How Mimi Perrin Translated Jazz Instrumentals into French Song

“Just like the th at the beginning of they and at the beginning of theater.”
“What’s different about the sound of theater and they?”
“Say them again and listen. One’s voiced and the other’s unvoiced, they’re as distinct as V and F; only they’re allophones—at least in British English; so Britishers are used to hearing them as though they were the same phoneme.”
—Samuel R. Delany, Babel-17

—Prenez par exemple, en français, le C de cure et de constitution.
—Quelle est la différence?
—Répétez chaque mot en vous écoutant bien. Le premier est palatal, articulé sur le sommet du palais, et le second vélaire, sur le voile du palais. Il s’agit simplement de variantes combinatoires dues à l’environnement.
—Samuel R. Delany, Babel-17, translated by Mimi Perrin

Translating prose from one language to another can often be a thorny task, especially with a text, such as the above extract from Samuel R. Delany’s Babel-17, whose meaning or literary effect is inseparable from its voiced sound. For the French edition of this 1966 science fiction novel, its translator, Mimi Perrin (1926–2010), had little choice but to completely recompose Delany’s paragraph. Where the English original contrasts “they” with “theater” to illustrate voiced and unvoiced phonemes, she instead cites the French words cure and constitution to demonstrate palatal and velar pronunciations of the consonant c, meanwhile omitting Delany’s comparison of American and British English. To convey the author’s argument about interlingual phonetic perception, she had to forgo his text’s literal word-for-word meaning and transpose its fictional setting.

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to a French cultural context. These sorts of logistical challenges and creative possibilities—questions of what to retain, change, add, or omit that inevitably arise when translating such concatenations of meaning, speech, and sound—were lifelong preoccupations of Perrin’s, not only in her prolific work as a professional translator but also in her equally fruitful musical career as leader of one of the postwar era’s most successful jazz vocal groups: Les Double Six.

Perrin’s accomplishments with Les Double Six, which she founded in 1959 and disbanded when illness curtailed her performing career in 1966, have to date received little attention from Anglophone jazz researchers. (The only academic scholarship on her musical oeuvre has been by French authors, Eric Fardet and Isabelle Perrin, her daughter, both of whose work provides an essential grounding for the present study.) This may be in part because, from a US-centered perspective, Perrin appears to lie somewhat on the fringes of the jazz world. A white, European, female practitioner of a male-dominated black American musical idiom, she specialized in the distinctive performance practice known as “vocalese,” in which jazz singers take recorded instrumental improvisations (usually well-known commercial discs by famous soloists), set them to words, and reperform them, note for note. (Vocalese, whose name was coined by the British critic Leonard Feather, first became popular during the early 1950s and ever since has typically taken the form of an accessible, engaging entertainment more than an unambiguously earnest art form.) Furthermore, Les Double Six were renowned for meticulously rehearsed arrangements and elaborate postproduction recording techniques rather than the sorts of live, spontaneous improvisation or compositional innovation that jazz critics and scholars have tended to esteem most highly; the group’s name itself signaled their use of six singers, overdubbed to create the illusion of twelve voices, on each of their four albums. Yet the main reason for Perrin’s marginalization by Anglophone jazz scholarship is that her principal enduring musical contributions were as a lyricist, and she wrote in French.

Nevertheless, Mimi Perrin’s strikingly original and sophisticated artistic legacy offers us a uniquely illuminating, transnational perspective on the interrelationships between music, language, and culture. Working alongside major American artists such as Quincy Jones and Dizzy Gillespie, not to mention many leading French singers and instrumentalists, she composed vocalese lyrics with acute sensitivity to the sorts of phonetic subtleties noted in Delany’s novel. Seeking to vocally mimic instrumental sonorities and articulation, she even conceived of her sung texts as, in a metaphorical sense, translations of the recorded jazz solos upon which they were based. The result was a distinctive vocal aesthetic that, by adapting standard French grammar and pronunciation through creative lexical choices and syllabic elisions, at times imparted an effect...
very close to that of wordless, instrumentally oriented scat singing. Perrin’s methods and motivations can best be appreciated and understood by closely scrutinizing her texts’ poetic meanings and linguistic attributes and contrasting them with vocalese lyrics by other authors, particularly those of the American Jon Hendricks (b. 1921). To this end, her work first needs to be situated in the context of jazz’s global history.

**Vocalese’s Transatlantic Origins**

From its very beginning, vocalese singing exemplified jazz’s intercontinental diffusion, whereby musicians, recordings, and creative practices have continually circulated geographically and across cultural and linguistic boundaries. The first widely recognized vocalese recording, King Pleasure’s 1952 rendition of “Moody’s Mood for Love” (with lyrics by Eddie Jefferson), was based on a record made in Sweden by the American saxophonist James Moody. King Pleasure’s disc also featured a few lines sung by Blossom Dearie, who, several weeks later, recorded as a pianist behind Annie Ross, the Paris-based British singer who had recently made her first record with Moody in France. Shortly thereafter the two women presented a nightclub act together in London and Paris, and Dearie ended up spending the next five years in France, where she founded the Blue Stars, a bilingual vocal octet whose membership was otherwise mainly French. In 1957, soon after Dearie returned to the United States, Mimi Perrin joined a new, six-person incarnation of the Blue Stars for an English-language album called *Pardon My English*. A year later, the disc’s title echoed transatlantically when Neal Hefti, an arranger for the Count Basie Orchestra, released *Pardon My Doo-Wah*, a jazz vocal choir album that sought to capitalize on the popularity of the landmark *Sing a Song of Basie*, which had been recorded in New York in mid-1957. The latter album, featuring Basie’s big-band charts set to words and arranged for overdubbed vocals, debuted the trio of Ross, Dave Lambert, and Jon Hendricks, who remain history’s most famous vocalese group by far, still remembered for their commercially successful recordings and marquee concert and festival appearances during that era.

It was Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross’s *Sing a Song of Basie* that inspired Perrin to found Les Double Six in 1959. She already had embarked on an unusual dual career path. After taking classical piano lessons in her youth, she received a degree in English from the Sorbonne and taught the subject for a short time during the early 1950s, also publishing translations of two English-language books. But she increasingly gravitated toward music and before long had established a solid reputation as a jazz pianist, as well as often singing at jam sessions around Paris. By the decade’s end she was playing regularly at the Blue Note club, on
the Right Bank, and had released her first album. That ten-inch disc, *Dancing-party à Saint-Germain-des-Prés*, shows her to have been an adept, bebop-inflected keyboard improviser and, on four songs with English lyrics, a stately jazz vocalist, clearly influenced by Billie Holiday. Perrin heard Holiday perform in Paris in late 1958, several months before the latter’s death, and many years later she recalled the experience as “captivating, bewitching. When the curtain came down and you left the club, all you wanted to hear was silence.”

Most of Les Double Six’s founding members, including Perrin and other singers from the Blue Stars, recorded regularly as background vocalists on jazz and pop studio sessions during the late 1950s. Many were formally trained: Christiane Legrand had studied classical singing, Jean-Claude Briodin was a conservatory-educated saxophonist, Jacques Denjean and Claude Germain were classical pianists, and so was the American Ward Swingle, who had arrived in Paris in 1956 to study with Walter Gieseking. Indeed, the majority of Les Double Six’s rotating personnel, especially during its first two years of existence, were accomplished instrumentalists as well as vocalists. Those with extensive jazz-playing experience included the bassist Jean-Louis Conrozier and two of France’s leading postwar jazz artists, trumpeter Roger Guérin and organist Eddy Louiss. Seeking repertoire, Perrin turned to the American trumpeter and composer Quincy Jones (b. 1933), who had been living in France since 1957 while employed as a studio conductor and arranger for Barclay Records. Jones gave her the charts for some of his big band compositions and arrangements, and he participated in rehearsals for the group’s first album, *Les Double Six Meet Quincy Jones*. Having gathered singers and musical scores, Perrin had only one task left to complete. She needed to write the words.

**Jazz and the French Language**

Vocalese lyrics raise some key issues of musical reception, meaning, and national identity. In France during the 1950s, jazz was a well-established cultural presence, with a long-standing tradition of native French players, institutions, and critical discourse. But while instrumental jazz may seem relatively compatible with cosmopolitan or universalist conceptions of the idiom, sung texts are inherently anchored within a particular language community, with inevitable cultural and national associations. Much as the advent of the “talkies” (sound films with spoken dialogue) linguistically fractured the global cinema audience during the late 1920s, jazz sung in English around the same time made French listeners feel more excluded than did instrumental music of the same genre. On his first European tour, in 1934, Louis Armstrong was told by the manager of Paris’s Salle Pleyel that, for the audience’s benefit, he must sing in French;
Armstrong demurred on the grounds that “it would have been a flop. . . . It would be like wanting Miss Lucienne Boyer to sing in English.”

The notion of the chanteuse Boyer singing in English may well have seemed outlandish to Armstrong, yet her compatriot Maurice Chevalier did just that, to great acclaim, during the same era. Still, when most French vocalists of the 1930s sang American songs, it was far more common for them to perform versions translated into their native tongue. In the hands of cabaret singer Jean Sablon, “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf” became “Prenez garde au grand méchant loup” (Beware of the big nasty wolf); Ray Ventura’s band turned “Whistle While You Work” into “Siflez en travaillant” (Whistle while working). During the early 1940s, with Paris occupied by a German regime that was at war with the United States and its allies, the city’s radio announcers sometimes even thinly disguised American jazz numbers by retitling them in French—Armstrong’s “Basin Street Blues” became “Le blues de la rue du Bassin,” and his “Tight Like This” became “Tiens-le ainsi.”

Even after World War II, with American popular music showing no sign of losing its transatlantic appeal, French audiences continued to hear translated lyrics quite frequently. There were obscure curiosities such as the American trumpeter Roy Eldridge’s 1950 blues vocal, “Tu disais qu’tu m’aimes” (You said that you loved me). But there were also covers of popular English-language hits, such as singer Richard Anthony’s Francophone renditions of “Hit the Road, Jack” (“Fiche le camp, Jack”) and “Blowing in the Wind” (“Écoute dans le vent”). Anthony’s 1960 version of Brian Hyland’s novelty disc “Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polkadot Bikini,” retitled “Itsy bitsy petit bikini,” featured a sophisticated-sounding female speaker reciting a short line at the end of each verse: “Un, deux, trois, elle tremblait de montrer quoi?” (One, two, three, she trembled to show what?). The voice was Mimi Perrin’s.

Under Dearie’s leadership, the Blue Stars had been singing mainly in French; their version of “Lullaby of Birdland,” arranged by Christiane Legrand’s brother Michel, even appeared on the US pop charts in early 1956, retitled “La légende du pays aux oiseaux” (The legend of the land of birds), with French lyrics by Jean Constantin.

But by 1957, when Perrin joined the group, they were often recording in English. Two years later, as she set about planning Les Double Six’s renditions of Jones’s jazz charts, Perrin at first considered writing English lyrics. She soon changed her mind. “If you don’t try too hard to respect academically correct French, and if you allow yourself some slang phrases and elisions,” she decided, “French is almost better.” It was a daunting undertaking all the same. Ward Swingle recalled that, while composing lyrics, Perrin “often spent an entire night looking for the one word that would do the job.” The singers would arrive at her home each morning at nine o’clock to learn their parts, often returning in the evening.
to practice late into the night—Monique Aldebert, another participant, remembered “hours, days, weeks, months, spent . . . rehearsing again and again in order to achieve the sacrosanct ‘blend,’ the amalgam of six voices sounding as one.”  

The recording process was just as arduous. Perrin first called only the rhythm section (piano, bass, and drums) to the studio, where she asked them to listen to the original instrumental discs and rehearse using notated charts. When taping the instrumental tracks, drummer Daniel Humair faced one of the greatest musical challenges he had ever confronted. “It is really very tricky,” he found, “to record the accompaniment for an imaginary big band while observing the theme, chorus, and orchestral re-entrance, with the only point of reference being provided by Mimi Perrin, who went from one [musician] to the other, murmuring the theme and solos softly enough that the microphone didn’t pick up her voice.” Once the rhythm section tracks had been satisfactorily completed, the Double Six singers rehearsed with them. When it came time to record in the studio, the vocalists added three tracks: first the voices representing the lead trumpet and saxophone section, then the remaining brass parts, and finally the solos based on the original instrumental improvisations.

Words from Music

Musically, Les Double Six differed in several respects from their American counterparts, Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross. Perrin’s group was larger, placed more emphasis on exact part-by-part replication of big band orchestrations, and did not feature scat improvisation. Yet their most original and distinctive artistic contribution of all was unquestionably their leader’s unique approach to crafting French lyrics. “When you listen very closely to a jazz band,” Perrin explained in 1966, “it seems to me that the instruments don’t do what we generally call onomatopoeias—that is, ‘taba-da’ or ‘tooboo-doo.’ Rather, there’s a phrasing, a particular sound, that differs with each instrument, and I try—in some ways you could say it’s like a translation of a foreign language. It’s a translation of the music—of the sounds that the instruments make. So, for example, when it’s a trumpet section, I’ll try to render the trumpet attacks by t’s or d’s.” This, in essence, was her modus operandi: she conceived of vocalese lyricization as a form of translation, and she tried to write texts that would, to some extent, preserve the phonology of the original instrumental renditions. Of course, Perrin was hardly the first to note that jazz instrumentalists’ phrasing and articulation often resemble the human voice. She was exceptional, though, in that she conceptualized this phenomenon almost literally and explored it at an exhaustive
level of detail in her creative work. The resulting vibrant, imaginative fusion of speech, song, and instrumentally conceived melody was unprecedented in jazz. “The first time I rehearsed these fabulous singers,” Quincy Jones recalled, “I declared that they reproduced the instrumental phrasing, inflections, and nuances marvelously, and I told Mimi, ‘When I hear your group, I hear my band.’”

To illustrate, Perrin drew attention to the opening line of her vocalese setting of the Count Basie Orchestra’s “Blues in Hoss’ Flat.” “The beginning of this piece’s introduction . . . consists of successive attacks,” she pointed out. “And the corresponding phrase for us is ‘Pour tout vous dire, nous partons tenter le bon d’antan’ [Frankly, we’ll go and try the good old things]. If you listen, that makes the ‘rebounds’ of the t’s, the b’s, and the d’s, which reproduce this sound. So if you’d done ‘doogoo-doogoo-doo,’ that wouldn’t have had any relationship.” One of her aims, in this instance, was to deploy words that start with a plosive consonant, principally bilabials (i.e., p’s and b’s) or alveolars (i.e., t’s and d’s). In the Basie band’s instrumental arrangement, Frank Foster had scored the phrase for trombones and saxophones; Perrin uses plosive onsets, including five t’s, to enunciate eleven of its fourteen syllables.

Perrin’s innovative use of language to mimic instrumental sonorities and articulation caused Les Double Six’s performances to sound strikingly different from those of other vocalese singers. The clearest bases for comparison are a number of pieces that both Perrin and other lyricists independently set to words. One such instance is Horace Silver’s early hard-bop composition “Doodlin’”; Jon Hendricks, who wrote all of Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross’s lyrics, began his setting of this theme with these lines:

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Usin’ the phone booth—makin’ a few calls,
Doodlin’ weird things—usin’ the booth walls,
Got me a big date—waitin’ for my chick,
Puttin’ her face on, so she can look slick,
I enjoy procrastinatin’, ’cause I’m busy while I’m waitin’,
Doodlin’ away—doodlin’ away.
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Hendricks has said that he never attempts to re-create instrumental attacks or sonorities, he simply derives his lyrics’ subject matter from each composition’s original name. Silver may well have thought of the word “doodlin’” as an onomatopoeia resembling the theme’s incipit, insistently repeated melodic motive; Hendricks, in any case, took the title literally and invented English lyrics evoking idle scribbling. In contrast, when Perrin set this same melody to French lyrics, she capitalized on the phonetic resonance between its title, its reiterative melody, and the French approximate homonym dodelinant (nodding). Insistently reiterating this
word in tandem with the theme’s motivic repetitions, she heightened the French text’s sonic resemblance to the instrumental original:\(^{50}\)

Dis, toi, t’as peur de travailler, dis, toi, t’as peur de t’réveiller,
   dis, tois, tu n’peux pas t’lever!
Dodelinant, dodelinant, dodelinant, dodelinant,
  Dodelinant, dodelinant, dodelinant, dodelinant,
Tu n’peux pas, dis donc patate, non tu n’peux pas passer
tout ton temps tout en dodelinant, tout en dodelinant!

[Hey you, you’re afraid to go to work, hey you, you’re afraid
to wake up, hey you, you can’t get up!
Nodding, nodding, nodding, nodding,
Nodding, nodding, nodding, nodding,
You can’t, hey couch potato, no you can’t spend
all your time always nodding, always nodding!]

The inherent musicality of such linguistic repetition has been empirically demonstrated; in a recent study of music cognition, Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis observes that “when language is being repetitive . . . language is being musical.”\(^{51}\)

What is more, Perrin associated certain types of consonants with particular musical instruments. She spoke of “translating” saxophone attacks with labiodental fricatives (\(f\) and \(v\)) and voiced bilabial plosives (\(b\)); to replicate brass parts, she generally preferred alveolar plosives (\(t\) and \(d\)) or the voiceless bilabial, \(p\).\(^{52}\) The most often cited illustration of how she conveyed the effect of specific instrumental note onsets is her setting of Bobby Timmons’s classic hard bop theme “Moanin’.”\(^{53}\) “On Quincy Jones’s arrangement,” she explained, “I hummed ‘ta pada pada pada pa.’ The first word would need to be ‘ta pa,’ hence ‘t’as pas peur de t’évader d’là’ [you’re not afraid of escaping from there]. I wouldn’t have been able to put ‘viens chez moi’ [come to my place], since we wouldn’t have attacked.”\(^{54}\) She eventually completed a vocalese text entitled “La complainte du bagnard” (The convict’s lament):

T’as pas peur de t’évader d’là? (Moi, pas.)
Tu n’crois pas qu’tu n’y arriveras pas? (Moi, pas.)
Tu n’crois pas qu’tu n’y arriveras pas? (Moi, pas.)

[You’re not afraid of escaping from there? (Not me.)
You don’t think you won’t make it? (Not me.)
You don’t think you won’t make it? (Not me.)]

In this case, the theme’s title is a basic starting point, but textual semantics are a subsidiary consideration because Perrin’s foremost creative goal is to recreate the instrumental phonology: almost all of the words start with consonants, and she begins each line with the letter \(t\), replicating the
crisp, tongued saxophone articulation heard on Quincy Jones’s big band recording. And, characteristically of jazz aesthetics, her own creative vision largely supersedes whatever meanings or symbolism “Moanin’” may have possessed in its original context.

Hendricks, whose father was a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, has said, “‘Moanin’’ to me sounds like a church song.” Motivated by the theme’s gospel semiotics—its call-and-response exchanges and plagal cadential progressions—he wrote very different lyrics for Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross:

Every morning find me moaning. (Yes, Lord.)
’Cause of all the trouble I see. (Yes, Lord.)
Life’s a losing gamble to me. (Yes, Lord.)

The English phrase “Yes, Lord,” set to the responsorial IV–I (“amen”) interjections at the end of each line, unmistakably resonates with the music’s implicit liturgical connotations, yet these words’ initial consonants, y and l, bear little resemblance to the horn articulations of trumpeter Lee Morgan and saxophonist Benny Golson on Art Blakey’s original quintet recording. Perrin’s corresponding “Moi, pas” not only uses bilabial consonants to mimic the trombone attacks in Jones’s big band arrangement but also deploys vowels whose relative lengths in spoken French—a drawn-out oi (wah) followed by a clipped as (uh)—roughly conform to the motive’s rhythmic profile: a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note. In short, Hendricks’s lyrics seek to convey linguistically what he believes the original music signifies; Perrin’s lyrics recreate the music’s sound while verbally expressing new meanings, often limited only by her imagination.

**Hearing Scat**

But what of Perrin’s characterization of her vocalese texts as translations? Although lyricizing instrumental performances is certainly quite unlike literary translation in the everyday interlingual sense, it is quite close to what Roman Jakobson calls “intersemiotic translation,” or “transmutation,” in which “verbal signs [are interpreted] by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems,” except that the intersemiotic relationship is reversed: nonverbal signs are interpreted verbally. Naturally, the instrumental music and corresponding vocalese lyrics may not necessarily have any shared meaning; what they share is their sounding phonology. Perrin’s texts can therefore also be considered a form of homophonic translation. Homophonic translation, ordinarily construed interlingually, involves reinterpreting the sounds of one language in another language, typically with a change in meaning; for instance, the English phrase “Baa baa black sheep, have you any wool?” can be homophonically translated
into French as “Papa blague chipe, à vieux inouï houle” (Stealing, even in fun, my father, can disturb a mature man to unheard-of depths). Perrin’s mode of inventing vocalese lyrics was, in sum, a process of *homophonic intersemiotic translation*: phonetically, her verbal texts approximated the sounds of instrumental performance, but semantically, they did not necessarily bear any relationship to any meanings that could reasonably be ascribed to the original renditions.

Because they reproduce jazz instrumental phonology, Perrin’s lyrics have an unusual transnational bivalence: more than most other vocalese texts, they are capable of being perceived by linguistic outsiders as semantically open, scatlike vocal performances. Consider, by way of comparison, the perspective of non-Anglophones hearing one of Hendricks’s English settings of a jazz instrumental recording. Lacking any decipherable linguistic content, the performance would not be semantically comprehensible, nor could it be easily apprehended as if it were semantically open, in the manner of most scat singing, since, unlike scat, its vocal phonemes do not tend to mirror jazz instrumental articulation and inflections. Non-Anglophone listeners are therefore prone to experience the music with a marked sense of foreignness and cultural exclusion—as simply a language that they do not understand. Perrin’s French texts are different. More instrumentally oriented and thus more scatlike, they do not linguistically alienate non-Francophones quite so resolutely.

A good example is her setting of the Woody Herman Orchestra’s “Four Brothers,” which she gave a science fiction text, a common theme of her lyrics after the early 1960s. Retitled “Les quatre extra-terrestres” (The four extraterrestrials), it begins:

> Pour vous nous voilà venus,
> Partis de tous les coins de l’univers,
> Pour tenter tant qu’on pourra,
> D’prouver qu’en n’étant pas du tout d’une même planète,
> On peut pourtant vous tendre la main.

[Here we are—we’ve come for you
From all corners of the universe
To try as best we can
To show that though we’re not at all from the same planet
We can still give you a helping hand.]

The opening line, “Pour vous nous voilà venus,” contains a triple assonance of the *ou* (ooh) vowel pairing, closely echoed by the final syllable’s *u* (see ex. 1). The consonant *v* is repeated three times, *n* twice, and the only other consonants at syllabic onsets are the plosive *p* on the downbeat and the *l* on beat 3. The latter syllable, *là*, is the most distinctive of
all, giving additional salience to an eighth note that initiates a decisive change in melodic direction from the incipit semitonal undulation toward an arpeggiated descent.

Herman’s “Four Brothers” also happens to have been the first recording for which Hendricks wrote and recorded a vocalese lyric. His English text is semantically grounded in the first-person-plural perspective of four horn players, but, except for its straightforward rhymes, it has neither the phonetic consistency nor the instrumental phonology of Perrin’s:

Take a seat and cool it,
‘Cause unless you overrule it,
We are ready to show you some blowin’.
A-rompin’ and a-stompin’ is a lot of fun.
Four brothers who are blowin’ our horns.

Hendricks’s first seven vocalese syllables—“Take a seat and cool it, ‘cause”—contain two s consonants, a voiceless alveolar fricative that tends not to be much used in scat singing, perhaps because it does not resemble any conventional instrumental articulation. Consequently, to a linguistic outsider, this English phrase is not nearly so conducive to a “scat hearing” as is Perrin’s corresponding “Pour vous nous voilà venus” (in standard French pronunciation the terminal s consonants are silent).

Though Perrin’s primary intended listenership was French, she also was well aware of, and appreciated, Les Double Six’s English-speaking North American audiences (the group toured the United States and Canada in 1964, and their albums were released transatlantically). By presenting non-French speakers with a genuine foreign language masquerading as scat, she inverted a long-standing tradition among jazz singers of using scat to convey the impression of a “mock-foreign language.” Since Perrin’s lyrics always certainly remain, at some level, recognizably French texts, listeners who do not understand French will continue to experience them with some degree of alienation from their verbal meaning, even if less so than non-Anglophones hearing Hendricks’s lyrics. From a non-Francophone standpoint, her texts also affirm the long-standing notion of jazz as, in Louis Armstrong’s words, “a secret order,” an exclusive community that uses opaque musical and verbal codes, such as “jive” argot, to segregate itself from mainstream society, including even some of the idiom’s devotees. And meanwhile, by
infusing a real, non-English language with qualities of instrumentally oriented scat, Perrin evoked another, related jazz practice: the intermingling of scat and hipster jive (epitomized, as Brent Hayes Edwards observes, by Armstrong’s English “translation” of Budd Johnson’s scatted “viper language” on a 1933 recording of “Sweet Sue”). Even so, her lyrics remain exceptional in the extent to which they convey the effect of textless, “abstract” instrumental sound without ever abandoning concrete linguistic signification. They are, in a sense, simultaneously both globally cosmopolitan and distinctly French.

**After d’Alembert: Transfiguring French**

Understood as a process of translation, albeit an intersemiotic rather than interlingual one, Perrin’s vocalese aesthetic embodied certain long-standing principles of the literary translation process that was her once and future vocation. Even her invention of entirely new texts whose meaning was sometimes completely untethered to that of their musical foundation is reconcilable with a literary aesthetic: Walter Benjamin famously claimed that a literary text’s “essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information.” Translation is, in his view, a “mode” that “ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages,” and one way it does so is by “finding that intended effect [Intention] upon the language into which [one] is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.” Although Benjamin’s theory is by no means always reflected in practice, his notion that literary translations should imbue their target language with an aroma of the foreign original is a very old one, traceable to such sources as the French Enlightenment philosopher Jean d’Alembert, who wrote in 1763 that interlingual translation ought to borrow “features of one language in order to embellish another” and thus produce a text with “a foreign coloring.” Perrin, in a similar vein, felt it was necessary to modify her native tongue when composing vocalese texts.

One of her reasons for defamiliarizing the French language was to engender the ineffable quality called “swing,” a goal she shared with a number of other prominent French popular vocalists and lyricists both before and since her time. “French . . . doesn’t swing like the English language,” she explained in a rare English interview. “I have to transform it a little . . . to put the . . . word stress on another syllable . . . . The French language is more fluid. Our stress is not accentuated like in English. So that obliged me to put the stress on the French word where it’s not there really when we talk normally. . . . I had to . . . twist it a little so that the words would bounce like in English.” This process of linguistic transfiguration has been further explicated by Perrin’s daughter, Isabelle, a
translation scholar who worked closely with her mother (they published many literary translations together as equal collaborators). Isabelle Perrin notes that English contains a comparatively large number of monosyllabic words; lyricists can use these to accent musical syncopations with a single complete word. French, with proportionally more polysyllables, is more conducive to legato, rather than strongly accented, phrasing. To compensate, Mimi Perrin adopted a French vocalese lexicon comprised of a disproportionately large number of single-syllable words; Isabelle calls attention to her mother’s text for J. J. Johnson and Kai Winding’s version of Dizzy Gillespie’s “A Night in Tunisia,” which foregrounds words such as _peut_ (can), _voir_ (see), _là_ (there), and _donc_ (thus):73

Paraît qu’on peut voir en Arabie,
paraît qu’on peut voir là, parlez donc,
paraît qu’on peut voir en Arabie,
des milliers d’tapis volants. (T’en es tout baba.)

[It seems we can see in Arabia,
it seems we can see there, say then,
it seems we can see in Arabia,
thousands of flying carpets. (You’re all flabbergasted.)]

Isabelle Perrin additionally observes that the slang term _baba_ at the end of this stanza—a word that itself resembles scat syllables—is echoed by a reference to Ali Baba later in the same text.74

Mimi Perrin also deviated from French linguistic norms by saturating her texts with syllabic elisions. In a nonexhaustive list, musicologist Eric Fardet has identified twenty-eight different fused consonant pairs that arise from elisions throughout her oeuvre: _d_ and _q_ merge when “de quoi” is contracted into “d’quoi,” _j_ adheres to _v_ when “je vais” is elided into “j’vais,” and so forth.75 These elisions not only contribute to her lyrics’ colloquial flavor to French speakers but also facilitate their bivalent function, accentuating the impression of scat to non-Francophone listeners.76 In the second line of her text for the tune “Walkin’” (retitled “Un tour au bois” [A walk in the woods]), Les Double Six sing the reiterated phrase “là où il y a” with extreme elisions that condense its five syllables within just two distinct pitches (see ex. 2). Their diction creates an effect very close to the scat syllable “ool-ya,”77 in this case


\[\text{Example 2. “Walkin’” (“Un tour au bois”) (Les Double Six, BMG France).}\\
\text{C’est là bas là/ou il y a là bas là/ou il y a là/ou il y a là/ou il y a là/ou il y a l’bois.}\]
mimicking the saxophone grace-note inflections of Quincy Jones’s original arrangement.78

C’est là-bas, là dans le bois, là, qu’on ira là. (Tout là-bas.)
C’est là-bas, là où il y a, là-bas, là où il y a, là où il y a, là où
il y a l’bois.
Venez donc avec moi,
allons faire un tour au bois.
Venez donc avec moi,
chérie allons là-bas,
faire un petit tour au bois,
tous les deux, tous les deux là-bas, là.

[It’s down there, there in the woods, there, we’re going there.
(Right down there.)
It’s down there, that’s where, down there, that’s where, that’s
where there’s the woods.
So come with me,
let’s take a walk in the woods.
So come with me,
darling, let’s go down there,
for a little walk in the woods,
both of us, both of us down there, there.]

This particular text also makes ample use of single-syllable words such as là, bas, and bois that sound almost identical to common scat syllables (“la,” “bah,” and “bwah”). Perceptually, these sorts of French/scat homophones may even facilitate a “scat hearing” for non- Francophones, much as cognate homophones are known to trigger codeswitching in conversations between bilingual speakers.79

Truth be told, even French speakers sometimes tend to hear these sung texts as if they are scat vocables rather than semantic syllables. Perrin was of the opinion that those who found her texts difficult to apprehend were mainly “superficial, distracted, or musically unskilled listeners.”80 “To them I reply, ‘Of course,’” she explained. “Because if you were understanding each word very distinctly, it would just mean that we weren’t swinging, since we wouldn’t be vocally reproducing the attack, intonation, phrasing, nor even the sonority of the instruments!”81 That is, her lyrics’ occasional incomprehensibility was not a shortcoming but a measure of their success. Perrin’s accomplishment was to have devised a mode of linguistic deformation that was singularly capable of imparting a sense of swing, incorporating vernacular argot, and echoing the original instrumental phonology, all at the same time.

During her seven years at the helm of Les Double Six, in a leadership role that was in the 1960s—and still is—rare for a woman in the jazz
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world, Perrin realized a creative vision that straddled some basic social and artistic binarisms: speech and song, music and text, instrumental and vocal production, live performance and technologically manipulated recordings, and of course European and African American culture. Such marked originality always risks marginalization; for all that she enjoyed some short-lived commercial success, her work would probably be more widely recognized today had she pursued musical goals that were less idiosyncratic or within more conventionally prestigious fields. Nonetheless, her lyrics and recordings—aside from their immediate aesthetic, expressive, and intellectual rewards—offer an instructive, compelling illustration of postwar mainstream jazz’s global reach, traversing national, geographic, and linguistic boundaries and, conversely, providing a dynamic site for crosscultural interaction.

In highly distinctive ways, Perrin’s vocalese aesthetic exemplifies the practice of translation in both its intersemiotic sense and the larger metaphorical sense of cultural transmission and adaptation. Her composition of French lyrics based on Afrodisporic musical sources was far from a matter of transparent mediation; it was always an inventive process effected not merely via an implicit dialogue with American cultural traditions but also through literal, face-to-face collaboration with these traditions’ human proponents (in addition to Jones and Gillespie, Les Double Six also recorded with the American jazz musicians Kenny Clarke and Bud Powell). As a variety of recent musicological and literary scholarship has shown, the concept of translation, deployed as an interpretative trope, can shed light on the power relations and ideological motivations that suffuse networks of cultural diffusion; it additionally encourages, historian Celeste Day Moore has argued, a salutary shift in “focus away from the ‘thing’ itself (be it the word, the idea, or even commodity) and toward the processes of creation and animation.” Perrin’s musical project certainly can be understood in cultural nationalist terms insofar as it used language as a means of decisively sweeping jazz into a French social orbit. But translational processes, at the same time, inherently serve to establish and fortify social bonds between separate linguistic communities; to invoke Brent Hayes Edwards’s metaphor, translation “lubricates the turbine” of internationalism by helping ideas, thoughts, and feelings to circulate. On balance, Perrin’s vocalese lyrics for Les Double Six certainly facilitated social exchange and cohesion far more than they hindered them. By interweaving two culturally distinct expressive systems—an African American music and a European language—they left an imprint on both. On the one hand, her texts enriched the jazz idiom by forging a novel, transnational synthesis between sung lyrics and instrumental music, and on the other, jazz’s aesthetic imperatives yielded comparably substantial transfigurations of the French language. Neither jazz nor French was simply an object of her translational process. Each
was furthermore a medium within which that process unfolded, and
together they provided the inspirational spark and creative method for
an artistic undertaking whose electrifying energy, whimsical humor, vital
creativity within clear parameters, and sheer communicative immediacy
embodied the transformative power of the language of music—and the
music of language.87

NOTES

I thank Luciane Beduschi, Ellie Martin, Celeste Day Moore, and Isabelle Perrin. All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

2. “Take, for example, in French, the C of cure and of constitution.”
   “What’s the difference?”
   “Repeat each word and listen closely. The first is palatal, articulated on the roof of
   the palate, and the second is velar, on the soft part of the palate. It’s simply a matter
   of combinatorial variants due to the environment.”


7. Although spelled similarly, “vocalese” is completely unrelated to the wordless vocal compositional idiom known as “vocalise.”


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10. Many, though not all, Anglo-American jazz scholars have tended to ignore texts written in any language other than English; even some landmark critical or historiographical surveys, including Scott DeVeaux’s “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25 (1991): 525–60 and John Gennari’s *Blowin’ Hot and Cool: Jazz and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) have overlooked major untranslated non-Anglophone books such as Robert Goffin’s *Aux frontières du jazz* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1932).

11. James Moody, “I’m in the Mood for Love” (Metronome [Sweden] 15219; mx. mr29-a), recorded October 12, 1949; King Pleasure, “Moody’s Mood for Love” (Prestige 924), recorded February 19, 1952. There are earlier recorded precedents for the setting of lyrics to recorded jazz improvisations, such as Bee Palmer’s recording of “Singin’ the Blues,” which sets words to Frank Trumbauer’s 1927 recorded saxophone solo (Columbia; mx. W147771), recorded January 10, 1929; and The Delta Rhythm Boys’ “Take the A Train” (Decca 8578), recorded 1941. Several other early instances are noted in the overview of vocalese found in Friedwald, *Jazz Singing*, 233–50.


14. Les Blue Stars, *Pardon My English* (Mercury 7182), recorded 1957. By the time they recorded *Pardon My English*, the Blue Stars’ personnel consisted of Claudine Barge, Jean Liesse, Jean Mercardier, Mimi Perrin, Henri Tallourd, and Nadine Young; see Fardet, “Le jazz et les groupes vocaux,” 357. For a table indicating the membership shared by the Blue Stars, Les Double Six, and the Swingle Singers, see ibid., 258.


22. Also singing with the group in 1959 and 1960 were Monique Guérin (Roger’s wife) and her future husband, Louis Aldebert.


26. The Russian theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold wrote that “from the moment the film began to talk the international power of the screen began to diminish” (Meyerhold on Theatre, trans. Edward Braun [New York: Hill and Wang, 1969], 255; discussed in Philip
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28. Jean Sablon, “Prenez garde au grand méchant loup” (Columbia DF1406; mx. CL 4663-1), recorded January 16, 1934; Ray Ventura et Ses Collégiens, “Siflez en travaillant” (Pathé PA1476; mx. CPT 3837-1), recorded March 4, 1938.


34. An exception is their scat recording of “Jumpin’ at the Woodside,” *Les Blue Stars* (Barclay EP 70 027), recorded 1956.

35. “J’ai constaté que, si l’on ne prend pas la peine de respecter un français académique, et si l’on se permet des phrases d’argot et des élisions, le français est presque mieux” (Tronchot, “Ce chant que jouent,” 18, quoted in Fardet, “Le jazz et les groupes vocaux,” 227, and in Perrin, *L’écriture du vocalese*).


39. Humair, “Les Double Six,” 16. Members of the rhythm section also took part in the vocalists’ studio sessions and may have rerecorded the instrumental tracks. Humair recalls...
recording with the singers, and Christiane Legrand remembers the drums being placed in the basement while the singers were on the first floor (Fardet, “Le jazz et les groupes vocaux,” 338). In the 1970s Perrin also described a recording process that used four vocal tracks in addition to the rhythm section track (Carrière and Cullaz, “2 x 6 = Mimi,” 55).

40. “Lorsque vous écoutez de très près un orchestre de jazz, puisque il s’agit d’un orchestre de jazz, il me semble que les instruments ne font pas ce qu’on appelle générale-ment des onomatopées, c’est à dire des ‘tabadas’ ou des ‘touboudous’ mais ils ont un phrasé, un son particulier—qui diffère d’ailleurs avec les instruments—et j’essaie, en quelque sorte, c’est comme une traduction d’un langage étranger, si vous voulez, et là c’est une traduction de la musique, du son que produisent ces instruments. C’est pour ça que, par exemple, lorsqu’il s’agit d’une section de trompette, j’essaierai de rendre les attaques de trompette par des Ts ou des Ds” (Fayard, Deux voix par tête).


42. In a 1968 interview, Hendricks, too, described his vocalese lyricizations as a mode of translation, but he explicitly characterized the translational process as more metaphorical than literal, geared toward capturing the “feeling” of the music: “I call it translating, really. . . . Not just a literal translation. I try to translate the feeling of the music lyrically” (Jon Hendricks, interview with Les Tomkins, 1968, http://www.nationaljazzarchive.co.uk/stories?id=199, accessed July 19, 2014).

43. “La première fois que j’ai fait répéter ces fabuleux chanteurs, j’ai constaté qu’ils reproduisaient à merveille le phrasé, les inflexions et les nuances des instruments et j’ai dit à Mimi: ‘Quand j’entends ton groupe, j’entends mon orchestre’” (Quincy Jones, “Préface à l’édition française,” in Quincy).

44. Count Basie, “Blues in Hoss’ Flat,” Chairman of the Board (Roulette 81664), recorded March 4, 1958. Another, very different, reinterpretation of this instrumental recording as if it were expressed through human speech can be seen in the 1961 film The Errand Boy, starring Jerry Lewis. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kS2IT_p0pNA, accessed July 24, 2014. 

45. “Le début, l’introduction de ce morceau, que nous avons d’ailleurs reposé devant vous, est fait d’attaques successives, et la phrase pour nous qui correspond est ‘Pour tout vous dire, nous partons tenter le bon d’antan.’ Si vous écoutez ça fait des rebonds de Ts, de Bs, de Ds, qui reproduisent ce son. Alors si vous avez fait ‘tou-goudou-goudou,’ ça n’a aucun rapport” (Fayard, Deux voix par tête).


49. Isabelle Perrin calls attention to Mimi Perrin’s consistent use of such textual repetitions in conjunction with motivic replications; see “L’écriture du vocalese.”

50. The first line of Perrin’s text corresponds to a short introductory phrase in Quincy Jones’s arrangement (the melody and lyrics of this line are reproduced in Swingle, Swingle Singing, 14). Hendricks’s version, which is not based on Jones’s arrangement, has no corresponding phrase, so the first line of Hendricks’s text corresponds to the second line of Perrin’s.


53. Discussed in Fardet, “Pour une nouvelle définition,” 88, 93; and in Perrin, “L’écriture du vocalese.”

54. “Sur l’arrangement de Quincy Jones, je fredonnais ‘ta pada pada pada pa.’ Il fallait que le premier mot soit ‘ta pa,’ d’où ‘t’as pas peur de t’évader d’là.’ Je n’aurai pas pu mettre ‘viens chez moi,’ car on n’aurait pas attaqué” (Tronchot, “Ce chant que jouent,” 17, quoted in Perrin, “L’écriture du vocalese”).


57. Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, “Moanin’,” Moanin’ (Blue Note 4003), recorded October 30, 1958.


65. Robert G. O’Meally, liner notes to The Jazz Singers (Smithsonian Recordings RD 113), 98. Another literature scholar, Brent Hayes Edwards, characterizes the faux-Chinese and faux-Yiddish comic vocals of swing-era artists such as Cab Calloway and Slim Gaillard as a “mode of performing alterity” (“Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat,” Critical Inquiry 28, no. 3 [2002]: 627).


72. Isabelle Perrin, “L’écriture du vocalese.”

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

75. Fardet, “Pour une nouvelle définition,” 96. Also discussed in Perrin, “L’écriture du vocalese.”

76. Jon Hendricks made use of elisions as well, though not nearly to the same extent as Perrin. See Hendricks, “NEA Jazz Master Interview,” 77–78.

77. Compare, for instance, Dizzy Gillespie and Gil Fuller’s scat composition “Oo-la-lu-ko” (Victor 20-2878), recorded December 30, 1947.

78. Quincy Jones, “Walkin’,” *This Is How I Feel about Jazz* (ABC Paramount 149), recorded September 29, 1956.


80. “auditeurs superficiels, distraits ou peu musiciens” (Carrière and Cullaz, “2 x 6 = Mimi,” 54).

81. “Je leur répondais: ‘Bien sûr, car si vous comprenez très distinctement chaque parole, cela voudrait simplement dire que nous ne swinguons pas, car nous ne reproduirions vocalement ni l’attaque, ni l’intonation, ni le phrase, ni même la sonorité de l’instrument ou des instruments!’” (ibid.).

82. For a brief discussion of women’s marginalization in the postwar French jazz world, see Perchard, *After Django*, 15–17.


84. Clarke played on Les Double Six’s debut disc, and both he and Powell appeared on the group’s album with Dizzy Gillespie.
