

### On Fundamental Change in Re-Recordings

First released in March of 2022, Stromae's newest album, *Multitude*, primarily explores "care" and "how humans use and abuse one another as they seek comfort and turn a blind eye to inconvenient truths if it means getting what we want"(Snape). The ninth song on the album, "Mon Amour," recounts the life and abuses of a man as he cheats his way through his relationships. In late July of 2022, Stromae re-released "Mon Amour," this time featuring American artist Camila Cabello.

Although both active pop singers, Cabello and Stromae boast vastly different styles and hail from very different regions. We may wonder how the two ended up working together but the crossover is not as spontaneous and random as we may assume. Apparently, Cabello has been "manifesting" a song with Stromae off and on since 2015 (rolling stone?). It wasn't until 2022, about one month after the release of *Multitude*, that the ball started rolling. Stromae and Cabello met at the 2022 Met Gala and the re-release was in the works shortly after (Billboard).

If we look beyond the narrative of Cabello as a longtime fan of Stromae's—the common story told in the press—we can consider a career-motivated view as the driver of this collaboration. In order to do this, I first state that "Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)" is necessarily a cover of *Multitude*'s original "Mon Amour," not just a re-recording, due to fundamental changes in the song, which we will discuss later on. Cabello's first solo album was released in 2018, marking the start of her career as an individual performer. This was eight years after Stromae's first album release, making her a relatively much newer artist. George Plasketes tells us that "from an artist's perspective, covers are important because they... show an important influence on the artist and... give the audience something familiar when introducing a new

act”(Plasketes 226). Though Cabello is not a “new act,” performing with Stromae absolutely benefited her as an artist as it introduced her to Stromae’s audience in a way that shows her influence on him, painting her as an artist just as, if not more, successful than him.

In “Cover Songs: Ambiguity, Multivalence, Polysemy,” Kurt Mosser defines a minor interpretation as a cover that “tends to maintain the general sense of the base song, including tempo, melody, general instrumentation, and lyrics” (Mosser 4) and a major interpretation as a cover whose “variations can include one or more changes to the tempo, melody, instrumentation, and lyrics; the base song should still be recognizable at the cover’s reference, but the resulting cover, in a fundamental sense, becomes a new song” (Mosser 5). I argue that “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” is not a minor interpretive cover but a major interpretive cover of “Mon Amour.”

In simpler terms, a minor interpretation offers some slight differences from the initially released song but the general intent, spirit, and integrity is maintained. A major interpretation is recognizable but distinct from the initially released song due to fundamental changes between versions. Although one may be inclined to categorize “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” as a minor interpretation, there are fundamental changes to the spirit, intent, and integrity of “Mon Amour”(of *Multitude*) that require it to be categorized as a major interpretation.

The most obvious and simple differences between the initial version and the re-recording is the introduction of English and extensive use of autotune to the song. These changes are worth noting as they are the most noticeable difference between the versions (besides the introduction of Cabello) though I will not focus on them as they don’t necessarily push us from minor into major interpretation. These differences make changes to the lyrics and instrumentation but, alone, do not fundamentally change the song enough to call it a major interpretation.

The first fundamental change to the song, albeit a small one, is change in spirit. Stromae's initially released version of "Mon Amour," from *Multitude*, displays a "rich, summer-y charm" with a "playful yet precise" approach (Swingle). This version also lends to a barbershop quartet feeling, evident in concert and other performances by Stromae and his band ("Stromae: Tiny Desk Concert"). In contrast, "Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)" is often described as "silly." Rolling Stone writes about the "updated tune, which features Cabello's silly verse about feeling wild and free post-breakup"(Mier) and Billboard describes Cabello's singing as "cooing"(Rowley). The "silly" and "cooing" re-recording takes us far from the barbershop quartet aesthetic of the "playful yet precise" initial recording. This notable difference in feeling, and removal from the barbershop quartet aesthetic, between the two recordings marks the fundamental change in spirit of the song

Fundamental changes to the song in intent and integrity go hand-in-hand. The intent of the initially recorded songs changed via the introduction of personal anecdotes in contrast to the social commentary and lyrical storytelling via a fictional character Stromae explores in the original. Stromae, himself, said he "think[s] [artists] job is to tell stories ... [he] play[s] with words... It's a balance between personal and universal. It's important for [him] that people can relate to [his] songs. If it's too personal, [he doesn't] think that's really interesting"(Rolling Stone). Clearly, Stromae's intent is to tell a universal story, one that can be related to by any of his listeners. Cabello's verse in the re-recorded song is as follows:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

You think only you can have fun? Think again

I've been boy crazy since I was like ten

I like him but I also like his friend (Damn, that's fucked up)

Twenty, something, first time I'm free

This summer, I belong to me

'Cause that won't put my life on pause 'cause of paparazzi (Fuck no)

Come here, kiss it French, baby, touch my body

Au revoir if you post some shit on your story

Gotta watch my back, I'm not just anybody. (Stromae & Camila Cabello - Mon  
Amour (English Translation))

Although Cabello references universally relatable situations such as being “boy crazy” and being single for the summer, she also references extremely niche experiences. It is likely difficult for the average listener to relate to putting their life on pause “‘cause of paparazzi” or to having any interaction with Cabello’s fellow celebrity Bad Bunny who is name dropped in the song. Cabello also separates herself from the audience claiming she’s “not just anybody.” So, although Cabello’s verse is musically sound and enjoyable, the injection of very personal anecdotes and experiences fundamentally changes Stromae’s original intent of universality.

With this introduction we can also see the integrity of the song fundamentally change between recordings. We see the potential for the audience's perceived authenticity of the song to change from the original to the cover due to the insertion of Cabello’s personal experiences which are arguably unrelatable to the general audience as discussed above. “According to Grossberg, the authentic rock singer requires '[the] ability to articulate private but common desires, feelings and experiences into a shared public language”(Moore). A similar requirement for authenticity can be felt in Pop music: listeners want to view the artist as a fun and ordinary person just like themselves; they want the song to be relatable for themselves. As Moore describes, the authenticity of a song is not inscribed, rather it is ascribed. So, “it is beneficial to

ask who, rather than what, is being authenticated by that performance”(Moore). Due to the relatable nature of the song seen in Stromae’s verses, it is the audience that is being authenticated by the performance of either version of “Mon Amour;” the audience is authenticated by the performance as a reflection of self. In the case of the primarily recorded “Mon Amour,” the audience’s reflection of self is authenticated through the arguably universally relatable scenarios of being cheated on. This thus ascribes a sense of authenticity to the song. Contrarily, Cabello’s verse is largely unrelatable and would feel inauthentic to a listener when viewed from reflection of self. In the re-recording with Cabello, Stromae’s relatable verses are still present but the injection of Cabello’s personal anecdotes make it harder for the general audience to relate, overall marring the audience-ascribed authenticity of the song.

[As said in lecture] there is a general sense of covers that there needs to be something authentic about them. “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” as a cover is authentic from the original “Mon Amour” in that it introduces a new perspective, the female perspective, to the narrative which was previously not mentioned. Cabello attempts to add the female counterpart of Stromae’s cheater to the narrative; a “boy crazy” woman who “likes him” and also “his friends” and just wants to have a good time. This may seem relatable to average listeners but Cabello extends the character as a reflection of herself—someone who’s “not just anybody” and is constantly being chased by paparazzi, an arguably unrelatable character. Despite this form of authenticity, the loss of audience-ascribed authenticity due to the addition of Cabello’s verse marks a fundamental change in the overall level of authenticity from first recording to re-recording.

In all, the fundamental changes in spirit, intent, and integrity explored above require us to categorize “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” as a major interpretive cover of the initially

released “Mon Amour,” not a minor interpretation, by Mosser’s definitions. Similarly, we should not consider “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” as simply a re-recording of the initial release, but as, specifically, a cover. In his discussion of cover songs, Mosser briefly ponders the question “can artists be said to cover their own songs?”(Mosser 15)

Mosser states that the standard occurrence for performing artists is that if the artist “originally wrote and recorded a given song, and then either records or performs a different version of that song, one might simply say [they are] providing another version or an interpretation of it”(Mosser 16). Now we wonder how fundamental changes in spirit, intent, and integrity to song in between the initial and re-recordings, change the relationship of the earlier and later versions. With this question, Mosser says “we seem to confront a problem that can be solved arbitrarily, if dogmatically, simply by asserting that they are two distinct songs, two songs with only the most tenuous relationship, or, in fact, the same song with two different interpretations”(Mosser 16). These two options of assertion require the re-recording to be classified as only either the same song or an opposite song, not a cover. To this, Mosser considers how “if another performer or group had produced a version sonically identical to the later version that [the artist] provides, one wouldn’t hesitate to invoke the notion of the [artist’s] song being covered’ and chalks the discrepancy up to the “metaphysics of this issue” which determine “what, precisely, is involved—and revealed—in our use of the ambiguous term ‘cover song’” (Mosser 16).

If we remove the bias against an artist's ability to cover their own song, “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” would undoubtedly be considered a cover, not just a re-recording with a featured artist. This is because of the above discussed fundamental differences between “Mon

Amour (with Camila Cabello)” and the released “Mon Amour” which make the two versions distinct from each other.

With all that said, we should discuss the difference in success of the two versions given their fundamental differences. Mosser tells us that the most successful cover songs “are not only the kinds of songs most frequently mentioned in conversations about cover songs; some even replace the base song.”(Mosser 5) As of December 4th, 2023, “Mon Amour” and “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” boast about 17,960,000 and 17,370,000 streams respectively on Spotify, a major music streaming source. Given the latter was released four months after the former, these streaming numbers would imply similar success for each song. Let us now look to YouTube, another popular spot for listening to and discovering music. Here, the music video for “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” boasts 12 million views (“Stromae with @camilacabello - Mon amour (Official Music Video)”). The initially released version’s official audio video has just 3.4 million views (“Stromae - Mon Amour (Official Audio)”) and its live performance video has 1.3 million (“Stromae - Mon Amour (Live Performance) | Vevo”). Note that these three videos are all posted on Stromae’s YouTube account and are the only official videos for either version of the song. On YouTube, then, the version featuring Cabello wildly outperforms the original. Perhaps this can be attributed to the entertainment factor of the music video over the recorded performance and audio alone video. However, it is undeniable that this number of views is an indicator of the success of “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello).”

Overall, although we see plenty of examples of fundamental changes to “Mon Amour” with the introduction of Camila Cabello, it is clear that these changes are not “bad,” nor do they make “Mon Amour (with Camila Cabello)” a “bad song.” In fact, based on commercial success, these changes may have been good for the success of Stromae’s song. Now we must ask

ourselves, will this cross-over tarnish the quirkiness and mystique of Stromae or allow him access to a larger audience? Only time will tell.



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