

**Broken Music,  
or the Wondrous Story of  
How a Fine Voice Was  
Delivered from the  
Treachurous Clutches of  
Deception and  
Returned to Itself**

*Michele Piumini*

# I

## *It may seem a million miles away...*

*A Gordon Matthew Sumner, buona voce.*

Such is the dedication on a book that some of you may chance to have. To those who do, here's a question and a plea.

Question: you know who Gordon Matthew Sumner is, don't you? The mystery will soon be solved anyway.

Plea: the book, in a way, was where it all began. The idea is saving author and title till the end, so keep it quiet!

Preamble, hopefully not too long. *Broken Music*, which is not the book at issue, is a dream that only ten years ago I'd never have dared to cherish.

To those who enquire about my passions, I promptly reply, in alphabetical order: language, and music.

My passion for language (as in studying foreign languages, but also and mostly as the investigation of language as a human faculty) is, at least partially, soon explained: for familiar reasons, I grew up among words, written, read out and narrated. For less familiar reasons (I couldn't pin them down even though I've known myself for thirty-one years), my love for words has taken a different and, so to speak, more technical path. I was one of those rare examples of students who face sentence analysis and the scrutiny of grammar subtleties – whether Italian, English, Greek, or Latin – with ecstatic and obsessive devotion. I very much enjoy remembering the dumbfounded faces of my lower secondary and high-school mates. Pretty much the same faces of my university mates at Logic classes: the horror! I, a student of Foreign Languages and Literatures, had *chosen* to take an exam that at least three quarters of Philosophy students would go to any lengths to avoid! More or less the same share of Foreign Language students who keep clear of General Linguistics, the subject I graduated in. Those who know Logic and Linguistics are aware that they provoke equally strong and contrasting reactions: either you love them or you detest them. Incidentally, those were the days when my translation career started, and only now do I realize how, without studying those (and other similar) subjects, I probably wouldn't be here today, or at least I would have gotten here with a lot more difficulty.

My passion for music (i.e. listening to as wide a range of styles as possible, but also composing and recording musical experiments and testing the percussive and melodic potential of objects, various furnishings and unfortunate friends/relatives) is approximately just as old, and has obviously evolved through the years. The music I

have learnt to appreciate goes from jazz to electro, from folk to so-called “new age”, from pop to soundtracks, from fusion to Apulian Taranta. My love at first hearing, though, was undeniably one: Gordon Matthew Sumner. You don’t know why he started calling himself “Sting” at the dawn of his career? Could be your first reason to read *Broken Music*, which at last we begin to approach...

*Broken Music* was the first – and so far most exciting, as you can guess – in a (hopefully long!) series of moments that allowed me to blend the aforementioned passions into one. Mind you: as any other form of writing, translation is a musical process in itself. But when you get to translate the words of your favourite musician, you know what I mean... The meeting-fusion of the elements reaches intoxicating peaks.

As it is, in late 2003 I learn that Sting has decided to write his own biography. Or rather, the story of his first twenty-five years, up to the eve of his success. I admit to being far from unbiased, but isn’t it an astoundingly brave idea for such a superstar? What better than to quote his very words here, from the book’s jacket flaps:

*Having been a songwriter most of my life, condensing my ideas and emotions into short rhyming couplets and setting them to music, I had never really considered writing a book. But upon arriving at the reflective age of fifty, I found myself drawn, for the first time, to write long passages that were as stimulating and intriguing to me as any songwriting I had ever done.*

*And so Broken Music began to take shape. It is a book about the early part of my life, from childhood through adolescence, right up to the eve of my success with the Police. It is a story very few people know.*

*I had no interest in writing a traditional autobiographical recitation of everything that’s ever happened to me. Instead I was drawn to exploring specific moments, certain people and relationships, and particular events which still resonate powerfully as I try to understand the child I was, and the man I became.*

And now for the back cover of the Italian edition – my own work:

*“Broken music”: these are the words an elderly British lady uses to describe her nephew’s cacophonous attempts at playing the piano. Son of a milkman and a housewife, the young Gordon Sumner grows up in Newcastle’s harsh industrial reality of the 1950s. At the end of the road there is a shipyard: Gordon is fascinated by the huge ships being built, ready to put out to sea... Will he manage to put out to sea as well, to escape from a family who can only clip his wings, and from a frustrated father who, even though his unfaithful wife has abandoned him, will love her till the end of his days? Gordon looks for a way out and finds a guitar, inherited by an uncle. A dream takes form in his mind: “making it”, struggling free of the chains of solitude and trying his luck as a musician. His dream will become a reality defying all expectations: after a number of attempts and disappointments, Gordon will grow up to become Sting, one of*

*the most internationally acclaimed musicians in the last twenty-five years, first as the leader of the Police, then as a solo artist with a gloriously variegated career.*

## II

*... but it gets a little closer every day*

A... BOOK... by... STING?

And not just any book: an autobiography! Such an idea – back in the autumn of 2003 – sends me into raptures, for multifarious and obvious reasons. Half of my English I learnt from his songs and his voice: he's one of those I'm grateful to for falling in love with this language. But a whole book... the very notion is so stunning that I fall into a kind of mental short circuit, which – speaking in hindsight – probably keeps me from springing into action there and then. A fatal hesitation but, as we will see, every cloud has a silver lining...

At first, I content myself with the raving reviews of those who have read the book, often from overseas, eagerly anticipating the moment when I will hold it in my hands. I'm a member of an international mailing list devoted to Sting and the Police: everyone is talking about *Broken Music*. Probably due to my bewildered state, it takes some time for the light to go on, one night, I recall, while I was half-asleep.

*Hey, wait a minute! Sting loves Italy: he recorded albums here, he spends a lot of time at his fabulous Palagio in Figline Valdarno that he bought for Lord knows how many zillions... Were it only for this, the Italian publishers must be after his book! I MUST BE THE TRANSLATOR!*

Now I *do* spring into action. The following morning, I trawl the Internet for *Broken Music*'s English publisher. Without further ado, I e-scribe the situation to them, politely begging to be told whether any Italian publisher has already acquired the rights. In the meantime, I unleash James – an American friend I met through the mailing list – after any useful news. Somehow we trace Sting's literary agent in America. The loyal James tries to call him, ready to pretend he's the person in charge for my foreign editorial relationships (or some other pompously implausible figure).

Tuut-tuut-tuut...

«*Shit, Mick, the line's always engaged!*»

The English publisher hasn't replied yet. Come to think of it, the Frankfurt International Bookfair is about to start: let's quickly check out the website... where's the list of publishers? Bingo, there it is, they're in! Only damn, I cannot fly to Frankfurt right now... A few months ago I was at Berlin's Literaturfestival, where I met Miriam, an unbelievably solicitous girl from the staff. We kept in touch after that, and I know she's going to Frankfurt, so I email her with all of my heart: would she be so kind as to

find them at the fair and ask them whether any Italian publisher has already put their hands on *Broken Music*? Time passes, my accomplices in America and Germany do their best, but I cannot afford wasting a second...

One of the clients I worked (and still work) for was Mondadori, the biggest Italian publishing house. Back then I also worked as an editor there, while today I am almost exclusively a translator and a translation teacher. So I thought: why not ask a managing director I know, who happens to be one of the most helpful people I've ever met in there? This turns out to be the turning point: despite James and Miriam's efforts, my foreign investigation department yields no results, while the managing director does give me the piece of news I was looking for.

*Broken Music* will be published in Italy by... Mondadori. To be more specific, by Mondadori Varia, the editorial office right next to the one I work for. They're the ones in charge of the best-sellers, from music biographies to far less serious books such as those written by a certain shorty and slimy prime minister.

Alas, it turns out I'm late. Only a few weeks ago, the translation has been assigned to someone else.

Had I been quicker in thinking of looking just round the corner...

Well, at least I gave it a try. Of course it burns to be defeated, but I attempt to console myself: if Sting ever writes a book about his second twenty-five years, I shall not be caught unprepared. As to *Broken Music*, I don't want to know who will translate it and I will keep right clear of the Italian version. Yes I will.

All I can do is plunge deep into the editing works I was involved in back then, aware that my dream has vanished for good.

Or has it?

Mondadori collaborators such as I was work in a small area with very few Macs at their disposal. There are no fixed seats, the law of the jungle rules undisputed: the early bird catches the worm. As it happens, one morning like any other I find myself sitting opposite an editor (henceforth "Our Woman") who months before had been called to substitute Mondadori Varia's editor-in-chief (henceforth "the EC"), away on maternity leave. Well, the translator for *Broken Music* had been chosen while Our Woman was in command. Understandably anxious to find a highly skilled professional, Mondadori Varia had asked an "old hand" of Italian rock journalism (henceforth "the Veteran"), who besides collaborating with several magazines writes and translates music books. (In case you wonder about his translating skills, we'll come back to that.)

And so, a seminal character in our story enters the stage. The Veteran had *warmly recommended* a dear friend of his to Mondadori Varia. Seemed he too was a rock critic. We will call him either "Our Man" or "the Trancelator". According to the current practice, he had been asked to translate the first chapter of *Broken Music* as a test. It was Our Woman who had assessed his work: she approved it with one reservation, that he be more careful while translating the rest...

Back to that morning like any other now. The EC has returned to work, after giving birth – as I will learn later – to her second daughter. I see her coming from the nearby office.

«Hey, Our Woman,» I hear her saying to the one sitting opposite me «concerning Sting's...»

The rest of the sentence escapes me, so overwhelmingly I flare up from head to toes. I can no longer bear the frustration: I am ten yards away from where they're working at the Italian edition of *Broken Music*, I just *can't* sit on my hands... After waiting for the EC to walk away – I haven't been introduced to her yet – I humbly approach Our Woman and inform her of my dire condition. Here Our Woman does something that absolves her – partly – from passing the Trancelator. Seeing me so spasmodically interested in the book, and knowing I am a translator/editor, she takes me to the EC, to whom I carefully introduce myself as someone acquainted with Sting's facts. The EC confirms that the translation has already been assigned to Our Man, whose CV – clearly irresistible, I guess – has been officially approved by Sting's management. Nevertheless, as the text will need editing from someone experienced, she offers to call me as soon as the Trancelator hands in his work. Without thinking twice, I accept, of course: it's not what I was wishing for, my name won't show on the book, but good heavens!

Mind you: only now do I buy *Broken Music*. The dream of translating it seemed irretrievably lost, and reading it right then would probably have re-opened the wound. Now, though, things have changed.

As I said, my opinion is clearly far from being unbiased. To cut it short, it's an extraordinary book. Whether fan of the author or not, trust me, anyone can appreciate it. We already know about Sting's choice of sticking to his first twenty-five years: this is not a book for professional musicians, but the compelling romance of a life. No need to say that, for connoisseurs like me, it's manna from heaven. It's hard to describe the page after page excitement of discovering the genesis of the songs that have soundtracked your life for twenty years: more than once, lyrics are literally quoted and disguised into the prose, so as to be found only by those who know them by heart. Not to mention Sting's ironical and heartfelt sincerity in baring his soul. Many people accuse him of being your typical icy and snobbish Anglo-Saxon: what better target than a multibillionaire superstar – so rich, so glamorous, so English – for the barbs of envy, that all too common, equally human and detestable vice? All I can say is, let them read *Broken Music*.

Months pass, the new year comes. It must have been February, when the EC calls me. «The translation has been handed in. We read the first chapter and found it a bit stiff. We'd like you to give it a fix.» Since she doesn't know me professionally yet, she rightfully asks for a couple of pages as an editing test. And so, equipped with pencil and red pen, I dive headfirst into the job. At the end of the third page, I am completely spent. Talk about stiff! Due to the importance of the text, I must be utterly accurate, I cannot

confine myself to what's strictly necessary. There are no colossal mistakes in the first translated chapter – *dulcis in fundo*, as they say, where *in fundo* amounts to the rest of the work –, but it is indeed the quintessence of stiffness: after my intervention, the three pages are reduced to a hardly decipherable battlefield. Foreseeing the EC's frowning at contemplating such a messy disaster, I proceed to print out the pages as edited by me. My work is approved: I'm in.

Ouch. If there's a reason why I've tended to do less and less editing through the years, it's this: how's one to trace a line between editing and re-translating? There is no clear answer to that, and used as I am to translating, my first instinct is to draw a huge line over it all and start from scratch. But this is not what is expected from an editor: you must be able to perform necessary changes only, and separate them from those that your personal taste would prompt you to make. In other words, you have to respect the translator's job, acknowledging his choices as legitimate even when they don't match yours.

And with all my force do I try to respect Our Man's choices, but...

I immerse myself into the first chapter. Practice has it that the translation editor notes down his proposed changes on the printed page. Well, a couple of days later I bow to the facts: it would be humanly unfeasible to do so for the whole text. The intricated web of signs is bound to horrify whoever will be in charge of integrating my corrections into the Word file, not to mention that I simply lack the time: I have little more than a month and nearly 340 pages to do.

I call the EC, who has the sensibility of allowing me to directly work on the file: time is running quickly, and by now she trusts my skills. And so I get rid of my pencil and proceed to instantly correct the continuous opprobrium that stares at me from the screen. Gasping for breath, I make it to the end of Chapter One.

Chapter One was indeed stiff, to be monumentally euphemistic. It would clearly need a complete retranslation, but compared to the rest...

Chapter One, as you will remember, was assigned to the Trancelator as a test...

From Chapter Two onwards...

No words can describe it. Or rather too many words can describe it, but there's no need for them. Facts speak for themselves. To these facts is my whole next chapter dedicated.

Before feeding them to you, a few more preliminary notes.

As I dig deeper into Our Man's monstrosity of a work, I have to face reality: neither the overwriting option is longer possible. In order to make it in time, and to avoid worrying myself sick, I would need to retranslate the book.

Well, as I begin the fourth chapter I obtain permission to proceed by retranslating the original text. There is only one difference, in fact: so far I have overwritten on the Trancelator's nonsense – now I have blank pages to fill up. I let out a huge sigh of relief. Well, relatively so, as I have three quarters of a book to translate in the amount of time I had been granted for the editing. But man, this is a thousand times better: I am working

at a gruelling pace, but at long last – yeah! – I *am* translating Sting’s book. Having now clear how Our Man’s “trancelation” is an object of imposing ignominy, though, I thoughtfully keep it next to my Mac as I go on.

The way things are going, there’s something else I find it fair to request. As the published translation will to all intents and purposes be mine, I don’t deem it excessive to ask for my name to somehow show on the book. The EC – who, as you may have gathered by now, is one of the most sensible people I’ve ever worked with – agrees. My name will show. How? Everything in due time.

### III

#### *Every Little Thing He Does Is Tragic*

*Key to symbols:*

O = Original

M = Mistake (in Italian)

MT = Mistake translation and/or explanation (in English)

Square brackets: notes

@ FOLLOWED BY TEXT IN BLOCKS: glosses added today

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Not translated, or anyway not handed in, Chapter 12 and the Epilogue

@ YES, YOU READ CORRECTLY.

– Mistakes with “false friends”

O: *Entrepreneur*

M: Interpretate

MT: *Interpreter*

O: *Ingenuity*

M: Ingenuità

MT: *Ingenuousness*



O: *In fact*

M: Infatti

MT: *Actually, sure enough*

O: *My youngest sister is still at school and the only dependent remaining.*

M: Mia sorella più piccola frequenta ancora la scuola e ormai è l'unica “dipendente” che è rimasta.

MT: *My youngest sister is still at school and the only “employee” remaining.*

– Undue simplification

O: *I was a grassy knoll theorist even then.*

M: Ero già un teorico del complotto.

MT: *I was a conspiracy theorist even then.*

– Untranslated words

*Cicadas*

– Untranslated geographical names, even though Italian counterparts do exist

*Darling Mountain Range* (La catena dei Monti Darling)

*Cornwall* (Cornovaglia)

– Conversely, proper nouns translated without any logic

@ PREPARE YOURSELF FOR APOTHEOSIS # 1. STING IS DESCRIBING HOW A CHILDHOOD FRIEND IS DRESSED.

O: *Winkle Picker (boots)*

@ I.E. THOSE POINTED BOOTS THE BEATLES USED TO WEAR, “WINKLE PICKER” BEING THE NAME OF THE BRAND. OUR MAN, CLEARLY MORE ANXIOUS TO TRANSLATE EVERY SINGLE WORD THAN EVERY SINGLE CHAPTER, LOOKS UP «WINKLE», LOOKS UP «PICKER» AND COMES UP WITH

M: I cosiddetti “estrai littorine”

MT: *The so-called “winkle pickers”*. [The relevant dictionary entry is “*Winkle*: a small herbivorous shore-dwelling with a spiral shell. Also called *periwinkle*”. *Littorina* is the Italian name for such a mollusk.]

@ NOTICE THE “SO-CALLED”: HE MAY HAVE GUESSED THAT SOMETHING WASN’T QUITE RIGHT, BUT CORRECTING HIMSELF WOULD CLEARLY HAVE BEEN TO MUCH OF AN INTELLECTUAL EFFORT.

O: *East Coast (USA)*

M: La costa orientale

– Unnoticed technical terms, often metaphorically used by the author, uncorrectly or more or less literally translated

O: *Bright chromium headlights on stalks*

M: Fasci di cromature sulle leve

MT: *Chrome bundles on the levers*

O: *Fault line*

M: Serie di errori

MT: *Series of errors*

O: *Sea change*

M: Mare di cambiamenti

MT: *Sea of changes*

– Unnoticed idiomatic expressions

O: *Some hope! I still haven’t come close to having sex.*

M: Ho una speranza! Non ci sono ancora andato vicino al sesso.

MT: *I have a hope! I still haven’t come close to having sex.*

O: *It’s eyes down for a full house, Mr Secretary. Please, the switch.*

M: «Rivolgete il vostro sguardo alle cartelle del bingo. Signor segretario, per favore, l’interruttore.»

MT: *«Keep your eyes on the bingo scorecards. Mr Secretary, please, the switch.»*

O: *The task in hand*

M: Il compito che ho tra le mani

MT: *The task I have in my hands*

O: *On the wrong side of fifty*

M: Nel lato sbagliato dei cinquanta

MT: Literally translated (doesn’t make sense in Italian)

O: *Ever-so-slightly-askew*  
M: Come sempre quasi di traverso  
MT: *Us usual almost askew*

– Would as past tense marker mistaken for would as future-in-the-past marker

O: *These recordings would send me into innocent paroxysms of joy.*  
M: Quei dischi mi avrebbero spinto verso l'innocente parossismo della gioia.  
MT: *These recordings were going to send me into the innocent paroxysm of the joy.*

Same mistake with:

*We'd start with rolled newspapers*  
*I would seek the pleasure of his company more often than others*

– Translation mistakes

O: *Hindsight*  
M: Introspezione  
MT: *Insight*

@ IT TAKES TWO LETTERS TO MAKE A *HINDSIGHT* OF AN *INSIGHT*.  
PERHAPS THE TRANSLATOR LACKED A FEW DIOPTRIS?

O: *West*  
M: Est  
MT: *East*

O: *Beneath*  
M: Dietro  
MT: *Underneath*

O: *North London*  
M: A nord di Londra  
MT: *North of London*

O: *By this time*  
M: A partire da ora  
MT: *From now onwards*

– Sentences/paragraphs lacking any sense. Simply re-reading them would have been enough to realize

O: *We both wilt visibly at the sight of the grim institution at the end of the drive, but this does give me the opportunity to escape into the throng of students even though I FEEL LIKE RUNNING BACK with her all the way to Wallsend.*

M: Entrambi ci ammosciamo visibilmente alla vista della macabra istituzione alla fine del viale d'accesso, ma questo mi dà l'opportunità di eclissarmi nella calca degli studenti, anche se mi sento come se corressi a casa con lei.

MT: ... *even though I feel like I was running back with her all the way home.*

O: *OTHER THAN playing and listening to music, I would while away my late afternoons and evenings...*

M: Invece di suonare o ascoltare musica...

MT: *Instead of playing and listening to music...*

[NB: In the previous page, Sting says how much he enjoys playing bass with his friends.]

O: *I'm a little shaken by this, TO SAY THE LEAST. 'What exactly do you mean, er, Miles?'*

M: Sono sconvolto e riesco solo a dire...

MT: *I'm a little shaken and I only manage to say...*

O: *Deborah had become a surrogate for my mother's longing...*

M: Deborah, con i suoi desideri, era diventata un sostituto di mia madre...

MT: *With her longings, Deborah had become a surrogate for my mother...*

O: *We find ourselves up to our knees in the flood.*

M: Ci alziamo sulle ginocchia nella piena.

MT: *We stand up on our knees in the flood.*

O: *Coming on at 8 a.m. to take over from the night shift.*

M: Entrando alle otto di mattina per uscire all'arrivo del turno di notte.

MT: *Coming on at 8 a.m. to stay until the night shift turns up.*

O: *We believed that our enthusiasm and passion would blind the audiences to our total lack of contemporary style.*

M: Noi pensavamo che, con l'entusiasmo e la passione, avremmo potuto far dimenticare alla gente qualsiasi musica contemporanea.

MT: *We believed that our enthusiasm and passion would blind the audiences to any contemporary style.*

O: *We don't have anything as sophisticated as an export carnet, so the band gear will have to be loosely disguised as camping equipment.*

E: Non abbiamo cose così sofisticate da aver bisogno di un carnet...

C: *We don't carry anything as sophisticated as to require an export carnet...*

@ PREPARE FOR APOTHEOSIS # 2. STING IS TALKING ABOUT THE ACTRESS FRANCES TOMELTY, WHO WILL SOON BECOME HIS FIRST WIFE.

O: *Against her better judgement, Frances agrees to marry me.*

@ OUR MAN, PERHAPS REGARDING HER AS TOO DULL A CHARACTER, DECIDES TO INFUSE A TOUCH OF SCHIZOPHRENIA INTO HER.

M: Contro il suo parere, Frances accetta di sposarmi.

MT: *Against her own will, Frances agrees to marry me.*

@ AND NOW, GET YOUR TISSUES READY. HERE WE DEAL WITH MILES COPELAND SR., FATHER OF POLICE DRUMMER STEWART. MILES, WHO WAS AMONG THE FOUNDERS OF THE CIA, OPERATED IN TERRITORIES OF LEBANON, SYRIA AND EGYPT.

O: *(After the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in a cave near Qumran in 1947, they were sent to the CIA office in Damascus.)*

*Miles senior and his fellow spies couldn't make much sense of them in the tiny, dimly lit office, so they took the first of the scrolls at hand up on to the roof, to get a better look. They had just unrolled the mysterious 2,000-year-old document from end to end on the flat, scorching concrete when a strong wind picked up and blew the fragile parchment into the air and across the rooftops of Damascus...*

M: Miles senior e i suoi scagnozzi non riuscivano a tirarne fuori molto in quell'ufficio piccolissimo e poco luminoso, così presero il primo dei manoscritti e lo srotolarono tenendolo con le mani appeso al soffitto per averne una visuale migliore. Avevano appena srotolato il misterioso documento di duemila anni prima da una parte all'altra dell'appartamento, quando fecero letteralmente una volata a causa di un forte colpo di vento che sollevò la fragile pergamena portandola lungo tutti i tetti di Damasco...

MT: *Miles senior and his henchmen couldn't pull much out of it in the tiny, dimly lit office, so they took the first of the scrolls and unrolled it onto the ceiling with their hands, to get a better look. They had just unrolled the mysterious 2,000-year-old document from end to end of the flat, when they literally flew up because of a strong wind that picked up the fragile parchment and carried it across all the rooftops of Damascus...*

O: *If the charges against him had stuck, he would then have been court-martialled by the US Army and most likely incarcerated for a long time. As it was, he was proved innocent, and the delays in the trial made certain that he would not make his second tour of that ravaged country. This probably saved his life.*

M: Se le accuse contro di lui si bloccarono, venne comunque processato dalla Corte marziale dell'esercito degli Stati Uniti e molto probabilmente incarcerato per molto tempo. Visto che lo era, venne dimostrata la sua innocenza, e i ritardi nel processo gli permisero di non fare un secondo viaggio secondo in quel paese devastato. Questo probabilmente gli ha salvato la vita.

MT: *Even though the charges against him were blocked, he was court-martialled by the US Army anyway and most likely incarcerated for a long time. Because he was, he was proved innocent, and the delays in the trial made certain that he would not make his second tour second in that ravaged country. This has probably saved his life.*

O: *I thought my father would have been more pleased than he was.*

M: Credo che mio padre fosse più contento di quanto ha dimostrato.

MT: *I believe my father was more pleased than he showed.*

O: *Phil Sutcliffe introduces us, the room erupts, and we can't seem to put a foot wrong.*

E: Phil Sutcliffe ci presenta, la sala esplode e non possiamo permetterci un passo falso.

MT: *Phil Sutcliffe introduces us, the room erupts and we cannot afford to make a false step.*

– Incomprehensible or unjustified “translation licences”

O: *If he raises two digits...*

M: Se alza due “diti”...

MT: “Diti” is an uncorrect, child-like plural of “dito” (*finger*).

O: *Less is more* (Sting's “musical ethic”)

M: Meno è meglio

MT: *Less is better*

– Italian grammar mistakes

O: *It is as if I have to...*

M: È come se io debba...

*Correct Form:* È come se io dovessi...

O: *As if the English band [...] is introducing*

M: Come se questa nuova band inglese [...] stia inventando...

CF: Come se questa nuova band inglese [...] stesse inventando...

– Unnoticed musical terms or titles, roughly or uncorrectly translated

@ DON'T FORGET THAT THE TRANSLATOR IS APPARENTLY A MUSIC JOURNALIST.

O: *Paul's bass played 'two to the bar'*

M: Il basso di Paul suonato semplicemente

MT: *Paul's bass played simply*

@ A TINY GAP, AFTER ALL IT'S ONLY THE BEATLES' FIRST SINGLE WE'RE DEALING WITH. EVEN SUPPOSING, FOR THE SAKE OF ARGUMENT, THAT A SELF-STYLED MUSIC CONNOISSEUR IGNORES THE MEANING OF «TWO TO THE BAR», ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS LISTEN TO THE SONG'S FIRST FIVE SECONDS: *DUM-PAUSE-DUM-PAUSE...*

O: *I have to recognize the tune within two bars and busk the changes through to the middle eight until the next key change.*

M: Devo riconoscere il brano nel giro di due battute e prendere a orecchio gli accordi a metà dell'ottava fino al seguente cambio di tonalità.

MT: *I have to recognize the tune within two bars and guess the chords at the middle of the octave until the next key change.*

O: *B flat*

M: sol bemolle

MT: *G flat*

O: *Hi-hat*

M: Piatto

MT: *Cymbal*

O: *(Guitar) lead*

M: Corda

MT: *String*

O: *Brahms' Lullaby*

M: Una serenata di Brahms

MT: *A serenade by Brahms (Italian title is Ninnananna)*

@ WITH WHICH I WISH YOU A GOODNIGHT.

#### IV

##### *Truth Hits Everybody*

*If, according to the Publisher's sole judgement, the translation contains interpretation mistakes or stylistic and/or expressive flaws relative to the the said Publisher's quality standards, thus requiring an adequate reworking, the cost of such reworking will be deducted from the above stated remuneration.*

Translation contracts feature an undisputably fair clause like that. Before embarking on this adventure, my experience as a translation editor, along with stories I'd heard from colleagues, had convinced me that it was little more than a dead letter.

While I re-translate *Broken Music*, I constantly fill the EC in on Our Man's astounding feats. A couple of the blunders from last chapter are enough for her to make up her mind: for the first time in her career, she will apply the aforementioned clause. Mind you: I didn't do this for the money, but such a recognition leaves me far from indifferent. In order to justify to deduction from the Trancelator's remuneration, the EC needs a solid and detailed list of his "interpretation mistakes or stylistic and/or expressive flaws". Well, you can imagine my extreme delight in composing the florilegium whence the previous chapter is totally taken. Notice that it could have been three times as long: for space reasons (he will receive the "evidence" by recorded delivery letter) I have to limit myself.

When I go through Our Man's flashes of genius today, I can't help but smile a bit. I'm a good-natured guy, you know: somewhere deep inside I have kind of warmed to his inventions. Back then, though, my feelings were pretty different.

Good for me that the book is about the most exciting subject I could ever hope for, but it doesn't take from the fact that, courtesy of the Trancelator, I have spent a month grinding away at my Mac day and most of the night, which gives me a backache that will take at least another month to pass. In other words, not for one moment does the excitement of translating Sting's words cloud my awareness of the situation. This mixed state of euphoria and indignation, as well as the urge to preserve my mental sanity, spurs me to write a letter to Our Man. I will never send it, of course, but I desperately need to give vent to my feelings, and my friends who pop by in those days laugh their heads off at the heat I read it out loud with. Here's an excerpt.

*... obvious doubts and gaps you didn't solve, or you did solve with much imagination, acting as if nothing happened and hoping for your flights of fantasy to pass unnoticed. Well, you'll be luckier next time. You were so thoughtful as to underline some*



*passages you had difficulties in translating, as if you fared better with the rest. You tried hard to translate a few of them (better draw a veil over the results), while others you simply left in English. What a touching display of humbleness, were it not for a tiny particular: clearly no one told you that translators, when they have doubts, are paid to solve them, not to pass them over to whoever will edit their work. There's a passage you don't understand? Well, honey, wakey wakey, ask an English-speaking friend, or a Italian friend who, unlike you, speaks English, search the Internet. Or maybe just read the paragraph once more: who knows, you might as well understand what the fuck it's all about. You need your head to become a translator, a dictionary is not enough.*

*Ever heard of "false friends"? How come I'm not surprised you haven't. If you know 'em, you avoid 'em, as they say. It's those hideous words from language A that look awfully like words from language B but, alas, tricky wicked little things, they mean something else altogether. A couple of examples at random: "entrepreneur" doesn't mean "interpret"; "ingenuity" doesn't mean "ingenuità". Well, you are an infallible shot: you never miss one.*

*If you have no clue as to what a word means, the technique you apply is revolutionary. If it looks like a word you do know, that's how you translate it (it takes two letters to make a "hindsight" of an "insight", buy yourself a pair of glasses if you are short-sighted). If it doesn't, you look up the word on your dictionary, place one hand over your eyes and hammer the finger of the other hand onto a random line of the entry. Trusting your supernatural instincts, you decide that is the right meaning. The fact that the resulting sentence doesn't mean fuck all doesn't seem to bother you in the least.*

*Sting's prose is far from simple, but your English is way under what's requested for much easier translations. No doctor ever told you to fake being a translator, just do something else if you can't, it's the most underpaid of jobs.*

*Thing is, not only you don't speak English, but you also are unable to write in decent Italian. "È come se io debba". Congratulations. Such a howler would earn you a D in a high school composition. Instead, you give yourself out as a high-level translator.*

*But there's more: you'd like to pass for a music book translator. The note B? It's the "sol", of course. Paul McCartney's bass in Love Me Do played "two to the bar"? Whatever will it mean? Why, "simply", it goes without saying! Try again, you'll be luckier: I could tell you what "two to the bar" means, but I have better ways of spending my time. Ever heard of Brahms' Lullaby? Why do I even ask, if you translate "Brahms' Lullaby" as "UNA serenata di Brahms"? And what about the poor "middle eight", autistically turned into an arcane "middle of the octave"? Do us a favour: go hide yourself. Google's auto-translator would do better than you.*

What about my name on the book, then? As substituting the translator is out of question now – the Trancelator having been officially invested, as you will recall –, something else must be devised. At first, I sound the EC for the possibility of me featuring as co-translator. She promises to ask her superiors, but immediately hints it

might not be feasible. When her doubts are confirmed, she comes up with what will be the final solution, for which I will always be grateful to her. Such a sensational idea that I hadn't even conceived it, let alone suggested it.

Translated by Our Man  
Italian version edited by Michele Piumini

In case you're wondering whether such a thing has ever occurred in the history of translated literature, my answer is: I don't know, but it seems most unlikely. At least as unlikely as a movie whose opening titles have "Directed by Tom, Actors supervised by Dick". Of course, I don't leap with joy at the thought of such a character having his name where mine should be, but all in all, given the circumstances, perhaps it's for the best.

Firstly, "Translated by X and Y" would suggest that X and Y have each done half of the book, or even – God forbid! – worked together.

Secondly, I begin to suspect that such a blatantly uncommon formula will set the readers on the right path.

A week before *Broken Music* is published, my suspect proves well-founded. As it's often the case with important books, an advance review appears on a magazine, with a long excerpt from my translation, cover story picture and all. Not all magazines include the name of the translator: praised by *L'Espresso*, then. The details from the title page, probably due to space reasons, are even shortened to "Translated by/Italian version by".

A friend-colleague of mine has long been recommending me to join Biblit, an Italian newsgroup for literary translators. I repeatedly promised to comply, but lazy as I am I just kept on putting it off. A few days later, she forwards me an email from a Biblit member who has read the advance review of *Broken Music*. «Whatever does "Translated by/Italian version by" mean?» wonders the latter. «Perhaps Our Man has made a mess of it and this Michele Piumini guy has set it right?» Bingo!

On April 19th 2004, exactly one week before *Broken Music* is out, I join Biblit. While introducing myself, I briefly summarize the very story that ends here, but for a series of happy and unpredicted after-effects.

## V

### End Titles

A few months earlier.

Just when I begin editing the Translator's masterpiece, the heaven-sent Mondadori managing director calls me into his office to propose a work that, he thinks, I might find interesting. I sit down. He hands me a small multicoloured parallelepiped. *The Little Box of Beatles* by Alan Clayson, one volume for each of the Fab Four: their full biographies,

so up-to-date they cover George Harrison's demise. It's all I can do not to shout my jubilation out loud: The Beatles are my second musical passions, and I have been playing their songs for years, switching from bass to guitar to drums. The book is due out for Christmas, so I have time to devote myself to *Broken Music* first. Fairly emotional and incredulous, I warmly thank him and, protecting *The Little Box of Beatles* as if it were the Holy Grail, I walk out of the office.

Once *Broken Music* is released here, I feel the urge to tell as many Italian Sting fans as possible about what went on behind the scenes. I have the fortune to be in contact with Giovanni, founder of a Sting and Police fanclub: after years of chasing, lying in ambush and travelling around the world, he has managed to become a personal friend of Sting, Andy Summers and Stewart Copeland's. Among his activities, he emails a newsletter out to a considerable number of fans. Well, thanks to Giovanni, hundreds of people get the chance to receive a brief summary of my story. After reading it, a university researcher from Salerno named Paola emails me. She is particularly intrigued and asks for the "substantial list of howlers" by the Trancelator that I have offered to send on request. We become good friends and, a year later, she invites me to give a seminar on translation at her university. It is my first teaching experience.

Autumn 2005.

I begin my career as a regular English to Italian literary translation teacher. The tasks I set my pupils consist in translating excerpts from different kinds of texts: novels, essays, books for children and so on. One of the tasks is slightly different, though. As reviewing other people's work is a very useful practice for beginners, Our Man's wonder of a job has proven ideal for a brief translation editing test. My pupils enjoy it very much, especially the Dead Sea scrolls bit.

A couple of months after the Italian *Broken Music*'s publication.

The EC asks me if I'd like to translate *Jim Morrison—Life, Death, Legend* by American critic Stephen Davies. I'm not a Doors fan, but I'd love to accept, if only I hadn't a summer with *The Little Box of Beatles* ahead of me. Very unwillingly, I have to decline, because there is no way I could make it in time. As the summer fades, I'm almost through with the Beatles. Knowing what a Beatles fan I am, Mondadori proposes Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* to me. It's quite a ludicrous booklet, which doesn't deserve being further described here. It turns out to be rather pleasing to translate, though, or at least relaxing and not too challenging: an intermediate Sudoku. Meanwhile, the EC calls me back: Jim Morrison's biography is being translated by no less than the Veteran and a fellow of his. They happen to be late on schedule, though, so would I care to translate the third part of the volume? Of course I would: as Ono's ravings quickly pass me by, now I have time for Jim. The book is beautifully written, and I am stirred by the story: all the more so because the third part features Jim's last days in Paris. I have been to

Paris recently: while visiting the Père Lachaise, stopping by his grave gave me some shivers. Back to the biography, though. Once I'm done with the third part, a friend-editor from Mondadori Varia asks if I'd like to edit the first two, as translated by the Veteran and his fellow. I say yes, damn me. But maybe, in hindsight, once again I made the right choice. After *Broken Music*'s affair I can't help but bear the Veteran and his friends a grudge, but I try to be as impartial as I can anyway. Well, guess what? Their translating skills turn out to be *ever so slightly* better than the Trancelator's. The world is regrettably full of people who, just because they know a lot about something, believe that they can translate – or write, for that matter – a book about it. There are no clear neo-futuristic stokes of genius à la “winkle pickers”, but the work teems with blunders (California State University mistaken for the State of California) and glaring stiffness. With one peculiarity: as a translator, the Veteran finds it his duty to add a personal touch to the original text, to leave his mark on it. What kind of Veteran would he be, if he didn't? One example alone will do. A simple *to* introducing a final clause, unquestionably to be translated as *per*, is turned into “con il precipuo scopo di” (“with the primary aim of”). But because I only have to edit their work, I must not cross the notorious line between editing and re-translation. As a result, when I'm done, parts one and two are satisfactory, but still far from what I regard as a well-done work. And so, once more, I have to face the issue of how my name will show on the book. That it will is certain: to all intents and purposes, this time I am a co-translator. The question is of a different nature: since I don't identify with the first two parts, I ask to specifically feature as translator of the third. If this cannot be, I'd rather not be mentioned at all: luckily, I don't need no Veteran names next to mine for the sake of my career. Time passes. The friend from Mondadori Varia informs me that both my requests (specifying which part I translated or omitting my name altogether), for diplomatic/editorial reasons, might pose something of a problem. Just as the EC had done with *Broken Music*, it is she who suggests the final solution: Michele, why not use a pseudonym? What an amusing idea, I am very intrigued. What will I call myself, then? At first, I try anagrammatizing my own name, but the less improbable nom de plume I turn out is Emile Chiumpini, so figure the rest. Leaving anagrams aside, my mind goes to my two best male friends: I take one's first name and the other's last name, alter them a bit, and... ladies and gentlemen, I give you Ivano Castiglione, third translator of Morrison's biography!

In early 2006, another autobiography came out in the US and UK: Andy Summers' *One Train Later*. Another undescribable musical-literary thrill, for us Police enthusiasts. No need to say that me and Giovanni are painstakingly and frantically searching for an Italian publisher to buy it and publish it, and have it obviously translated by me. Andy himself is aware of our efforts. If all goes well...

What if I hadn't pursued my dream of translating *Broken Music* until the very end? What if, out of pride and frustration, I hadn't tried my luck that day in Mondadori when it seemed I had no more chances? I know I discover nothing new, but the long and the short of it is this: follow your dreams, even when your hopes are reduced to a faint glimmer. Only thus, maybe with a little luck, will the extraordinary job of translating become much more than a job: a potentially boundless horizon of all-absorbing experiences, the kind that makes it worth to get out of bed in the morning.

In 1993, my father published a short story for children: *Motu-Iti, l'isola dei gabbiani* (Motu-Iti, the Island of Seagulls). Sting already was my favourite artist, so I had long been playing some of his songs to my dad and translating the lyrics for him. He really appreciated them: I remember his enthusiasm for the line “*can you think of your own mother dancing with her invisible son*” from *They Dance Alone*. That is why he chose to dedicate the book «a Gordon Matthew Sumner, buona voce».

Some day, no matter when, Gordon Matthew Sumner will receive the copy of *Motu-Iti* he deserves. And if I know him just a little bit, his *buona voce* will gratefully accept it.

## Appendix

After reading this story, this is what the EC had to say, bless her: «Dear Michele, thank you for sending me your translation diary. If I could go back, be sure that I would do just the same: I am addicted – as few are in publishing houses – to recognizing people's real merits without giving in to powerful sponsors. Sometimes it's a real struggle».

In the past few years, I have managed to approach Andy Summers, Stewart Copeland and Dominic Miller, Sting's current guitar player and author of gorgeous instrumental albums for classical guitar. Here is the story of how I met Andy:

[http://www.brushwithfame.com/Brushes/andy\\_summers.php](http://www.brushwithfame.com/Brushes/andy_summers.php)

And here are the pictures of the day I had the huge honour to jam with Dominic Miller:

<http://www.michelepiumini.it/Michele%20Piumini/9%20settembre%202007.html>

I have joined a group of die-hard fans, cheerfully obsessed by everything the three Police (and those who gravitate around them) do. Everytime one of them comes to Italy or nearby countries – I will only mention Copeland's fantastic collaboration with

the Notte della Taranta Ensemble, which granted him the honorary citizenship of Melpignano, Apulia –, we run after them, hoping for at least a fleeting rendez-vous.

Ever since I'm a member of the gig-going crew, I always bring *Motu-Iti* with me. Underneath my dad's dedication, I have added one of my own. You never know what might happen. Sooner or later, I will give it to him. Yeah, easier said than done: Andy and Stewart are free to walk round relatively undisturbed, but Sting is nearly always shielded by an impenetrable armour of security. But I am patient. I know the day will come, had I to wait until he's eighty and senile ailments make him less elusive. I have two things to say and a book to give: my father dedicated a book to you (here it is) and I have translated your autobiography into Italian. In other words, I don't risk being tongue-tied.

In late 2007, Sting comes up with an unprecedented project: a tribute album to British composer John Dowland (who lived between the XVI and XVII centuries) in collaboration with renowned Bosnian lutenist Edin Karamazov. No need to lavish praises on the extraordinary idea and its results, and believe me, Sting or not, I'm rather Talibanish when it comes to music tastes: only after listening to his records do I decide I love them, not before. There follows the *Songs from the Labyrinth* tour. I gain access to a special performance in Milan's Santa Maria delle Grazie. It gives me goose bumps: I never saw him in such an intimate setting, singing songs that particular. The tour goes on.

February 25, 2007. Me and Lydia, another superfan who knows Sting, Andy and Stewart personally, leave at dawn for Munich, to attend another Sting-Dowland night. We immediately trace the artists entrance to the theatre: seems like a good sign. After the performance, we run back to it and gain pole position among the crowd of waiting fans. Beside me is a girl holding a couple of roses. With all this mess, I quickly ponder, attracting his attention and exchanging a few words will be hard. *Motu-Iti* in my pocket, I have a sudden idea: right next to my signature, under my dedication, I add the words "son of the author and translator of Broken Music into Italian". At least he will know I'm not just any fan, and hopefully be a little curious... Here he comes: cheering, shouts of joy, camera flashes, the security holding us back. I reach out, with *Motu-Iti* in my hand. «Sting, this is for you!» He quickly grabs it, takes a rose from the girl next to me, waves everyone goodbye and disappears into the big car.

That's it, a pebble thrown in the ocean. Damn, at least he knows I exist!

What next?

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