

Words and Music
by Betty Howell, C.Tr.

If a well-educated English speaker has a vocabulary of 35,000 words, the experienced into-English translator will also know many thousands in their source language(s). In 40+ years working as a professional translator, my brain has focused on words: nouns, prepositions, verbs, adjectives, idioms, all wonderfully stored in some easily accessible pigeonhole for quick reference. I work from French and German and am convinced that the brain has a foreign-language department: if I am looking for a French word, I often think of the German equivalent long before the English one pops up. An avid reader in childhood and adolescence, I gradually found myself reading less and less for recreation. So, in the early 90s, I decided it was time to find a different outlet for non-work time. Listening to classical music had always been an important part of my life, but I was never a proficient player of any instrument. So I wondered if I would find a teacher willing to teach a grown-up. It turns out that in Canada, there is a great tradition of helping people, of every age, learn something so that they will do it better. It is not necessary to have Olympic dreams to start running or to want to be a virtuoso to learn an instrument. I chose the cello for its beautiful voice and the fact that it seemed physically less demanding than a violin or a woodwind instrument. After several years of basic training, my teacher suggested that I play in an orchestra. My first encounter was both thrilling and terrifying. Having someone put music by Mozart or Beethoven on my stand that I was actually allowed to play: amazing! Of course, in an orchestra performance, there is always a lot going on. Initially I felt like I was on the median strip of a very busy highway. But being part of the amateur orchestra I joined, now called the *Orchestre Philharmonia Mundi de Montreal*, has changed my brain. We rehearse every Thursday night, preparing for one concert in December and another in May, performed at Oscar Peterson Hall. After weeks of hearing all the parts, often separately, when the conductor says listen to the melody: you're supposed to be accompanying that, not drowning it out!, we find we have become Tchaikovsky's 6th symphony, Shostakovich's 5th, Beethoven's 8th, and other masterworks. It makes attending professional concerts all the more interesting when you can distinguish the different instruments and their contribution to the total sound. Most experienced translators, after years of using language as the main outlet for their mind, feel the need for another way. Some paint or do photography, some dance or do serious hiking, and some turn to making music. While it's humbling to do something not as well as you think you should, it's music, and it makes my world better.