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The Intersemiotic Journey of André Marie de Chénier, through Umberto Giordano, Mario Martone and Audio Description

Abstract

The story of André Marie de Chénier is real and well known: he was a poet and a political journalist martyrized during the French Reign of Terror. The way his story is conveyed in Umberto Giordano's opera *Andrea Chénier* is realistic, to such an extent that it is often classified as a masterpiece of verism. Mario Martone's new reading of the opera for his 2017 production of *Andrea Chénier* is faithful both to the story of the poet and to Umberto Giordano's portrayal offered in his opera, first performed at Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy, in 1896. Martone's reading was staged at Teatro alla Scala for the season *première* and revamped in 2023, also through a new form of intersemiotic translation, i.e., audio description for the blind and partially sighted. The thread that runs through all these rewritings and retellings is strong, complex and rich. It is precisely this complex journey from history to audio description that is at the core of this essay, with an eye to faithfulness in intersemiotic translation and the creation of timeless texts precisely through faithful readings and transfers.

1. *Introduction*

Operas contribute greatly to giving substance to the uniqueness of Italian cultural heritage and its appreciation worldwide. Still today, six out of the ten most frequently staged operas worldwide are by Italian composers Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini and Gioachino Rossini (Operabase n.d.). If we consider that three out of ten are by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and one is the well-known *Carmen* by Bizet, we can state without any doubt that opera, as the word itself, is Italian. Most operas falling within the classical repertoire have a complex genesis behind them: they may originate out of historical facts or famous, imaginary tales, they may have been narrated by novelists or his-

torians, but they are hardly ever the result of the imagination of a composer. This is the case, for instance, of *Macbeth* by Giuseppe Verdi, inspired by the Shakespearian tragedy but written by consulting its Italian translations and translators. The same holds true for Bizet's *Carmen*, inspired by a story written by Prosper Mérimée, in turn inspired by the Greek poet Palladas, who was active in the fourth century AD. First performed, generally, between the final years of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century, these operas have, over the years and decades, lived on thanks to numerous rewritings and new readings that have revamped them and ensured them an afterlife.

This essay aims to report on, and reflect upon, an intersemiotic journey that I was able to experience when working on the audio description of Mario Martone's production of Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chénier* for the 2017-2018 opera season at Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy, a production that was staged again at the same theater in the spring of 2023. The essay explores the complex transfers from the real story of André Marie de Chénier to the libretto by Luigi Illica, the music by Umberto Giordano and their fascinating intersections, and from the reading and new staging by Mario Martone to the audio description for blind patrons at Teatro alla Scala. It does so to reflect upon the nature and impact of intersemiotic translations, their cultural implications, and their occasional quest for faithfulness, which has been little explored to date.

2. *André de Chénier, the Revolution and the Reign of Terror*

The story of André de Chénier is real and well known. He was a poet and a political journalist who was born in Istanbul in 1762 and died in Paris in 1794. For the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, he is "generally considered the greatest French poet of the 18th century" (Britannica 2023), although today he is most commonly associated with Umberto Giordano's opera (Milner 2001, 12). His literary works were all published posthumously with the exception of two poems. His first collection appeared in 1819, soon making him a reference point for the Romantic movement and throughout the nineteenth century. In our times, as Jacqueline Milner recalls:

In terms of literary studies he has often been relegated to a twilight world of neo-classicism [...] [but] [t]hese attitudes are far from historical, since he contributed to the discourse of the day not only with neo-classical poetry but with political journalism. (Ibid.: 10)

In Milner's words again, the latest poetry he composed, especially during his Paris years, was satirical and loaded with political intentions, as we can see, for instance, in "Hymne à la Justice" or "Terre, Terre Chérie", among many others. All in all, Chénier led a short but intense life, enriched by his political commitment and struggle. It also inspired great works of art such as Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme* (1802), Sainte-Beuve's *Joseph Delorme* (1829) and, last but not least, Umberto Giordano's opera *Andrea Chénier* (1896), who made him a true symbol of the poet-hero. In 1789, five years before dying, Chénier left London for Paris where he became immediately involved in the revolution by actively working as a political journalist. He initially supported the revolution but, later on, he became critical of the monarchist positions, as well as the post-revolutionary Terror. In late 1793, he was imprisoned and sentenced to death. He was guillotined in March 1794, a few weeks before the fall of Robespierre and the end of the Terror. His brother Marie-Joseph de Chénier, born two years after André, was also a poet, a dramatist, a politician and a supporter of the revolution.

3. *Umberto Giordano's* Andrea Chénier: *The Genesis of a Unique Opera*

Umberto Giordano's opera has been classified as a masterpiece of Verism, although many operas written at the end of the nineteenth century tend to be assimilated with this movement for their portrayal of powerful, passionate and harsh dramas set among the humblest layers of society. However, Giordano's Verism goes well beyond this: the historical drama he depicts in music and the libretto by Luigi Illica in words are extremely scrupulous in their reconstruction of events, milieux, colors and sounds of the time (Sozzi 2013). The latter, i.e., the time span covered in *Andrea Chénier*, coincides precisely with the five years of activity of the French poet and journalist in Paris, until his death (Giordano 2013). Initially, the libretto for this opera was to be composed by the musician and nobleman Alberto Franchetti. However, he passed the task on to the younger and talented Luigi Illica, whom Giordano met for the first time in 1893. Before embarking on the writing of the libretto for *Andrea Chénier*, Giordano tried to persuade Illica to create the texts for a score he wanted to compose, based on a play by Ivan Sergeevič Turgenev, but the dramatist and librettist was not enthusiastic about the

idea. When Franchetti offered to pass the writing of the libretto for *Andrea Chénier* on to him, Illica replied enthusiastically.

Luigi Illica's libretto, which Giordano checked eagerly upon while it was being composed, offers extremely detailed descriptions of the milieux, the costumes and the protagonists' main movements, something that was not at all customary. To Umberto Giordano's great concern, Illica was late in submitting his libretto because he lingered over accurate historical studies, so as to make sure he would offer an absolutely faithful portrayal of the environment and settings. To this end, Illica added pivotal characters such as Maximilien de Robespierre to his text, while Giordano, working after Illica, filled the score with notes and sounds that evoke the French Revolution and its aftermath: the balls at the aristocrats' homes, the rolls of drums, the patriotic chants, and even a hint at *La Marseillaise* (Marco n.d.). We can, therefore, say that the libretto and the score are perfectly interwoven in their faithfulness to history: Giordano worked on the score as soon as he finally laid hands on the libretto, offering yet another faithful rendering of the story of André de Chénier.

Giordano's opera was staged for the first time at Teatro alla Scala in Milan on 28 March 1896. The *première* provoked opposite reactions. Amintore Galli, who was one of the managers of the most prominent Italian musical publisher, Sonzogno, disliked the opera and deemed it unworthy of being staged any further. Sonzogno himself, who at the time was director of Teatro alla Scala, shared Galli's opinion, whereas composer Pietro Mascagni insisted that the opera had to be kept in the program. After a few more performances at La Scala and the audience's increasing enthusiasm, Galli had to change his mind, and he eventually acclaimed both Umberto Giordano and his work. A few months later, *Andrea Chénier* was staged at the Academy of Music in New York, scoring a huge success that was to be replicated over the following months and years throughout Europe. In 1897 only, the opera was performed in Poland, Hungary, Germany, France, Russia, the Czech Republic, and Argentina (OperaGlass 2008).

4. Andrea Chénier *Reborn Again: Mario Martone and His Faithful Staging*

In 2017, cinema and stage director Mario Martone was called upon to give life to a new production of Andrea Giordano's opera to open the season at Teatro alla Scala. As Italian and international operagoers know, the *première* at Teatro

alla Scala in Milan is a unique event, broadcast worldwide and, in terms of production, always assigned to prestigious directors to secure new readings and stagings that are bound to become historical and possibly timeless.

Faithful both to the (hi)story of the poet and journalist André de Chénier, and to the portrait offered by Umberto Giordano in his opera, is Mario Martone's new reading of this work for his 2017 production. One of the main tenets of Martone's faithful reading is the time span covered by Giordano, which coincides precisely with Chénier's final years in Paris, from 1789 to 1794, and the wish by Martone himself to convey the whole time span as smoothly as possible. To this end, the director envisaged what he defined as a *machine célibataire* (cfr. Deleuze and Guattari 1972) that occupies the largest part of the stage and functions like a rotating music box, allowing the different moments and events to transition smoothly so that the story is told without interruptions. Also, the rotating machine box allowed Martone to portray the action from multiple viewpoints, including that of the lowest layers of the society that actually changed history over those five years (Martone 2017).

Working closely with Margherita Palli for the settings, and Ursula Patzak for the costumes, Mario Martone has given life to a faithful intersemiotic translation of Umberto Giordano's opera, with some unique elements that aim to highlight specific aspects of the (hi)story, as we shall see. For instance, the mirrors that are present throughout the performance. In the first scene, they multiply the images of the nobles dancing at the castle of Coigny, just before the revolution. Afterwards, they show the revolutionaries hidden behind them, almost motionless, to highlight their constant presence in the years that followed. In the third act, the mirrors in Carlo Gérard's home are distorted, to convey his torments as he craves for Maddalena and is disillusioned and tired by the politics of the Reign of Terror. As Martone (2017) states, mirrors are the simplest but cruelest *machines célibataires*.

On the whole, many a symbolic intersection can be identified in the writings, readings and transfers that make up the journey of André de Chénier from history to the stage, most of all from Umberto Giordano to Mario Martone's production of Giordano's opera. To mention just one, as Martone recalls in his director's notes, Umberto Giordano moved to Milan to urge Luigi Illica to write the libretto for *Andrea Chénier* so that he could then create the score. He tried to find lodging in the same building where Illica was living, not far from the monumental cemetery of the city. However, the only avail-

able space that Giordano was offered, and accepted, was a storehouse on the ground floor, filled with statues coming from, or destined for, the cemetery itself. Such a fact struck Martone to such a degree that the first act of his *Andrea Chénier* is set in a castle filled with highly symbolic statues, and more statues appear throughout this production.

As is already evident, the intersemiotic translation of Giordano's work performed by Martone is not easy to frame, and yet, faithfulness is to be found everywhere in this undeniably complex transfer. The story of André de Chénier, which we experience through Mario Martone's staging, is the original, a story that we can trace back in history and that assumes a striking timelessness precisely by virtue of its fidelity to the original facts. This is what I will try to explain and exemplify in the following sections.

5. *Intersemiotic Translation and Audio Description*

All the forms of reading, re-reading and transfer discussed so far are part of a long journey whose fascinating traits have not yet all been discovered. Nonetheless, having referred to intersemiotic translation many times, exploring a few definitions of this concept and their applications is useful here.

For Umberto Eco (1976), intersemiotic translation forms the basis of cultural communication and exchange. It is an ongoing process that generates meaning as "culture continuously translates signs into other signs, and definitions into other definitions, words into icons, icons into ostensive signs, ostensive signs into new definitions, new definitions into propositional functions, propositional functions into exemplifying sentences, and so on" (Ibid.: 71). Later on in his seminal book, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Eco tackles the thorny issue of how to classify signs, focusing on the passage from verbal to non-verbal and vice versa. In relation to this, he states that meaning expressed by means of verbal units can smoothly be translated into other verbal units, and that a good part of content that is conveyed by non-verbal units can equally be translated into verbal units. However, as he adds, there is a lot of content that is expressed through complex, non-verbal units that can only be rendered through verbal units with a high degree of approximation. To support this statement, he refers to Marcel Proust as an example. Proust, according to Eco, managed to give us the impression

of translating into words the feelings, attitudes and values conveyed in the paintings of Elstir. However, as Eco further recalls, he decided to do so by referring not to a real, but to an imaginary painter because even a superficial evaluation of the painter's real work would have revealed content that Proust's words had not reflected. We can, indeed, say that the intersemiotic journey of *Andrea Chénier*, starting from the real-life story of the protagonist and arriving to the stage production by Mario Martone and the audio description for blind patrons, represents a set of complex, mostly non-verbal units that would potentially have to be translated with a high degree of approximation, in Eco's terms. And yet, as we have been saying so far, there seems to be no approximation in this journey but, rather, a great amount of faithfulness through it all.

Along the lines outlined by Eco, and following his path, Nicola Dusi (2015) has provided us with a definition of intersemiotic translation that also encompasses the diachronic dimension, rightly observing, by way of example, that a film remake is an intersemiotic translation, possibly using the same systems of signs, but revising more or less radically their interrelation, for the sake of new audiences and, more significantly, to function in a new social and cultural setting. Quoting Juri Lotman, Dusi says that the function of an aesthetic text is to produce new meanings that are generated precisely by the provision of new readings. Moreover, for Dusi:

Intersemiotic translation is a complex "form of action", not a simple transcodification but a transcultural, dynamic and functional event caught between the requirement to remain faithful to the source and the need to transform it into a text that is understood and accepted in the target culture. (Ibid.: 183)

The attention is, in Dusi's definition and analysis, geared towards the need for intersemiotic translation to function in a new, target culture. As Eco also stated, the cultural dimension of a complex, necessarily creative form of transfer is tantamount. Although generally true, these statements bring to mind the age-old dichotomy spelled out by translation practitioners and scholars Friedrich Schleiermacher and Lawrence Venuti (quoted in Munday, Ramos Pinto and Blakesley 2022), between domestication and foreignization in translation, with an eye to domestication in the definitions above, as the preferred strategy to make a translation function in a new culture and

for new receivers implies naturalizing it. Similarly, Gideon Toury (1995) distinguished between appropriate and adequate translations, where the former are meant to appropriately display the source, and the latter are adequate to fit in the receiving culture.

In the complex transfers described in the previous sections, from the original story of André de Chénier to the libretto by Luigi Illica, from the libretto to the music score by Umberto Giordano, and from this complex, intersemiotic text to the reading and staging provided by Mario Martone with the support of Margherita Palli and Ursula Patzak, faithfulness to the source, or to multiple sources, remains always central. And yet, Martone's faithful staging of *Andrea Chénier* is extremely successful with contemporary audiences. Indeed, Teatro alla Scala revamped this production over twenty times, with a sold-out theater for virtually all performances.

Therefore, provided that intersemiotic translations can be done in the name of faithfulness to the source(s) as a primary objective, they can, nonetheless, be extremely effective with new audiences, thus being, by virtue of an almost magical journey, both adequate and appropriate. Moreover, this journey, as it has been explored thus far, points to another important feature: intersemiotic translations, when performed in the name of faithfulness, seem to become timeless (O'Halloran et al. 2016), not attached or anchored to a specific time and space except for that of the original (hi)story. This is also, quite evidently, one of the reasons why they appeal to old and new audiences.

In performing the last transfer of this intersemiotic journey, that is to say, the creation of an audio description for Mario Martone's *Andrea Chénier* for the benefit of blind operagoers, the many signs contained in the previous transfers have all been turned into verbal sequences. Audio description is undoubtedly a form of intersemiotic translation, whose complexity is due to many features, most of all its time limitations. The following section is devoted to a more detailed exploration of audio description, with specific reference to operas and to the case of *Andrea Chénier* for Teatro alla Scala.

6. *Chénier, Giordano, Martone and the Writing of a Faithful Audio Description*

In *Image Music Text*, Roland Barthes (1977) discusses the nature of the photographic image and the texts which accompany it in the press by making three,

important remarks. First, he states: "the text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to 'quicken' it with one or more second-order signifieds". In what he names a historical reversal, the image, for him, no longer illustrates the words, but it is rather the words which "are parasitic on the image" (Ibid: 25). As a second remark, he recalls that the connotation defined by a text in relation to an image depends on the text format and structure: by remaining closer to the image, the connotation is less evident and the relationship remains primarily denotative, objective. However, and this is Barthes' final remark, "it is impossible [...] that words 'duplicate' the image; in the movement from one structure to the other, second signifieds are inevitably developed" (Ibid: 26) and these often involve the wish to highlight one or more elements conveyed or implied by the image. By assuming the concept of "image", in broad terms, to refer to all the visual elements making up an opera, Barthes' analysis seems to be particularly appropriate to analyze the audio description of Mario Martone's *Andrea Chénier*, i.e., the creation of a new, descriptive text that aims to respect the fidelity of the source text to its own sources.

As hinted at above, audio description is an evident form of intersemiotic translation that turns images and all other visual stimuli into words, aiming to provide accessibility to a show, a film, a musical or an opera for persons with visual disabilities. As Anna Matamala and Pilar Orero (2007, 329) rightly put it, audio description is transfer, an intersemiotic passage "transforming images into vivid narration". One of the peculiarities of audio description is that, by transforming visual stimuli into words and sentences, it is called to give a linear sequence to objects, colors, characters and movements that the eyes perceive virtually simultaneously. This implies choices that an audio describer always has to make when writing a description: prioritizing information, giving it a linear sequence in the form of a written text that is nonetheless not free, but constrained by the time available to provide descriptions over an opera performance, and by the actual time when someone or something is seen on stage. Research on audio description has been widely developed throughout Europe and the world since the turn of this century, becoming more and more central in audiovisual translation studies over the past decade (Di Giovanni 2018, Braun & Starr 2020). One of the classical debates developed by scholars over the years revolves precisely around the issue of objectivity: since audio description turns into verbal language what reaches the describer's eyes in the form of diverse, non-verbal elements, it has to

remain as objective as possible, by not expressing judgment or over-interpreting. However, this quest for objectivity is very hard to define because when sighted individuals look at static or moving images, their brain embarks on a cognitive process that implies both perception and reception (Ibid.), and reception is shaped by our knowledge and experience of the world, and it implies inevitably an interpretive act.

Thus, in audio describing *Andrea Chénier*, as Barthes rightly puts it, I have striven to convey its images as objectively (and faithfully) as possible, nonetheless bringing my competencies and experiences to the reading of those images, and by making selections, prioritizing information as I deemed appropriate, while still trying to be as neutral as possible. In the following paragraphs, the focus will be on excerpts from the audio description of Martone's *Chénier*, taken from different sections.

6.1 *From Images to Text: Examples from the Audio Description*

Audio description (AD) of operas is normally created in the form of two main types of verbal inserts. The so-called audio introduction (AI) is normally 5 to 8 minutes long and it is released via different systems to blind patrons before the beginning of the performance, to then continue over the break(s). In addition to the introductory sections, short in-opera descriptions of a few seconds are inserted throughout the performance, making sure no primary sound is covered, nor the voices of singers and the choir. Even though AI and descriptive inserts can be pre-recorded, they are always delivered live, following the rhythm of each live performance. An operator sends the audio clips manually through the use of software and a set of receivers distributed to blind (and non-blind) persons who request the service. The structure that is normally given to the AI is as follows: 1) short historical facts connected to the opera; 2) the synopsis; 3) the stage director's intentions and vision; 4) the settings; and 5) the costumes. These are normally followed, as a final section of the AI, by a short description of the opening scene that is provided a few seconds before the overture. Sections 2, 4 and 5, plus the description of the opening scene, are normally split into several parts, based on the number of breaks for each show, so as not to foreground too much information and avoid overloading the receivers with it. During breaks, blind patrons are thus

advised to leave their headsets on and listen to the new introductory sections for the remaining parts of the performance.

Before embarking on the analysis of three excerpts from the AD of *Andrea Chénier*, let us here recall that AD is created by watching a performance, i.e., a specific production, with the libretto only occasionally used as further reference. Therefore, the performance, and not the libretto, is the source text for AD.

6.1.1 *Audio Introduction: The Opening Scene*

The opening scene designed by Mario Martone is a faithful reproduction of Umberto Giordano's opera and the descriptions provided by Luigi Illica in his libretto.

A few days before the French Revolution, in the rich palace of the Counts of Coigny, a party is being prepared in a large, elegant hall that looks like a winter garden, with plants and statues, beautiful lamps, mirrors and a harpsichord. Furniture is scattered all over and the servants who are preparing for the countess' party fret about, nervously. As the performance designed by Martone begins, we see a wide hall adorned with plants and statues, and some sofas and chairs are overturned. The nobles are already on stage, but they are motionless, as if suddenly frozen in their actions. The only characters that are moving are the servants, so as to convey, in Martone's intentions, that the days before the revolution were animated by static, passive, reactionary nobles and active laypeople, who were to become the true soul and engine of the great historical movement. In this case, the faithfulness of Martone's images to the original opera is clear, with an additional emphasis provided by the presence of the frozen nobles, that are slowly taken back to life by the servants (a highlight and a connotation, in Barthes' terms).

Although, as mentioned, AD is written by carefully watching a performance more than once by exploring the settings and costumes after watching the performance and by talking with the director and set designer. Table 1 below offers an excerpt from Luigi Illica's libretto on the left and the text of the AD on the right. All translations from Italian of both the libretto (Teatro alla Scala 2017, 5-31) and the AD are mine.

We are in the province, the castle of the Counts of Coigny. The *winter garden*, a *great hall*.	The first act is set in 1789, right before the Revolution, at the castle of the Coigny family.
At the end of a winter day, in 1789, the hall offers a curious view: it looks like a garden with statues of *Bacchus, Flora and Minerva*. It is a hall, with *furniture scattered all around*, *exotic plants* and a *harpsichord* by Silbermann.	An *elegantly decorated hall*, with golden framed mirrors, crystal lamps and three big statues: *Bacchus, Flora and Minerva*. The hall is a *winter garden*, with *exotic plants* and *luxurious furniture, some pieces of which are scattered on the floor*. On the right, a *harpsichord*.
When the curtain raises, the arrogant Master of the House, in livery, gives orders to the servants, lackeys and porters who bring furniture and vases for the final arrangement of the hall. Carlo Gérard, also in livery, helps arranging the furniture.	In the opening scene, there are approximately 30 nobles in the hall: they are motionless, as if frozen in their positions. The only moving characters are the servants and porters, among them Carlo Gérard. The first one to arrive on stage, amidst the nobles, is the Master of the House.

Table 1 – Excerpts from the opening instructions in the libretto
and the audio introduction.

The words in italics in both columns point to a high degree of similarity between the libretto and the AD, a similarity that is the result of a wish to convey Mario Martone's high degree of faithfulness to Umberto Giordano's opera. Other important similarities are to be found in the costumes for the main characters in this opening scene, whose descriptions are offered in the dedicated section: in Martone's production, both Carlo Gérard and the Master of the House wear traditional livery, as indicated in the libretto.

6.1.2 *The Settings: Jean Paul Marat*

Maximilien de Robespierre is central to the whole journey – from the life story of André de Chénier to the production designed by Mario Martone, appearing as a character in the second act and being mentioned several times by characters throughout the opera. However, a less prominent but symbolic presence is that

of Jean Paul Marat. As is known, Marat was a great protagonist of the revolution and a supporter of the toughest group of revolutionaries who were to institute the Reign of Terror. He was killed in his washbasin by Charlotte Corday in July 1793, right before the Terror was established. In Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, the appearance of Marat coincides precisely with the passage from the days before the revolution portrayed in the first act to the first months of the Reign of Terror, in 1794, in the second act. As Luigi Illica described it in the libretto, this passage needs to be harsh even on the visual level: from luxurious halls and costumes to the tavern where the revolutionaries and the prostitutes hang around. In Martone's staging, it is the central, rotating structure that shifts smoothly from the great luxurious hall in the castle to the streets and the tavern.

However, Jean Paul Marat does not appear as a real-life character in Umberto Giordano's opera: it is, as we can read below, a statue of the revolutionary that is described by Illica as part of the basic settings for the opening scene of the second act. Once again, the AD points to Mario Martone's faithful intersemiotic translation of his source text, with the addition of a few extra details to enrich the connotative effects, always in line with history and with the original opera.

In Paris. On the right, *an altar dedicated to Marat*, supporting his bust, is in the foreground. In front of it are *withered flower garlands*, ribbons, and an extinguished lamp.	In act two we are in Paris, in 1794. At the centre of the stage is the Café Hottot. [...] On the right is *an altar with a bust of Marat*. On the altar are *withered flowers*, a large, French flag and a few, extinguished candles. Marat is portrayed as in a famous portrait by Joseph Boze, done in 1794, where he wears an elegant overcoat and a white shirt, and nothing on his hair.

Table 2 – Excerpt from the libretto and the audio introduction for the second act.

In this case, the AD is more than twice the length of the text in the libretto, with extra details such as the French flag, and with extinguished candles instead of the lamp described by Illica. The second part of the description above aims to convey some of the intentions expressed by Martone in his director's notes, as well as in

a conversation aimed to better write the AD. Marat is not portrayed dead, with a turban on his head, as in a very popular painting by Jacques Louis David. He is alive and wearing his best uniform, so as to highlight his active role in the days narrated at the beginning of the second act. Again, this additional element in Martone's production, transferred in the AD, speaks the language of faithfulness.

6.1.3 *The Costumes: Bersi, the Mulatto Servant*

In opera audio description, as anticipated, the costumes are described in a dedicated section of the AI, but references to the characters, to the overall choice of style and temporary collocation are normally made also in the section dedicated to the stage director's intentions. Bersi, the young countess' servant, stands out as an interesting example of a radical change of appearance and costumes. In the first act, during the party at the castle, she wears a very elegant, voluminous, light green dress and her hair is nicely combed.

From the beginning of the second act, after the revolution, she is no longer the countess' servant, as the nobles have been imprisoned and the castle expropriated. Bersi, thus, becomes a prostitute (a *meravigliosa*, in Illica's libretto), and her appearance changes radically. Once again, below is an excerpt from the libretto (left), and two excerpts from the AI (right), the sections dedicated to the stage director's intentions and the costumes.

At the Café Hottot [...] one notices Bersi, the mulatto servant, for her free, bizarre hairstyle, and for her exaggerated dresses, that clearly identifies the once refined and elegant woman as a prostitute (Meravigliosa).	(AI – The stage direction) In the second act Bersi, Maddalena's servant, is a prostitute (Meravigliosa). (AI – The costumes) In the first act, the mulatto Bersi wears an elegant party dress in pale green and white, with a tight corset and a wide gown. Her hair is elegantly combed and tied at the back of the head. In the second act she is dressed as a prostitute: she has a green cotton dress, sleeveless and extremely low-necked, so as to show part of her breasts. Her hair is voluminous, curly and untied.

Table 3 – Excerpt from the libretto and two sections of the audio introduction.

If Luigi Illica only described the appearance of the mulatto Bersi after the revolution, when she becomes a prostitute, Martone's faithful intersemiotic rendering of the opera highlights the character's change by making her wear extremely different costumes. The AD has striven to faithfully and objectively convey Mario Martone's intentions.

7. *Conclusions*

This essay, inspired by a collaboration with Teatro alla Scala, has aimed to reconstruct an intersemiotic journey through history, music, singing and accessibility. Written with a necessarily bottom-up approach in mind, it has brought me, as the author of the AD as well as of this essay, to reconstruct all the passages and transfers that have led to yet another reading and intersemiotic translation of André de Chénier's life story, across media, times, spaces and performances. The bottom-up approach, dotted with interdisciplinary explorations, has led me to unveil and reflect upon the great and often underestimated potential of intersemiotic translation in ensuring the afterlife of a story, or a source text, through faithfulness. One of the recurrent themes in the debates developed within the translation studies field over the decades is connected to the timelessness of original texts, especially of a literary nature, and the aging of translations that are often anchored to a certain space and time, or better, to an audience, in space and time.

Following this path dotted with fidelity to the sources, throughout the journey, I have been able to find, and demonstrate, that faithful intersemiotic translation can ensure timelessness, without giving up its inherent creative dimension.

AD, as discussed above, is first and foremost a strategy aiming at accessibility: it ensures access to the visual dimension of an opera, or any other multimodal text, by the addition of a verbal track, written to be then spoken and delivered to the ears of blind patrons. As a matter of fact, reviewing all the steps in the journey reconstructed here, we can say that they have all aimed to provide access faithfully and objectively: to historical facts, to music and singing, to specific text types and genres, and to the authors' intentions.

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