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Homer. Iliad. Audiobook [book review]

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Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2007.06.12

Stanley Lombardo, *Homer. Iliad. Audiobook. 12 CDs. 15 hours.* Las Vegas, NV: Parmenides Audio, 2006. ISBN 1-930972-08-3. \$42.00.

Stanley Lombardo, *The Essential Iliad. Abridged. 5 CDs.* Las Vegas, NV: Parmenides Audio, 2006. ISBN 978-1-930972-10-0. \$20.00.

Stanley Lombardo, *The Essential Homer. Substantial and Complete Passages from Iliad and Odyssey. Abridged. 14 CDs.* Las Vegas, NV: Parmenides Audio, 2006. ISBN 978-1-930972-12-4. \$48.00.

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As someone who almost reflexively refers to Stanley Lombardo's translations of Homer as "new", it gives me pause to think that this year marks the tenth anniversary of his translation of the *Iliad*.¹ Happily this milestone has been appropriately commemorated by the release of high-quality recordings of Lombardo performing his *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *The Essential Iliad*, and *The Essential Homer*.² Each of these recordings follows the text--and in the case of the "Essential" recordings, the selections--of L.'s translations. With an apt updating of Pope's famous dictum that "Homer makes us hearers", the tagline on these recordings--"Homer Speaks...Listen Up!"--ably captures the colloquial vigor of L.'s translations and the importance of performance in approaching the Homeric texts. Although not without their quirks, these recordings have much to offer enthusiasts and instructors alike.

Before continuing, I should confess to a slight bias. Although I have assigned L.'s translations in several courses, student response has never been as enthusiastic as I hoped or expected. My students, coming to the text with an expectation of epic grandeur, often expressed disappointment with the register of L.'s translation. Over time I had come to internalize their judgments to a certain degree. Yet, when performed by L., his translations crackle with life, possessing a compelling force and a surprising grace. Even moments that previously caused consternation more often than not ring true. If you already appreciated the strengths of L.'s translations, these performances will come as a welcome gift; if you have had reservations about these translations in the past, I encourage you to revisit them by listening to these recordings.

That these translations shine in performance should come as no surprise. L. reminds us in the "Translator's Preface" that "my translations of Homer reflect the oral and performative nature of

the original. My translations began as scripts for solo performance and were shaped by the complementary pressures of poetic composition and oral performance. L. discussed the influence of performance on his translations in greater detail in the "Translator's Preface" to his *Iliad*: "Through the period of composing the translation as poetry on the page, I continued reciting it to audiences, voicing the text as I crafted it and crafting it to capture the voice that I heard."³ With his characterizations and voicing refined by this reciprocal process, L. is in full command when giving voice to the Homeric narrative and speeches. Characterization is laudably subtle, and avoids caricature; yet, the listener has no doubt when different characters are speaking, and can easily perceive the dynamic between characters and the emotional life of those speaking. Here we see the advantage of the performer-translator--someone who has wrestled with these scenes and inhabited these characters over a long period of time. Unlike other recordings of Homer, in which deservedly accomplished actors read someone else's translation--with the inevitable fissures between text and execution--there is a seductive seamless to L.'s performance, in which his depth of appreciation allows the modulation of character to be slight, yet highly effective.⁴

Some aspects of these recordings, however, may vex some listeners. The most idiosyncratic (and potentially annoying) feature is that similes are accompanied by a singular sound effect. L.'s tactic of marking similes as distinct from the narrative is familiar from his translations, and he discusses the origin of this decision in the preface to his translation of the *Iliad*:

"In performance, I found myself isolating the similes somewhat and marking them--pausing a little before and after, changing the voice, dropping any percussions I may have been using--in order to bring out their quality as poetic events distinct from the poetry of the narrative and speeches."⁵

Having recently witnessed L. performing his translation of *Iliad* 16, I can attest to the powerful effect that such alternation can have on the audience. Unfortunately, in these recordings, the relationship between narrative and simile is reversed, with sections of narrative and speeches unaccompanied and similes augmented by a strange complex of sounds--*like a cave full of cicadas and dripping water, as a horn sounds in the distance*. Although not overly obtrusive at first, the sound eventually grated on this listener. One salutary effective of this sonic marking is to highlight the distinctive effect of clusters of similes (e.g. in the opening of Book 3). This is one--and surely not the only--way in which these recordings could be used when teaching the epics.

At the start of each book, Susan Sarandon reads a brief summary of the plot (these summaries are also printed in the booklet that accompanies the recordings). The summaries are generally short (usually lasting a minute or less) and unobjectionable in themselves; but the interruption of action between books disrupts the flow of the Homeric narrative. Of course, the scholar is not the target audience of such a feature. And since the synopses are segregated onto their own tracks, skipping past them (or omitting them from your iPod playlist) barely qualifies as an inconvenience. Slightly more intrusive is the original musical theme that serves as an intro and outro to each book (often fading in over the last few lines of the book). Because the theme is included on the same tracks as the reading, it cannot easily be skipped. Some listeners, especially those listening to the recordings one book at a time, will no doubt find that this theme

nicely punctuates episodes, but those who like their Homeric narrative to flow from one book into the next should be forewarned.

The entire product exhibits a commendable attention to detail. The sound quality and editing is truly exceptional throughout. The consideration Parmenides Audio gave to packaging these recordings should also be commended. Each recording resides in a small flip-book encased in a sturdy and attractive cardboard sleeve (one flip-book for "The Essential Iliad"; two each for "The Iliad" and "The Essential Homer"). Each recording includes a small, nearly identical, introductory booklet containing a short "Translator's Preface",⁶ a brief "Introduction" by Tom Palaima (University of Texas at Austin), an appropriate "Background" section, synopses of the individual books of the epic(s), and finally, a list of "Major Characters and Places" and a map of the Aegean (with inset of the Troad). Most of these resources are reprinted from Lombardo's translations. The booklets for "The Essential Iliad" and "The Essential Homer" are printed on glossy paper of better quality than the (perfectly acceptable) booklet included with the "The Iliad."

Although certain aspects of these recordings are open to quibble, Parmenides Audio and L. should be applauded for producing such a high-quality product. Homer indeed makes us hearers, but I for one look forward with great anticipation to the recording of Lombardo performing his *Aeneid*, and the time when we can better judge whether the second half of Pope's judgment--"...but Virgil leaves us readers"--still holds true.⁷

Notes:

^{1.} Lombardo, Stanley, *Homer. Iliad*. Hackett Publishing, 1997; *Odyssey*. Hackett Publishing, 2000; *The Essential Iliad*, Hackett Publishing, 2000; *The Essential Homer*, Hackett Publishing, 2000. Lombardo's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have both been reviewed by BMCR, and their reviews illustrate the varied reactions these translations have elicited: BMCR [97.07.20](#) and BMCR [2000.07.06](#).

^{2.} The reviewer did not have access to Lombardo's recording of his *Odyssey*, but given the appearance of selections, in the *Essential Homer* recording, the comments made in this review would seem apposite to it as well.

^{3.} For more about this process, see the "Translator's Preface" in L's *Iliad* (1997, ix).

^{4.} Fagles' translations have been voiced by Derek Jacobi (*Iliad*) and Sir Ian McKellen (*Odyssey*).

^{5.} In his translation, this led to typographically marking similes with italics, spaces, and indentation (1997, xi).

^{6.} This preface itself is reprinted, with a few additional acknowledgements, from the "Translator's Postscript" in Lombardo's translation of the *Odyssey*.

^{7.} Lombardo, Stanley, *Vergil. Aeneid*. Hackett Publishing, 2005.

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