

Seeing Music

Feeling sounds through modern media

On the national day of Icelandic Sign Language (ISL) I found myself sitting in a quaint theatre named *Tjarnarbíó* at the heart of downtown Reykjavík. To either side of me were animated movements excitedly discussing the upcoming program and what it might entail. As two Deaf¹ women, Elsa G. Björnsdóttir and Kolbrún Völkudóttir, walked on stage and took their places upon a large amplifier a noticeable excitement filled the room and my peripherals were once more filled with a flurry of fingers as the collective energy rose in anticipation.² They performed a song in ISL with original lyrics, set to a slow bassy instrumental piece in which the hidden realities of growing up Deaf in a hearing society became poetically unravelled. As the piece came to completion a sea of shaking hands silently clapped in a fervent joy. It seemed as if everybody there was excited for the concert performed by the Deaf artists. The remarkable feeling of familiarity brought me to the realization that music is just as enjoyable to the Deaf as to those who can hear, enabled and propagated through modern technologies. There was nothing foreign about the performance and not an element lacking, leaving a true feeling of having experienced music in the fullest sense of the word.

What is Signed Music?

Signed music is becoming increasingly more popular as a form of artistic expression, but it is not commonly accepted as a form of music for one does not listen to it. History reveals that not all are in agreement as to what constitutes as music and examples exist of entire musical compositions being made up in nothing more than silences and stops. The musical piece dubbed *4'33"*, written and composed by artist John Cage, expresses stops and pauses of varying duration. Specific lengths and rhythmic significances are noted in ink but each note instructs the musician not to play throughout the entire duration of the song. The purpose of the piece is to illustrate the importance silence plays in music, as without silence a wall of unintelligible noise would surly dominate rendering virtually any musical piece completely unlistenable.

Currently, modern technologies are bridging the chasm between music makers and sign language speakers by using electricity to amplify sound thereby enabling the key component to be experienced on a physical level allowing for an interaction between the

¹ The word 'Deaf' is capitalized to affiliate a cultural identity within deafness as opposed to expressing a pathological condition of hearing loss.

² The performance can be seen on YouTube as of 22/4/2016 on:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCd0wSI5NXs>

senses to create something greater than the sum of its parts. In order to fully dissect the performance at *Tjarnarbíó* one must take a scalpel to the term ‘music’ to determine whether this phenomenon truly fits into the Deaf experience.

The general notion of music as defined on the widely used online dictionaries is “*an art of sound in time that expresses ideas and emotions in significant forms through the elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, and color*” (dictionary.com), and as “*the science or art of ordering tones or sounds in succession, in combination, and in temporal relationships to produce a composition having unity and continuity*” (Merriam-Webster). A picture begins to emerge with the further disambiguation of the word ‘sound’ where its fundamental purpose is to express ideas and emotions through an artistic discourse of stylistic rhetoric. Although sound is undoubtedly an essential component of music it is nowhere written that it must be ‘heard’ in order to be enjoyed.

With devices such as amplifiers and synchronized light-shows sound can be experienced through multiple senses and appreciated in many different ways. The experience of sound is a phenomenon expressed in physics as a hierarchy of vibrations, where the sensation of sound on the ear drums is generated by sound-sources within a particular environment. Waves of vibrations and the feedback it creates come together to produce what we define as music; such as the energy generated within a violin in the forms of pitch and timbre contributing to an orchestra of sounds traveling between walls within a musical hall, ultimately creating subjective experiences within the individual of enjoyment or otherwise (Handel 1995, p.426-428).

Signed Music and Cultural Theory

Although a few scholars, particularly in the field of medicine (Wilson & Dorman 2008), see deafness as a tragedy that excludes the suffering from musical appreciation it is a profoundly misunderstood condition.³ Theorists specializing in Deaf culture (Bauman & Murray 2009) describe deafness as being a socially manufactured disability in which the Deaf are only held back in life due to environmental factors which prevent them from normal participation. For as long as sign language remains largely unspoken Deaf people will always be marginalized

³ The founder of the first University of the Deaf, Gallaudet, harshly criticizes the state and direction of Deaf education in the late 19th century. A conference of deaf educators accumulated in Milan of 1880 and made the impactful decision to ban sign language in classrooms, resulting in decades of poor educational standards for the deaf. (http://saveourdeafschoools.org/edward_miner_gallaudet_the_milan_convention.pdf)

within their own communities.⁴ It may be tempting to assume that this isolation from larger society causes exclusion from the components of its cultural production but this is simply not the case. Avenues of thought leading intuitive minds to the assumption that a lack in sensual experience must result in a lack of cultural experience can be a precarious pitfall as there is evidence indicating the contrary.

Cultural theorist of the ‘Birmingham School’, Raymond Williams, laid down the basic framework when he famously said in his aptly named essay that “Culture is Ordinary” (Williams 1958). Culture is a phenomenon of shared experiences seen in the practices of everyday life and in the manner which those practices are expressed by anybody and everybody through their leisure and work. Much in the same way that culture is not manufactured in a posh university teahouse and then distributed to the ‘zombified masses’, music neither belongs to a certain group of privileged individuals nor is to be defined by any single industry. Though industries may come to claim ownership over the fluid and abstract definition of music they, like the teashop patrons, can be ignored (Williams 1958).

The release of emotions through the combined sensual expression of lyric and organized structures arises organically in human societies regardless of physical ability. One could imagine a blind person enjoying the Mona Lisa through the descriptive accounts of other people, known as audio description, or appreciating the painting for its historical and cultural significance; the mere fact that they themselves cannot witness the painting first-hand does not devalue its meaning or remove its impact (Snyder 2005). The traditional guide prescribed by ‘cultural entities’ such as art curators, musicians, or poets only lend a lens through which one may enjoy such cultural creations (Hesmondhalgh 2013). The tools of the mind to extract powerful and emotionally-relevant signals go beyond the dominant senses that are meant to lead the consumer through a mental path of artistic appreciation already paved before them. A trek through the trees will provide as great an insight as following in the footsteps of those who initially created the courses of convention, but perhaps a better question is to ask where exactly the destination is, and what role does technology play in getting there?

Cultural theorists of the Frankfurt school, Horkheimer and Adorno, see the cultural industries in a pessimistic light, and as an extension, the tools of cultural dissemination as well. They consider the agents of media as a corrupting force which serves to sedate the

⁴ A large community of sign language speakers, both hearing and deaf, existed on the island Martha’s Vineyard where there was a large degree of hereditary deafness. Deafness was not seen as a disability by the residents of this island. (<http://jdsde.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2009/10/07/deafed.enp026.full.pdf+html>)

masses through deceptive messages embedded into the technologies of cultural production. People who partake in the grand disillusionment of popular culture are labelled hypnotised with little hope for recourse for as long as the bombardment of brainwashing messages persists. Adorno goes even further to separate the cultural value from the devices that it is inextricably tied to: “*the technique of the culture industry is, from the beginning, one of distribution and mechanical reproduction, and therefore always remains external to its object.*” (Adorno, 1991, p.165). In this context the ‘object’ is the consumers of culture. This logic seems to lose weight when seen through the lens of sign language music, for the piece could not be distributed or enjoyed if not for the production tools propagated by the cultural industries. To enjoy signed music one must be able to see it, and the method for doing so is often through video editing. The tools are a part of the production and celebrated as a method to connect two worlds, the cultural product is restricted in its production and consumption if not for the devices and tools that enable the artistic piece to come into fruition.

The Performance and its Tools

Performing music for the Deaf parallels vocally sung music on multiple levels. The women sat upon the amplifier coordinate their movements to synchronize their ‘singing’, heightening the impact of their words and establishing a visual harmony. Throughout the song a chorus is repeated to a set time signature to deliver a desired emotional impact. The importance of the lyrics can be found in the narrative which conveys significant meaning and is intended to invoke feelings much like vocalized singing sets out to do. The flow of the piece depends upon the movements of the body which syncs up with the instruments to develop rhythm. To revisit the aforementioned definitions of music, the performance at *Tjarnarbió* contains rhythm, emotional connotations, expresses ideas and meaning, incorporates elements of melody and harmony through facial expression and coordination, and comes together to create a “*composition having unity and continuity*” (Merriam-Webster). Out of the criteria provided sign language singing clearly belongs under the banner of music, but the remarkable qualities of signed music lies not its similarities to its voiced counterpart but in the ways it differs from it.

One of the core differences found in signed music is that it is fundamentally an art of the senses; rather than being restricted to audio. Where one might be able to burn one’s favourite music onto a mix-tape or a CD and bring it virtually anywhere the signed version requires at least a platform to display the visual rendition of the lyrics. Ideally one would also need to provide a method of feeling the music physically as it is a vital component for the

Deaf artists and Deaf audiences to connect with sound-waves. In this way signed music necessarily involves more stage performance and incorporates theatrical elements as the music will always require a three dimensional space. Another key difference can be found in emotional expression, the feelings that are embedded in vocalized tones are instead displayed on the faces of those singing and through the sharpness and speed of their signs. Furthermore the major instruments at play in a Deaf musical production will more-than-likely consist of exclusively bass and percussion as those are the elements that are best mediated through an amplifier for physical vibrations to be felt. It becomes apparent upon examination that sign language music is to a large degree dependent on technology and could potentially belong outside the realms of music if not for the devices that enable dormant sensations to come alive through a conversation of senses that transforms the invisible to something more physical.

Amplifiers play a large part in any Deaf related musical performance as it did on the day of ISL celebration. The two artists placed themselves upon the amplifier, literally sitting on top of it. The closeness of the performers to their tools seems to have a special significance for the Deaf as they use the emanating vibrations as cues to mark allocated time segments. In contrast many hearing performers distance themselves from electrical amplification, instead opting on an acoustic delivery to attain a greater level of purity where mediating the music can be seen as polluting organic sounds as they get filtered through wires and cables before reaching the ears. Can it be inferred that Deaf music is unavoidably more polluted or less pure? In a traditional musical piece the main focus lies in audio where virtually every element of music from rhythm to emotional input is found, as a result the amplifier does not bring anything new to the table but instead takes an already existing element and magnifies it. In a Deaf musical piece the amplifier does not elevate a pre-existing component but provides something new entirely. Separating the amplifier from the performance would remove a bridge that links the element of sound to those who cannot hear it, but that is not to say that amplifiers are a necessary component for rhythm and flow to arise, for there are alternatives that can link sound to different senses.

Lights are a very important part of sign language full-stop, as the languages are entirely visual in nature, so it may seem obvious that lighting must play an essential role in signed music, but they can have a multifaceted purpose as well. With an absence of amplifiers light signals can replace them as time stamps denoting transition points. Sounds can also be represented through colour where heavier bass-filled sounds could take on a warm glow and higher pitches and melodies a colder glow. The colours and lights are able to create an atmosphere otherwise attainable through sounds. The 'plugged-in' requirements are therefore

somewhat essential for the piece to come together, but one can imagine a completely unplugged performance under the light of day requiring nothing but the singer and their hands.

It is at this point where one must ask oneself an important question: would the removal of all sounds transform the piece into something other than music, for instance would the performance rather be considered poetry or something akin to spoken-word music?⁵ One could once again allude to the controversial composition made exclusively out of stops and silences by John Cage and raise the same question. The point of difference is subjective, debatable, and not entirely important, as it is entirely possible that textbook definitions of ‘music’ have yet to catch up with the evolution of its usage. The relevance of such a question can be exposed in one’s own views on music and whether or not one agrees with the broadening of its definitions.

Conclusion

Sign language in music is not a one way street, as sign language is becoming more popular in the classrooms it is also gaining momentum in popular culture through assimilation into music videos by hearing musicians. The Australian musician Sia Furler incorporates American Sign Language (ASL) in her music video “Soon We’ll Be Found” in which she dips her hands in paint and then proceeds to sing both vocally and in ASL (Kenyon). There is also a greater push by Deaf people to be included into large-scale musical events such as Eurovision. Iceland’s entry in 2015 “Enga fordóma” by Pollapönk was translated into sign language by one of the same performers who stepped on stage in Tjarnarbíó.

When examining music it may be easy to forget that songs incorporate complicated ideas which can be conflicting in nature. It is a fluid art form where time itself is painted with melodies and meaning to point towards the untouchable aspects of life, where the evocative and ephemeral seize permanence in the moment and leave their eternal footprints in the blind tundra of consciousness. Silence and sound come together like light and dark or wet and dry, all on a spectrum where borders bleed and definitions blur. When hearing artists call their silence music, and Deaf artists define their music through silent gestures, then we have reached one of those grey areas of humanity where opinions will forever differ on the details. The bigger picture shows that there is interest from both ends of production; hearing artists

⁵ The bands Radiohead and Bright Eyes are both known to insert spoken lyrics into their albums as either stand-alone songs or as a part of a longer musical piece.

are seeking out sign language to be incorporated in their videos while Deaf artists are reaching out to society to be included in the rich cultural world of music.

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