Signed Music: An Emerging Inter-performative Art

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"I see little of more importance to the future of our country and of civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow [her or] his vision wherever it takes [her or] him."

- John F. Kennedy

Introduction

Music is one form of performing arts that has strong connection with sound. Sound has typically been identified as music's fundamental medium of expression. Music scholars devote themselves to understanding musical forms, their affect on people and their cultural contexts. At the most fundamental level, musicologists identify musics by the auditory components they are made up of. Though many traditions exist in music, Western and non-Western music have been identified as distinct forms that are both historically and socially divergent. Despite the heterogeneity of musical forms and their respective traditions, it is a small group of researchers in music studies – made up of musicologists, music theorists, and ethnomusicologists – that are entrusted with the task of collecting and analyzing all types of music.

Thaut (2008) noted that music is a highly abstract and non-representational form of art, using sensations of movement, phrasing and motif that reflect thoughts and emotions. Indeed, it is the ever expanding diversity of musical forms that remains mysterious. There are musical performances within the Deaf community that do not rely on audition or auditory culture. Historically, certain Deaf individuals have been creating visual-gestural music performances with the use of their hands to express their works visually. These musical performances have their own artistic style and are highly abstract in their own right. This type of visual-gestural music performance is culturally based in the Deaf experience, and is called Signed Music. For this reason, it is difficult for Music Studies to analyze Signed Music without the aid of socio-linguistics and the Deaf community. Considerations for the evolution and the use of Signed Music performances in the Deaf community are relevant for scholarly and ethnomusicological research, but require an interdisciplinary approach.

Music Defined as Audio-centric

Music is frequently perceived as exclusively auditory phenomena. Music comprises acoustic properties that include five basic elements: rhythm, timbre, melody, texture, and harmony. However, the incorporation of these musical elements in a performance varies as most of them can be found in Western music; but for some forms of non-Western music, only rhythm, timbre, and texture are found (e.g., Schmidt-Jones, 2007). Melody and harmony tend to be western musical phenomena. Elements of music that are solely based on audition have been

central to musical scholarship from its inception. This is a driving force for audism[1] – whether it be intentional or unintentional. Metaphysical audism is what characterizes this kind of thinking - because music is seen as an "orientation that links human identity with speech" (Bauman, 2004, p. 245) without any consideration for applying these elements to another music modality such as Signed Music.

Maler (2013) noted that Deaf people do have mixed feelings when it comes to appreciating or even talking about Signed Music. An example of this kind of mixed feeling among Deaf people is due to auditory culture's historic monopoly over musical practices: those who learn ASL as their second language, translate the spoken language lyrics into signed language, and do so typically without any cultural context mediation. Examples of these performances are frequently found on social media websites, and are often wrongfully presented as a celebration of Deaf culture. This unintentional audism from ASL learners as well as some Deaf performers - who also rely on audible music to create their performances - show that there is an enculturated disregard for the Deaf experience and their relation to sound. The lack of historical and cultural context related to music use with the Deaf community reinforces both external and internal self-imposed barriers for emerging Deaf musicians to express their thoughts, feelings, and sense of movement through Signed Music. The current narrow definition of music, as an auditory art form has a significant impact on Deaf individuals and limits our understanding of the full range of human experience and expression. It must be reconsidered in order to understand what music is in all its performative diversity.

Signed Music in the Past

Before analysing contemporary Signed Music performances, it is important to review historic signed music works by deaf groups or individuals. Deaf people in the United States have participated in a variety of performing arts, including music using American Sign Language (ASL). Their performances can be found either in the Deaf community or on tour performing for the general population. Many of these works have been recorded onto film or videotape. The first recorded signed performance art was of a woman (performer unknown) signing "The Star Spangled Banner" in 1902 (Gallaudet University, 1902). The second is a series of films of ASL stories from 1913 to 1915 performed by a number of Deaf and hearing ASL storytellers (Cokely et al., 2010). The third instance of recorded signed performance documents individuals and groups of deaf performers using music and ASL during the 1930s (i.e., another rendition of "The Star Spangled Banner," "Boat, Drink, Fun, Enjoy…," Oh Darn, I Hear Nothing!...," and "Yankee Doodle"; T. Supalla, 1994). These signed songs represent both signed translations of songs (i.e., "The Star Spangled Banner," and "Yankee Doodle") as well as percussive elements of songs (i.e., "Boat, Drink, Fun, Enjoy…," and "Oh Darn, I Hear Nothing!..."). However it was not until the 1960s that the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) launched and created its popular theater production called "My Third Eye" (Baldwin, 1994). Signed songs can be found in this production as well (i.e., "Three Blind Mice" and "Rescue Story"). There is a unique group performance of Signed Music with choral singing in ASL (discussed in greater detail below). The NTD later recorded this production in 1971.

[1] Audism is defined by Humphries (1977) as the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or to behave in a manner of one who hears.

The rise of ASL poetry in the NTD (NTD, 1967; 1971-72) inspired Deaf poetic performers such as Clayton Valli and Ella Mae Lentz to expand upon their own work, with a number of ASL poetry performances and publications during the 1980s and 1990s. Signed Music, on the other hand, has only recently received similar attention from Deaf performers and the Deaf community. An increase in musical performances can be seen in the 1990s. Ella Mae Lentz performed the poem called "Eye Music" in 1995. In her pre-performance narration, she mentioned that her work is part of translated ASL poetry from written English. At the time it was not even considered to be a musical performance. During her performance, she expressed her poetry in the visual-gestural medium explaining that telephone poles and wires do not require the audible "sounds" from music instruments (e.g., drums, flutes, etc.) to create music (Lentz, 1995). In her performance, musical sounds were illustrated through visual imagery that served as an analogue of "visual sounds" that Deaf people can enjoy (i.e. as you travel past telephone poles and telephone wires they provide a clear picture to visualize the rhythms and instrumentation of music). Unlike Lentz, Mary Beth Miller (1991) and Bill Ennis (1993) acknowledged their performances as signed music, and told their audiences that they would be signing the songs before they performed them. Mary Beth Miller did a percussion-type signed song, "Cowboy" using signed language classifiers with manipulation of ASL phonological parameters: handshapes, locations and movements. Bill Ennis, on the other hand, performed two "adapted" signed songs and are atheistically pleasing to Deaf people. Both of his performances were adapted from two famous spoken songs, "Mississippi Squirrel Revival" and "Backing to Birmingham" with an emphasis on rhythmic beats in the signed modality (i.e., ASL).

Previous Research in Signed Music

When Stokoe and his colleagues (1960; Stokoe, Casterline & Croneberg, 1965) discovered ASL as a human language through linguistic principles, scholarly research on performing arts using ASL followed. During the 1970s, Miles and Fant (1976) published research explaining that Deaf theater had created a new avenue for Deaf performers who use ASL to be present in public on the theatrical stage. Moreover, Klima and Bellugi (1979) noticed that Deaf performers were doing a poetic ASL version when translating spoken songs into signed language and performing some ASL poetry. A number of Deaf linguists in 1990s have explored more about ASL poetry and ASL storytelling using a linguistic framework for such analyses. Valli (1990), who is also an ASL poet, was the first to analyze ASL poetry for lines, meters, and rhythm. Around the same time, S. Supalla and Bahan (1992), both ASL storytellers, had examined ASL storytelling for its chapters, stanzas, and strophes as found in spoken language storytelling. More recently, Bahan (2006) wrote an article on different genres of ASL literature including percussion and translating songs as found in the 1930s. Research on music in the signed modality has been revisited recently but is limited to translation and percussion songs.

In their first and primarily analysis of music in the signed modality, Klima and Bellugi (1979) explored poetic signs and called it "Art-Sign." They found that there are patterns of linguistic forms that are 'non-conventional' and transformed into musical signed words. They identify three different structures in the different types of art-sign: internal structure, external structure, and superstructure. Internal structure is a musical structure that is loyal to the translation of music lyrics and/or the properties used in acoustic music. "The Star Spangled

Banner," "Three Blind Mice," "Mississippi Squirrel Revival," and "Backing to Birmingham" are all examples of signed musical performances that assume internal music structure.

In contrast, art-sign with external music structure is not concerned with translation of lyrics, or the particular acoustic properties of a song. External music structure is unique to Signed Music that involves manipulating the phonological properties of signed language (i.e., handshapes, locations, and movements). "Cowboy" serves as a good example of this practice. Other performances to be considered for external music structure are "Boat, Drink, Fun, Enjoy…" and "Oh Darn, I Hear Nothing!..." The former is part of the percussion songs that use 'one-two, one-two-three; one-two, one-two-three' rhythmic beats and uses external structure as it creates its own rhythm – one of the signed properties characteristic of Signed Music. Likewise, the latter also exemplifies external structure with choral music along with the signed lines of 'DARN, I HEAR NOTHING…' with different sounds created by animals (e.g., 'moo' from cow, 'baa' from sheep, etc). It is important to point out that all of these three signed musics are original without any reliance on auditory musical forms or translations of pre-existing song lyrics.

The uniqueness of signed music is its structure, which includes spatial rhythmic and temporal patterning superimposed on the sequence of signs. "Rescue Story" demonstrates how signed music is performance with simultaneous roles adopted by signers to represent specific things – similar to the roles different musicians take with their respective instruments. An example can be seen as one signer becomes the rhythm of the performance, signing in the percussion mode with rhythmic beats of ocean waves while other performers signed "helicopter", "victim", "rescuer", and "sun" using signed language classifiers. This multi-dimensionality is comparable to a song with a melodic structure adding to the meaning of the lyrics.

Research on the history of musical performances reveals three basic types of music used in the signed modality. First, music that involves ASL to English translation is one basic type, which is derived from traditional auditory culture. This type of music is still in a "grey area" because too frequently these performances were not considered by the Deaf community to be of a high quality. However, there are some translated or adapted musical performances that are considered acceptable and it may be due to the performer's particular translation skills with the exquisiteness in composition. These translations tend to embed rhythm into the signs and focus on intent of the lyrics as a good interpretation should, rather than staying too close to the spoken rendition of the lyrics. The second type of music is, 'signed percussion songs', as identified by researchers in signed language literature. As mentioned previously, some Deaf performers include unique rhythm beats such as 'one-two, one-two-three' beats in their musical performances. The third type of music in the signed modality is signed songs that draw upon Deaf cultural experiences. "Oh Darn, I Hear Nothing!..." is an example of music that incorporates deaf people's lack of experience with audible sounds shared with a sense of humour. Thus far, no discussion has taken place to examine the basic musical elements except for rhythm in Signed Music. Indeed, more research in this area is necessary in the near future.

Evolution of Signed Music

In the last two decades, ASL poetry performances have increased and impacted Deaf performers including musicians. Deaf individuals have come to understand more about what

makes signed language poetry 'poetic' which has ramifications for signed language performance arts such as Signed Music. For example, Valli (1990) analyzed ASL poetry for lines, meters, and rhythm and found that poetry in signed language involves rhythmic lines that are analogous to poetry found in spoken languages. This discovery "gave license" to Deaf poets to explore and produce more poetry in ASL. Moreover, Valli's ASL poetry compositions including rhythmic lines have influenced a new generation of Deaf musicians.

More recently, two young Deaf Canadian performers have produced Signed Music Video performances that involve highly abstract meanings and encourage artistic interpretation. Both of their works include rhythm, and employ audiovisual techniques that emphasize the poetic content of their gestural/signed performances. These videos are created for distribution on YouTube. It can be seen that Signed Music Video participates in the same processes as other musical cultures – like popular music and associated subgenres that have generated a multitude of music videos since the 1980s – while still belonging to the culture of Deaf people.

Janis Cripps, the first performer, created an experimental signed music performance called "Eyes" in 2003. Cripps was raised in a deaf family where she acquired ASL as her native language. She also attended residential school for the deaf in Ontario. Even though she is Deaf herself, she could hear and listen to audible music when growing up. In this performance, she expressed her music performance based on her interpretation of audible music that did not have lyrics performed by her hearing cousin. Her work used layers of hands and hand motions to express rhythm with pitches and beats. Similarly, Pamela Witcher, the second performer, created a gestural musical performance "Experimental Clip" in 2009. Witcher also had a deaf family and she grew up with both ASL and langue des signes québécoise (LSQ). Witcher attended residential school for the deaf in Quebec. Unlike Cripps, she began her performance with lyrics that were a mixture of ASL and LSQ without any reliance on spoken or written English or French. In addition to use of signed lyrics, Witcher uses hand motions to express rhythm in her performance as Cripps does. Witcher composed her Signed Music performance with no auditory component. Audible music was composed later, based on and overlaid onto her Signed Music performance. Using a series of close-up camera angles, Witcher's videotaped performance simulates a "peephole-style" production, as if the viewer is voyeuristically observing her in her home. This visual perspective could be interpreted as a commentary on the authoritarian gaze of auditory cultures: observing and other-ing Deaf individuals and their cultural practices. In sum, it is clear that their musical performances are prime candidates for case studies on the workings of Signed Music.

Current Research on Signed Music

Ethnomusicological research has proved to be a good theoretical starting point for examining Signed Music, because the discipline infers the musical understanding based on its cultural context. This includes analyses of Signed Music performances from the Deaf community, using ethnographic methodology that compromise a team of insiders, outsiders and mediator. Video clips of Signed Music are being analysed and made to examine the basic musical elements of the signed modality. A group of researchers, Jody H. Cripps, Ely Rosenblum, and Anita Small are currently conducting research based on the two Signed Music Videos mentioned above. This case study uses a mixture of socio-linguistic, anthropological and ethnomusicological analysis.

The goal of this research study is to define Signed Music and its musical elements. Geertz's (1973) Thick Description model is adopted to provide a detailed explanation of Signed Music video clips performed by Witcher and Cripps. Additionally, musical compositions from both of these video clips are subject for comparative analyses with other performing arts such as ASL poetry and dance. The purpose for this is to understand how Signed Music is different from other performing arts that use signed language and how it incorporates other performance arts resulting in a unique inter-performance art. Furthermore, the study of Signed Music encourages scholars to broaden the definition of music by including different experiential and expressive forms of performance. The combination of interdisciplinary studies in Music Studies such as ethnomusicology, studies of cognition, aesthetic, sound, signed language and literature, and Deaf Studies is needed to broaden our understanding of Signed Music as a performance art.

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