my teens, so have a little experience of this peculiar four-way marriage.

Tackling the technicalities

Maria's French is highly lucid, and there were only a few places where I was not completely certain about her meaning. I was in email contact with her throughout the translation process, so was able to clarify any problems straight away. The translations, together with notes of the conversations Maria and I had, were sent to the editor, herself a French to English translator. The publisher was also good enough to bring Maria, the editor and me together to talk about the project over lunch, which was a great help. Remote working alone is not nearly so congenial.

A certain amount of background reading was essential. Rostislav Dubinsky, the Borodin Quartet's long-standing first violinist, wrote a volume of memoirs called *Stormy Applause* after he defected to the United States. His book and Berlinsky's couldn't be more different, and all I can say is I am glad I don't have to decide whose version is the 'true' one. I looked at Elizabeth Wilson's work, particularly her biography of Shostakovich, for suggestions as to how to write in English about Soviet Russia. An

English translation of Sviatoslav Richter's memoirs also provided useful corroboration of some of the concert diaries.

Translating French that originated in Russian posed some very specific problems. Russian is transliterated differently in French and English, which is fine when dealing with a famous name (Tchaikovski in French, Tchaikovsky in English, Tschaiowsky in German) but more problematic when the person is less well known. I had to work back from the French to find out the original Russian, and thence decide on an appropriate English transliteration. Repeat many times, for many names of people and places! However, I had some invaluable help in this from a Russian to English translation colleague, Samantha Boorer, whom I originally met when we were playing in an orchestra. We spent

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some happy moments on Skype trying to figure out the English names for various small Soviet concert venues.

Perhaps most importantly, none of this background work will be obvious to the general reader if I have done my job well (perhaps again there are parallels with the viola's role in the orchestra). My aim was to achieve a readable book that will appeal to musically interested readers and those concerned with the artistic history of the Soviet Union, and which will not offend either group's ear for appropriate language. I hope I have conveyed Berlinsky's chatty style, and his interviewer's more high-flown questions, alongside a level of detail that doesn't trip the reader up.

Now, if anyone knows a publisher who wants to commission a translation of violinist Ivry Gitlis' memoirs, do get in touch!

The art of the deal: what went well and what might have gone better

The things that went well

First of all, I had good luck! The project came to me because I had been to a conference and had a chance conversation with a fellow translator on the airport bus about life in general, translation and music. Shortly after that, the publisher found this colleague when searching for local translators, and when he contacted her about this project my name came to mind instantly.

On the other hand, I did pick up the phone. When the publisher emailed me, I knew I was the

perfect person for the project, and very much wanted to be involved. A phone call allowed me to convey this while agreeing terms that were favourable to me.

What I might do differently

If and when there is a next time, I would stipulate in the contract that my name should appear on the cover (though I am acknowledged on the title page and in the publicity).

I should also have stated that I needed to see the proofs. I knew the editor was excellent and

trustworthy, but a couple of things slipped through that I might have picked up had I been able to do a final check.

What I would advise others

Get a formal contract, and get it vetted by the Society of Authors' contract people.

For a book-length project, try to make the deadline as long as you can – other clients and areas of your life will need your attention, and long deadlines have a habit of becoming short ones if you wait long enough!