

The World's Song

*Kaiqing Su**

I know three languages: Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. I speak Cantonese and Mandarin growing up, and English is the second language all Chinese students have to learn in school. Though interested in linguistics, I never thought of learning another language. While I am more comfortable with reading and writing, direct and immediate communication through speaking and listening need more courage. If reading and writing have time for looking the dictionary up, re-reading, and editing the words on the page, speaking and listening require instant comprehension and reaction to catch the sound that would vanish into the air once uttered. This communicative aspect of languages pressures me. What if my pronunciation is weird? What if no one understands what I try to say? What if I can't understand what others are saying?

Though I know nothing other than the three languages I speak, as a singer, I have sung songs in Latin, French, German, Spanish...just to name a few. With the help of music, pronouncing unfamiliar words becomes easier. The melody solves the problem of intonations, speed, and accent—I just need to find the right consonant and vowel, adding a bit of pitch to support the sound. As I sing those songs, there's almost an illusion that I can actually speak the languages without knowing the meaning of each word. The burden of communicating through meanings doesn't seem to exist anymore.

But music communicates itself in other ways, and meaning is not the only thing in comprehension. As I sing through each note carefully, I bite into the words attached and taste them. The words are no longer only assemblages of meanings, but sounds that translate themselves. Singing and listening to the songs syllable by syllable, I realize each movement of my tongue, teeth, and jaw produce specific sonic effects, which are related yet beyond their meanings. These sounds are inseparable from the story-telling—in some ways, they push the music to be more expressive and communicative. The music slowed me down. In those repetitive practicing, I realized words and sentences have their own musicality.

I used to search for only meanings when listening to conversations. When I couldn't understand, the conversations would sound like a vacuum, sometimes even a threat. But the more I sing, the more I hear utterances as songs. As I gradually give up my obsession with 'understanding,' music emerges from the incomprehensible. A year ago, I took an intro class in international politics. The professor has a strong Indian accent. During the first class, I could only understand half of what he said—I almost dropped the class. But the rest of the day, the accent stuck in my

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head, just like a song. The accent may seem like a blockage on my way of accessing meanings, but the sound itself conveys something more. When I was spending time with my friend from Indonesia, sometimes they called their family and speak enthusiastically through the phone. I watched their exciting facial expression and listened to their hearty laughter, trying to guess what they were saying. I almost enjoyed this incomprehension, which immerse me in other aspects of communication that are not just meaning.

This kind of musicality belongs to all languages, but the languages we know by heart can easily slip away through our lips without being carefully listened to. In an art history class, the assigned reading was a Chinese poem about a beautiful and elegant goddess. I was asked to read. At first, I struggled—no one could really understand what I was reading, even the translation was not sufficient. But I read, slowly and carefully—

piānrú àijīnghóng wǎnrú yóulóng róngyào qiū jǔ huámào chūnsōng
翩若惊鸿，婉若游龙。荣曜秋菊，华茂春松。
fāng fú xī ruò qīng yún zhī bī yuè piāo yāo xī ruò liú fēng zhī huī xuě
髣髴兮若轻云之蔽月，飘飘兮若流风之回雪。

I almost burst into tears when I finished. The rhythmic and melodic sound hit me; those characters rested on my tongue and lips felt more concrete—like chewing a kind of candy from a lost childhood.

These wonderful pieces of music lie in our languages. Other than meanings, there are many things our ears can be attentive to: sighs, waves of laughter, pauses, silences...all of these don't block possibility for conversations. In fact, listening to and appreciating different languages, we can still sense the meanings through intimate engagements with the sounds.

The music of languages also changes. When I spend too much time with my friend from Northern China, I inevitably acquire a strong, aggressive Beijing accent. While I don't understand Hindi at all, the end of my sentence will share a similar uplifted swirl as my friend from New Delhi and I have intense discussions on post-colonialism. Flowing through our ears, mouths, and minds, languages travel. Through a daily encounter with different kinds of sounds and languages, the music we make is not confined to a certain nation, culture or region.

We all search for music, and we all sing our songs. If a speech is a solo, a debate a duet, a class discussion an ensemble, together we all create a huge choir. Sometimes we don't follow the conductor, sometimes the notes we sing create dissonance, sometimes we suddenly pause for a long time...This is a multilingual song, filled with some incomprehensible sounds, but the music is no less beautiful. As we engage with languages beyond meanings, as we don't block ourselves from the incomprehensible, as we sing and listen carefully...the song will go on.

¹ Excerpt from “The ode of the Goddess Luo” by Three Kingdom poet, Zhi Cao. Translation of the excerpt: ‘her body soars lightly like a startled swan, gracefully, like a dragon in flight; In splendor brighter than the autumn chrysanthemum; In bloom more flourishing than the pine in spring; dim as the moon mantled in filmy clouds; restless as snow whirled by the driving wind.’
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