

## A Case Study on Signed Music: The Emergence of an Inter-performance Art

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### Research and Performances on Signed Language Performing Arts

Poetry, literature, dance and music are all recognized forms of expression unique to the human experience. Yet there are instances where a community or culture redefines an artistic practice. This essay examines the role of music in the lives of individuals who do not hear. For a long time, deafness was thought to be a debilitating condition. Given that language plays an important role in the performing arts (including music through its lyrics), deaf individuals are expected to “endure the consequences” of their inability to hear. This has been challenged by a number of scholars and researchers over the last few decades, especially regarding language being confined to the spoken form. What emerged from the 1970s and 1980s is the new view that language must be extended to the signed modality. This is where the language of deaf people known as American Sign Language (ASL) has received recognition as truly linguistic and fitting in the human language family of the world (see Meier ch. for further detail of historic

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<http://wp.towson.edu/signedmusic/contact/>

accounts on contrasting perceptions of ASL as a language). This is where the notion that the performing arts must incorporate signed language or ASL came into being. Of particular interest is how music in both the lyrics and beyond can become 'real' for deaf individuals. By definition, signed music constitutes a visual-gestural performance that demonstrates musical elements. Subject to study are deaf individuals who have explored creating musical performances with their use of their hands. These performances operate according to a distinct artistic style, which is often highly abstract.

A concept essential to developing a historical review and performance analysis of signed music is that ASL is structurally different from English or any spoken language. ASL possesses linguistic properties in the form of phonology, morphology, and syntax (e.g., Sandler and Lillio-Martin bk.; Valli, Lucas, Mulrooney, and Villanueva bk.). The impetus for this signed music research is derived from innovative artistic practices among deaf performers who attempted to break away from the traditional mindset regarding what constitutes music. The two performers participating in the case study are part of a linguistic and cultural minority where deafness and the knowledge of ASL are critical to its membership. These deaf individuals have formed and maintained a close-knit deaf community of their own, which includes a strong marriage pattern among deaf individuals as well as participation in a wide range of organizations (e.g., Padden 90; Padden and Humphries 2-5; Rutherford, "The culture of American deaf people" 130-133). The examination into signed music's form and authenticity is tied to the cultural viewpoint of deaf individuals, not that of a medical model.

For years, signed language storytelling has been a popular literature genre, and has been passed down from generation to generation amongst members of the deaf community (Christie and Wilkins 57; Padden and Humphries 73-74; see Rutherford, "A study of American deaf folklore" bk. for folklore in ASL). The fact that ASL is a non-written language has resulted in deaf people having a strong oral tradition (Frishberg 153-154). Formal storytelling performances began to emerge in the 1980s when individual deaf performers would create and rehearse their own pieces and sign in front of a videocamera. These works were authored, published and circulated among those fluent in ASL (Rose, "Stylistic features in American Sign Language literature" 145-147). This development can be described as a response to the introduction of ASL as a foreign/second language for study in high schools, colleges, and universities. Signed language was made widely available for study at academic institutions (Rosen 10-11; Wilcox and Wilcox 1-3). This has created a strong market for what is now known as ASL literature. The ASL Literature Series released in 1994 serves as one good example of how two narratives are subject, not just for viewing, but for literary analysis among students who study ASL (Supalla and Bahan bk.).

Signed language poetry emerged alongside videotaped ASL narratives, and studies on ASL poetry developed during the late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g.,

Klima and Bellugi “Wit and poetry in American Sign Language” 204-220; Klima and Bellugi “Poetry and song in a language without sound” 51-96; Klima and Bellugi “The signs of language” 319; ch. 13). The linguistic recognition for ASL made at the time was important not only for its symbolic value. Deaf people became consciously aware of their own language in terms of how signs are phonologically broken down into hand shape, location, and movement parameters (see Padden and Humphries ch. 5). Language play within these parameters became a site of exploration for poetry (see Klima and Bellugi, “Wit and poetry in American Sign Language” 204-220 for further discussion about the poetic form in ASL). Clayton Valli, a deaf ASL linguist and a poet, analyzed ASL poetry for line, meter, and rhythm through a linguistic framework (172-174). He helped to compile a collection of ASL poetry, published nationwide (Graybill, “Poetry in motion: Original works in ASL – Patrick Graybill”; Rennie, “Poetry in motion: Original works in ASL – Debbie Rennie”; Valli, “Poetry in motion: Original works in ASL – Clayton Valli”). Valli’s poetry has since influenced deaf children through his educational workshops at schools for deaf students<sup>1</sup>, publications, and videos (Philip and Small 59; Valli, “ASL poetry: Selected works of Clayton Valli”).

More recently, the analysis, creation and collection of ASL poetry has extended to content for infants and toddlers in Canada through the Ontario Cultural Society of the Deaf (OCSD), based on the ASL poetic features described by Valli and distributed through their ASL Parent-Child Mother Goose Program (OCSD, “The ASL parent-child mother goose program: American Sign Language rhymes, rhythms and stories for parents and their children”; OCSD, “ASL rhymes, rhythms and stories for you and your child”). The understanding of ASL poetry and ASL literature is now established within the academic discipline of Deaf Studies (e.g., Byrne diss.; Frishberg 156-163; Ormsby 227-243; Peters bk.; Rose, “Stylistic features in American Sign Language literature” 147-155, Rose, “Inventing one’s “voice”: The interplay of convention and self-expression in ASL narrative” 428-441).

Music by deaf performers only received attention recently. Scholars have begun exploring the concept of a music based on the use of signed language in the culture within the deaf community. Ted Supalla, a deaf scholar who has done extensive research on films documenting the deaf community over the years, identified certain ASL performers as ‘singers’. These singers used their hands instead of their vocal cords. Supalla produced a video documentary cov-

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<sup>1</sup> The renowned ASL poem, “*Cow and Rooster*”, performed by Annalee Laird in *ASL Poetry: Selected Works by Clayton Valli* (1995) was among the first children’s ASL poems created by him in 1991 specifically for the “*Language as an Art*” multi-year workshop series for children JK through high school, supported by a Francis R. Dewing Foundation grant, at one of the first bilingual schools for deaf students in the U.S., The Learning Centre for Deaf Children, Framingham, MA.

ering a number of rhythmic songs performed in ASL that were filmed in the 1930s (“Charles Krauel: A profile of a deaf filmmaker”; Padden and Humphries 75-79). The oldest known recording of a signed performance art belongs to a deaf woman signing “The Star Spangled Banner” in 1902 (see Cripps et al. in press for the historic account of performances in signed music).

Benjamin Bahan proposes two categories of signed songs used in the deaf community: percussion singing, and translated songs (33-36). Percussion singing incorporates ‘one-two, one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three’ rhythms, commonly used in Deaf Rap (Padden and Humphries 77-79; Small bk.). This is distinctly different from the performance of translated songs, which feature translations of spoken language songs into signed language. The earlier mention of the ASL rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner” serves as a good example. Also worthy of mention is the National Theatre of the Deaf in the United States that produced *My Third Eye* for both the stage and television during the 1970s. Both translated songs (i.e., Three Blind Mice) and singing in an ensemble format are found in this production. The latter involving a rescue at sea was put together entirely in ASL (see Baldwin bk. for further details on *My Third Eye* performance).

While an impressive number of original and translated songs may have been published in recent years (e.g., Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf and TVOntario, “Freckles & Popper, Part 1-4”; Ennis, “Live at SMI! Bill Ennis”; Miller, “Live at SMI! Mary Beth Miller”; Timm and Timm, “The Rosa Lee Show”), something came up that requires attention. The deaf community expresses a variety of opinions reflecting mixed feelings related to translated signed songs (Darrow 94; Maler 2). Most of the discussion regarding signing songs relates to the quality of the translations, and often the lack of cultural context included in the resulting interpretation. Such concerns are understandable as translation has its creative and cultural limitations (Cripps et al. in press).

Also under discussion in the deaf community is the work of Christine Sun Kim. Kim’s work experiments with strings and grain-type materials on speakers, showing the effect of vibration on the objects (Selby, “Christine Sun Kim”). The idea behind this was to give the deaf audience a ‘better’ sense of what music is about. In her video documentary, Kim expressed that she felt that there is more to music such as understanding how audible sounds work through the visual medium. In this case the point of reference to music is still auditory. One must ask: Is making conventional music ‘visual’ the limit of interactions between deaf people and musical practices? Consider the effect of visualized music on hearing people, and the scholars who study the use of a visual graphic or animation to express the audible music visually (DeWitt 115-116; Evans 11). In these instances, access to both the audible music and visuals work together to enhance their experience of music. Regardless of the visualization technique, sight is secondary to the auditory experience.

Some deaf artists do not use the visual music techniques created as companions to auditory musical experiences in their musical practice. As what is now known, signed music is wholly autonomous from the auditory experience. While it is pleasing to the eyes, just as conventional music pleases the ears, it has parameters that are completely different from musical forms hearing audiences are used to, such as audible pitch. Specifically, a high quality music performance (without words) includes handshape variations along with unique movements like circles, motioning up-and-down, back-and-forth, or to-and-fro representing possible notes (under discussion by researchers). Some performances also include lyrics or “words” in ASL. A small number of signed music performances of this kind have been posted on the internet (Cripps, “Eyes”; Witcher, “An Experimental Clip”).

Moreover, a number of deaf artists in the United States and Canada participated in the program *Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey* held at Towson University near Baltimore, Maryland on November 15, 2015. The evening performance was part of a symposium created by the Society for American Sign Language organization, and the audience was predominantly deaf. The musical performances were all done for the first time. Many within the deaf audience had not seen signed music in practice, and responded with positive feedback. When the performance ended, the deaf musicians received a standing ovation (Cripps et al. in press).

## **Towards A Theory of Signed Music**

### *Traditional Musical Elements*

To begin investigating signed music, one must understand the basic structure and elements of music. Thaut notes that music is a highly abstract and non-representational art, reflecting humans’ thoughts, feelings, and sense of movement (vii). Musicology has explored the conventions of Western art music, folk musics and popular musics from different regions. Musicologists (both historical and cultural), music theorists, and ethnomusicologists are easily identified as scholars who are responsible for the investigation of new types of music. Over the last three decades, music scholars have studied music not just as a discipline belonging to the arts and humanities, but also to the social sciences. This disciplinary shift is called the ‘New Musicology’. With this change in paradigm came the study of music outside of written notation, through scholarship concerning performance (Cook, “Between art and science: Music as performance” 5-7). The implications for signed music are clearly significant as the works are performance-based and very much in need of further understanding.

Music is comprised of five basic elements: rhythm, timbre, melody, texture, and harmony. All of these elements are found in the Western music canon, but

popular and folk musics do not require all of these musical elements (Schmidt-Jones 71). Signed music may be categorized as non-Western music, and perhaps outside any disciplinary study of music to date. However, elements within Western music are identifiable in signed music. Schmidt-Jones provides a definition for each of the five musical elements:

- Rhythm – the repetitive pulse of the music, or a rhythmic pattern that is repeated throughout the music (71),
- Timbre – all of the aspects of musical sound that are not based upon the sound’s pitch, loudness, or length (72; e.g., a flute and oboe play the same note, but they have distinctive sonic qualities),
- Melody – a series of notes (of particular pitch and duration) together, one after the other (73)
- Texture – the overall qualities in the music at any given moment ... often described as thick or thin, containing many or few layers (80)
- Harmony – multiple pitches sounding at a time, which interact with the melody (83).

Scholars have attempted to further elaborate the definitions of rhythm and melody to understand them fully. For example, Patel argues that “melody is an intuitive concept that is hard to define...” but he nevertheless defines it as “...an organized sequence of pitches that conveys a rich variety of information to the listener” (182). Theoretically, music in the signed modality should have organized pitches (which this paper will investigate). Similar to Schmidt-Jones, Patel notes that, “rhythm denotes periodicity, in other words, a pattern repeating regularly in time” (96). Essentially, rhythm is a primary source for music that includes patterns repeating in a defined amount of time. This phenomenon is not exclusive to the auditory phenomena of listening to music if one considers how percussion songs have been performed by deaf performing artists in ASL (Bahan 33-36; Valli et al. 196-197).

Thaut claims that rhythm and polyphony are “[the] two ‘big’ pillars in music that hold the auditory temporal architecture of music together” (viii). While the notion that the auditory sense underlines music is erroneous, the rhythm being in a sequential temporal order, whereas polyphony exists simultaneously in a vertical order, which includes sound in multiple melodies, intervals, and harmonies are what a scholar can investigate for signed music. Thaut also notes that polyphonic properties are considered to be “the broadest sense of structure of temporal distribution and organization” (viii). With signed music, it is thus worth investigating the broadest property of music: the motif. Motif is “a short musical idea - melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, or any combination of these three. [It] may be of any size, and is most commonly regarded as the shortest subdivision of a theme or phrase that still maintains its identity as an idea” (Drabkin n. p.). In other words, a motif is the musical theme that contains the building-block

of polyphonic structures (a combination of rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic elements).

Of special interest for signed music is how recent scholarship in music studies has incorporated the role of gesture in music (e.g., Hatten bk.; Gritten and King, "Music and gestures" bk.; Gritten and King, "New perspectives on music and gesture" bk.). In Gritten and King's book, *Music and Gestures*, the scholars addressed the role of gesture in different aspects of music, ranging from historical and cultural influence to listening and production. Cox argued that humans hear music and express imagined acoustic sounds through the use of gestures (45-46). More recently, Berry studied the work of composer and performer Sofia Gubaidulina, who uses her body and hands in her musical performance without any auditory component (3-9). Likewise, Davidson investigated an international celebrated pianist named Lang Lang who used his head and body movement when playing piano (615). Also, Godøy, Haga, and Jensenius studied individuals who use gestures to describe musical instruments (piano, drums, violin, etc.) referred to as "Air Instruments" (259-265).

Gesture and signed music share the same modality, that is, visual and gestural, but it does not mean that gesturing music and signing music are the same. Gestures used in audible music are based on the non-signers' interpretation of audible sounds in the visual means. It is true that the deaf individual may imagine emotions accompanying the gesticulation that goes with the actual playing (or the pantomime playing of an instrument) based on facial expressions that accompany the movements and speed of the movements, but this is separate from the actual sounds produced. The deaf individual does not necessarily have a good idea of what music is like. The situation for signed music is different as it provides deaf people direct access to music.

#### *Music, Performance, and Social Context*

Given that music theory cannot account for gesture with deaf people, the anthropological study of music serves as a good point of departure for exploring signed music. Traditionally, classical music created by composers such as Beethoven, Mozart, and Chopin are subject to examination by musicologists and music theorists that balance the composers intentions with interpretation of performing musicians and audiences. Scholars of folk, jazz, and pop have developed a new means of inquiry, a paradigmatic shift in the early 1990s, the aforementioned "new musicology", closely related to a "cultural musicology" (Cook, "We are all (ethno)musicologists now" 49-51; Kramer 125-127).

Cultural musicologists and ethnomusicologists began analyzing music for its meaning outside of a strictly musical theoretical perspective. Kramer posited that music is frequently perceived as lacking representational-semantic richness. To counter this weakness in music perception, individuals must understand the

music's "cultural meaning [even] with the lack of referential destiny found in [musical] words or images" (Kramer 127). Cook reinforced this by claiming that music is embedded within social context ("Music: A very short introduction" ii-iii).

For this reason, music performances ought to reflect the cultural and social experience of deaf individuals. They are signers, and they should have the opportunity to create ASL lyrics and visual musical notes (as is beginning to be described by some researchers)<sup>2</sup>. The notes include the use of hands and movements, which are already part of a deaf signer's ordinary communication expression. Hearing people likely do not have the incentive to pursue signed music. They are very much involved with a distinctive culture with its own music. Related to deaf people and signed music, deep cultural meanings are expected to be captured through the music performance to enhance both audience and performer's cultural identities (Cook, "Music as performance" 191-193) through their shared cultural experience.

Most relevant to deaf people is how Middleton argued that culture has a role in music and so music scholars have to think differently (1-5). He proposed to start a new approach or paradigm—*Music Studies*. Supporting this, Cook pointed out that Music Studies includes music scholarship from a range of different disciplines including ethnomusicology, historical musicology and music psychology ("We are all (ethno)musicologists now" 61-62). This new shift towards cultural analysis might open the door for the area of signed music. The foremost question for Music Studies as a field is: Should signed music be subject to analysis within Music Studies? Can music exist without the perception of audition? To answer these questions, an examination of signed music performances through thick description is necessary.

### **The Case Study: *Eyes* and *Experimental Clip***

#### *Background of the Performers*

Two young deaf Canadian performers have produced what is best called signed music video performances that are expected to involve highly abstract meanings and encourage artistic interpretation. These videos are created for distribution on YouTube. Here one cannot help but notice 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 adhering to the cultural characteristics of the deaf community.

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<sup>2</sup> The authors recognize that the terminology "note" for a non-auditory representation in a musical piece requires further analysis by researchers. The authors use it here to expand the conversation.



Janis E. Cripps, the first performer, created an experimental performance called *Eyes* in 2003 (see Video 1<sup>3</sup>). J. E. Cripps was raised in an all-deaf family where she acquired ASL as her native language. Although she had some ability to hear and listen to audible music when growing up, her hearing loss is significant which resulted in her attending a school for the deaf in Ontario. In the *Eyes* performance, J. E. Cripps based her interpretation on audible music without lyrics performed by her hearing cousin, and it was videotaped. Regardless of the initial contact with the auditory culture, J. E. Cripps created her work entirely through hands and movements. The background of J. E. Cripps' video includes features from "nature" such as trees covering rays of the sun, water dripping, a bird flying, and ocean waves.

Similarly, Pamela E. Witcher, the second performer, created a performance called *Experimental Clip* in 2009 (see Video 2<sup>4</sup>). Witcher also had a deaf family and she grew up with ASL. Witcher is, this time, profoundly deaf since birth. She attended school for the deaf in Quebec. Unlike J. E. Cripps, she created her performance with lyrics. In addition to use of signed lyrics, Witcher uses hand motions to express rhythm in her performance as J. E. Cripps does. 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.

#### *Method of Analyzing Signed Music*

Three authors of this paper have conducted this research from different cultural backgrounds. The first author, J. H. Cripps, approaches these works as an "insider": a deaf native signer raised from a deaf family household and he is involved in the deaf community. He does not have any background in auditory music and is currently studying music through the literature in musicology. The second author, Rosenblum, on the other hand, studies culture and performance within the deaf community as an "outsider": he is hearing, and does not know how to sign. He is a visual anthropologist, musicologist, and producer of films and recordings. The third author, Small, is a "mediator": she is a hearing signer and sociolinguist who has worked with the deaf community for over 25 years. She has some knowledge of music and its elements. Performing analysis of these works with three different perspectives – insider, outsider, and mediator – are

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<sup>3</sup> Cripps, J. E. (2003). *Eyes*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnwJsFHFebg> . This video can also be viewed at <http://liminalities.net/13-2/signedmusic.html> .

<sup>4</sup> Witcher, P. E. (2009). *Experimental Clip*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPHraTb36wc> . This video can also be viewed at <http://liminalities.net/13-2/signedmusic.html> .

the starting point for this preliminary analysis of the performances in signed music.

Geertz's Thick Description Model including comparative analyses between two signed music video clips is adopted in this study (3-30). (See Titon 76-85 for the relevance of thick description in Music Studies). The goal of this study is to explore the basic musical elements in the signed modality. To begin this preliminary analysis as an open dialogue, J. H. Cripps (insider) picked three short clips from each video, which are relevant for determining the major research question "Are there any basic musical elements in the signed performance?" It begins with the question, "What does this clip look like to you?" Using the ethnographic approach, some additional questions were asked as the discussion evolved. All of the music analyses from J. H. Cripps, Rosenblum, and Small were videotaped. For each clip, J. H. Cripps posed questions (e.g., What does this clip look like?) that Rosenblum responded to, initiating the analysis from an outsider's perspective. Once Rosenblum completed his analysis, J. H. Cripps and Small joined in the discussion. Also as a mediator, Small facilitated the conversation between J. H. Cripps and Rosenblum. She participated in discussing the analysis and made some parallel comparisons between the observed signed performances and what is known about auditory music. Themes identified through this preliminary analysis are: 1) Use of Imagery and Media, and 2) Use of Musical Elements and Linguistic Properties.

### Preliminary Signed Music Analysis

#### *"Eyes"*

In this section, each of the three clips will be described and dialogues between three researchers based on the four themes as identified are to be followed.

First Clip of Eyes. The first clip of *Eyes* (00:00:23-00:00:59) is described as:

Cripps' face was in the still mode and looking at the screen without any facial expression in the first layer. One of her "5" hands<sup>5</sup> was raised palm facing out, rotated towards her and then slowly moves down horizontally. Later in the clip, her second hand slowly repeats the motion of the first. In the second layer superimposed on the first, there is a set of hands moving rotating around each other and gently almost touching each other and spreading out, then grasping lightly in synchrony and moving up and down alternately and then in synchrony again in the background like water flowing in rhythmic beats. The video was done in black and white.

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<sup>5</sup> The "5" hands that the performer used is "spread" with the thumb and all fingers extended out.

Use of Imagery and Media. Based on the analysis in this clip, the transitions of media features and some layers of visual elements (e.g., “5” hand coming towards the performer) have been identified. This included Cripps’ hands almost touching each other when moving. In very subtle ways, her hand motions resembled waves in the ocean. Also, some meaning from that hand motion can be derived with a sense of textural feeling. From a cultural perspective along with the image of a stark black background, it can be seen that she was playing with her hands thus putting the emphasis on the hands themselves. An example is one of her “5” hands coming towards the performer showing how hands are important for deaf people. In addition to this, her eye gaze was stationary and glaring through her open hand, which is atypical. Her eye gaze was telling the audience that her eyes are important to her. Her use of staring with her eyes without any facial expression and playing with her hand movements were the ways to *hook* her audience, highlighting these features. They indicate how the eyes and hands are treasured by deaf people as they usually value their hands and eyes for communication purposes (i.e., the use of signed language). Also, addressing the importance of the hands and eyes can be seen as the beginning of a narrative within the performance. It appears as if the performer uses this as her introduction to express the meaning of communication.

Use of Musical Elements and Linguistic Properties. From a linguistic standpoint, complexity with the hand movements such as using hands motioning up and down repeatedly may be seen as intonation in the signed modality. Also, two layers with two different hand motions (i.e., “5” hand on the first layer versus gentle “grasping” with hands in the second layer) were perceived as contrasting but complimentary hand movements as one extends and the other closes and they were used simultaneously and overlaid during the music performance. These kinds of hand movements raised the questions of exhibiting melody, harmony, and rhythm in this clip.

Per the discussion, it was agreed that the application of melody and harmony in music via the signed mode is not as simple as one may think. However, the rhythm and texture in this clip became clear. The emotional tone (i.e., theme) of this clip was established based on how the hands move by themselves, which was part of the texture resembling the ocean waves. There was no emotional tone in this clip because Cripps did not use her facial expression and it appeared that she did it purposely. Indeed, her lack of expression created an emotion in and of itself for the viewer. It was used to connect the viewer to the performer and to focus the viewer through eye gaze.

Cripps used pitch when signing as her hands showed repetition of movements up and down with rhythmic beats expressed at varying speeds with the two layers of movement - one layer of movement was more rapid than the other. It can be seen that this kind of hand movement is abstract and did not have any

signed words involved. This characterized the abstract thought expressed in her performance. It features more than just water moving. It seemed to reflect pitch variation in the signed modality with emphasis on rhythmic. It also set up the consistency such as being playful or sad not fast or slow which could be seen as textural. It was agreed that identifying fixed pitch and melody was difficult in this clip. The rhythm itself is complex as it is not necessarily constant but can have variation. Individuals can play with rhythm with the movements of the hands depicting the waves. Like pitch with high and low frequency sound variations, rhythm, based on timing, can have its own variation as well.

Second Clip of Eyes. The second clip (00:01:26 - 00:01:49) involves two layers of hand movements as well but it becomes more complex than the first clip as described:

Cripps' face was still in the second clip as in the first clip. However both of her "5" hands were used in the second clip and move up and down slowly with her palms face down and away from her as they rise and fall in the first layer. The color is black and white. In the middle of the clip, her hands shifted from palms down to palms up and it moved directly towards her creating the basic rhythmic beats in her performance. In the background, there was a second layer that involves her face and hand movements in color and with a color background this time. In contrast to her rhythmic performance in the first layer, she was looking at her "5" hands moving in this layer. The second layer began with her "5" hands facing outward, then towards her and then outward and inward again as she gazed at her hands. She then looked at her "5" hands rotating horizontally and towards her seeing to indicate their importance to her and she clasps her hands at the end of the clip. The image of the second layer disappeared after she clasped them and the focus then shifts again to the first layer.

Use of Imagery and Media. In the second clip, there was more overlapping of layers with different images from the hands. The first part was a narrative with the "5" hand facing the performer and then adding other features such as two images overlapping. Also, Cripps appeared more calm. Visually, one may deduce from her performance that the tone of music is in the minor key and is associated with emotions of sadness, solemnity, anger, or disparity. Overlapping of the vague indications of waterfalls and ocean waving along with additional layers of her hands grasping at the end of the clip appeared dark becoming a fist. These fists were overlaid onto each other, juxtaposed by images of nature, with a visual effect similar to a sepia tone. Adding to the image, was a waterfall flowing and it appeared that the performer was giving her audience a *hint* of what will happen next. The images in this clip relate to each other which means the eyes and the hands are connected to nature as they are the natural expressions of deaf people. This demonstrates how signed language relates to the performer. This perfor-

mance connected two themes: 1) eyes and hands and 2) nature. This combination of themes and the metaphor of nature for the beauty of signed language is reminiscent of Valli's renowned ASL poem "Hands".<sup>6</sup>

Use of Musical Elements and Linguistic Properties. Overlapping of hands had been revealed in this clip and it had raised the question of an allusion to polyphony within the signed modality. Polyphony cannot be further analyzed because melody and harmony has not been adequately identified in the first place. However, a motif and a series of rhythmic variations were identified.

Third Clip of Eyes. The third clip (00:02:05 – 00:02:39), this time, includes three layers and is more complex compared to last two clips. It is described as follows:

In the first layer, Cripps' face was still but this time her eyes were moving. At the beginning, her eyes were looking at the screen and gazed at her hands then looking up while her hands were moving in a small circular motion almost beckoning like ocean waves moving towards her. Her palm orientation shifted when doing the circular motion making it more aesthetically pleasing. She even moved her hands sideways then up and down in the front space at the end of the clip. The second layer of movement involved two hands moving but began with emphasis on one "5" hand representing the motion of the water moving sideways in a stream, current, or rocking in the ocean. The hand movements of both hands then shifted from the rocking water motion to a closed fist and then released open "5" hands beckoning and repelling repeatedly as part of the rhythmic beats near the end of the clip. The second layer showed the oncoming waves from the ocean crashing back and forth onto the shore. This was reflected in the imagery produced by the hand movements of the two different layers and reinforced by a third layer of visual imagery of the waves in the background.

Use of Imagery and Media. In this clip, notes continue to make subtle reference to and imitate waves. Two layers of notes can be identified in this performance. One includes Cripps' face along with the hands representing the ocean waving. The second type only includes one hand representing a generic, abstract, water flow. It was not clear if both of these layers are connected as the whole representation is abstract when viewed together. One layer with hands representing the ocean waving was clear but the one with the current depicted by the single open "5" handshape was not as clear. It simply gave the impression of rocking in some form of water. The layer depicting the current has many possible meanings because it reflected a broad range of water bodies in the nature such as a river

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<sup>6</sup> "Hands" performed by Valli in *Poetry in Motion* uses the "5" handshape using up and down and side to side movements to express the beauty of nature in the four seasons as a metaphor for the beauty of signed language.

(with a strong flow), creek (with a smaller flow), or a brook (with water trickling in a thin line). Cripps incorporated the images in the background to help the viewer engage with images of nature that she is depicting in her performance.

Use of Musical Elements and Linguistic Properties. The two layers in this clip included two types of handshapes. The first one included “5” to “fist” representing the ocean waving, but in the second layer, the “5” handshape remained a constant representing a generic current throughout the performance. The first handshape more clearly represented ocean waves while the handshape of the current depicted a generic sense of rocking without specifying a river, creek or a brook. The background visual of the ocean waves also enhance the perception created by the signed music performance. These would not be considered linguistic. It is evident that there are no lyrics in this clip while it has one layer of more precise notes and another of more generic notes used.

The repetition of the hand movements throughout the duration of this clip may be seen as the main melodic line in the signed modality. Unique to this clip was that it incorporated a variety of rhythmic beats based on the movement of handshapes in different directions such as the hands in the foreground moving forward and then backward with her hands motioning almost in a “mantra” towards the performer. The motif of the water movement is expressed through the hand rhythms and texture of her performance.

#### *“Experimental Clip”*

First Clip of Experimental Clip. The music analyses now shifted to the second performer. Since the performance includes an explicit use of ASL, it is necessary to understand some structural properties to help follow the discussion of the analysis results. Linguists have distinguished two basic sign types, with one being conventional. The signed word's components (in the handshape, location, and movement parameters) are strictly phonological. This sign represents a concept (such as GIRL, UNDERSTAND and STOP). The other basic sign type is called classifier, where the handshape, location, and movements being employed have a meaning. These morphemic components combined create a classifier production that may represent a phrase such as 'the car passing by a tree' or 'a human figure standing'. The first clip of *Experimental Clip* (00:00:29 – 00:00:52) is described as:

Witcher's eye gaze was targeted to the camera and to her hands in black and white video and some sepia tone with occasional line strips (making the video look vintage). In the beginning of this clip, she formed the closed fist handshape with both hands and quickly released them to form “5” handshapes repeated moving them back and forth horizontally towards each other, to create her rhythmic beats. After this first series of hand motions, she repeated the

open “5” hand movements but this time she moved the “5” handshape in a circular horizontal motion moving each finger as she passed one hand slightly over the other hand as the circles overlapped at the end of these rhythmic beats. (In ASL, this classifier production represents many people walking and passing each other in a quick busy large crowd). She repeated this hand motion three times then shifted to a different signed form. She then used both “5” hands facing each other just touching, moving the hands and fingers back and forth in a fast pace vertically. (In ASL, this represents hordes of people walking by each other on a crowded street.) She signed this classifier three times.

Use of Imagery and Media. The importance of this clip is to see how Witcher moves her hands, which were representative of two things. First, this clip depicted busyness and detachment. Also, the juxtaposition of black and white video with the sepia tone and special effects showing lines in the video make it look like an aged film. The performance clip also goes to black to separate scenes as one would see in a vintage film.

Use of Musical Elements and Linguistic Properties. Unlike the *Eyes* performance, Witcher used verbal ASL in this clip. For example, she used the classifier productions for “people walking through” and “people walking around”. While both performers Cripps and Witcher used the “5” handshape, it is arbitrary for the former whereas it has a meaning for the latter. The “5” handshape as a morpheme refers to the multiple number of human figures or people. Had the handshape been just the index finger extending out or “1” and moving around, it would mean a person walking around, for example.

With Witcher's performance, the question is: How can one try to understand the difference between classifiers and hand movements used simultaneously as part of the bigger narrative within the music video? From this clip, there is strong rhythm going on with these two classifier phrases (i.e., “people walking through or by each other” and “people walking around”) based on the use of repetition that includes the timing of beats involved (i.e., three to four), which characterizes it musically. It is interesting that the performer limited herself primarily to one handshape (i.e., “5”) representing two classifier phrases. She intentionally imposes phonological constraint on this clip. Witcher used her phonologically constrained handshape (i.e., “5” handshapes representing people rather than using other potential handshapes like “1” or “2”) and created a rhythm simultaneously with these lyrics. Her repeated use of the same handshape to create different signed words or phrases with the same classifier is also indicative of poetic rhyming. It is clear that Witcher used signed lyrics in this clip.

Second Clip of Experimental Clip. The second clip (00:00:53 – 00:01:15) involves different parts of dancing and some hand motions that are abstract. This clip is described as:

Witcher began dancing, with her arms down and her hands pointed up, and she acted as if she was taken off of the screen by some kind of magnetic force. The screen was in color. After Witcher's departure, she came back to the screen but this time appeared hysterically angry at everyone and moved backwards. In the next part Witcher danced back and forth sideways with the video focused on her torso area. She then sat down and raised her arms/hands waving up and down as part of her rhythmic beats. She also walked across and near the screen in an "up and down" motion as if on an escalator. When walking across the screen, she saw the video capturing her then acted scared/surprised and tried to escape it. She sat down again raised her hands using distinctive classifier handshapes which resembled two animals interacting with each other. Both of her hands were moving in a circular motion at that time and her body was off screen except for her arms and hands. In the next shot, she stood backwards facing away from the camera and leaned back towards the camera, looking at the screen as her hands moved toward the screen as well. It indicated that she knew that she had an audience watching her all the time.

Use of Imagery and Media. Visual manipulation is an important component of Witcher's performance. Throughout the video, the performance stage moves inside and outside the video frame (e.g., zooming in and out) incorporating common tropes in dance. Cultural trope(s) are particular styles of dance that may connect with auditory music genres (e.g., pop, hip-hop, or electronic dance music). Witcher played with parody and satire, which seems whimsical and playful. In this part of the clip, she appeared to be conscious of the camera, moving in and outside of the frame. She was being both outsider and insider: cognizant of the camera capturing her, and in doing so identifying the voyeuristic nature of a video performance on a camera easily identified as a computer webcam. As the performance progressed, she glared into to the camera more and more. Based on Witcher's reflection about her past, this might be a reference to the voyeuristic gaze of auditory culture.

Use of Musical Elements and Linguistic Properties. Contrary to the previous clip, this clip had no signed words however this time it included dance. Witcher also used the distinctive classifier handshapes as part of a note representing two animals (not humans) interacting. Here Witcher shifted from her previous use of lyrics in the earlier segment to notes in this segment. She was playing with her hands and the movements, which is similar to the discussion for *Eyes*. During the dancing, Witcher's body moved, interacting with her hand movements through space creating a temporal and spatial pause from the signed lyrics (e.g., "people walking around" and "people walking through"). The lyrics used by Witcher from the last clip can be seen as sending a social message to the audience, while this particular clip was more of dramatic pause in the signed modality. This



segment of the performance shows different positions of the hands in space from very low by her side to raised high in the frame of the screen. This variation in use of the signing space from low to high may parallel pitch variation in use of voice.

Third Clip of Experimental Clip. The third clip (00:02:23 – 00:02:44) involves lyrics with rhythmic beats, including the climax of this performance. The description of this clip is shown below:

Witcher began signing the classifier phrase “a mass of people” in ASL and the video was in black and white. She then used the same rhythmic beats as described in the first clip. However, this time, she signed each lyric once in this order: the fist handshape exploding open to “5” handshape moving back and forth horizontally, her open “5” hands palm face down then moved horizontally in a circle motion overlapping each other and fingers moving rapidly, and then open “5” hands moving back and forth vertically in front of her palms facing each other and twisting her wrists so that her hands moved back and forth from side to side as they brushed each other. Also, she used her middle finger of both hands representing individuals walking with hostility as they pass by and with a sarcastic look on her face as if they don’t care about each other. She used this signed lyric four times then used an exasperated facial expression of wondering what is wrong in the world. The video shifted from black and white to sepia color and the performer had an angry facial expression indicating how frustrated she is with the world. She then gazed at her “5” hands moving back and forth vertically. She also poetically signed conventional words for the ASL phrase of “It is nice to meet you” using both of her hands acting like they are talking to each other. After this, she was looking at the screen, bent down at the waist with her face up and moved backwards moving her head side to side and with an anguished face. She then repeats the open “5” hands for crowds of people and this time used the index finger for single individuals. In the end, she looked at the screen and used the sign indicating that she, or we, are all “crazy”.

Use of Imagery and Media. All of the different lyrics and notes that Witcher used throughout the performance came together in a fast-paced series of video cuts set to a rhythm. This concluding portion of the video brought the different stories together cohesively. The interpretation of this clip was like viewing Witcher’s world through her performance space.

Use of Musical Elements and Linguistic Properties. Lyrics can be identified in this portion of the performance. Witcher used the conventional words for the ASL phrase “It is nice to meet you” in this clip. She used her middle fingers, which is not a handshape used in ASL. The performer used poetic license playing with the ASL “1” handshape that typically uses the index finger and replaced

it instead with the middle finger to indicate hostility (as the middle finger formation also works as a gesture meaning “f-ck” in Canada and the United States). The motif of alienation seems apparent in this segment of the performance as she expresses lack of connection between individuals and between herself with the crowds and individuals as they go by. Most of the authors of this article suspected that this could be related to audism<sup>7</sup> as a theme of “toleration of living in an oppressive society that she does not relate with”, as she uses the repetitive middle finger formation, or it could reflect a general disenchantment with such a busy society where individuals are absorbed in their destinations without attending to or connecting with each other.

Regarding the musical elements, rhythm can be detected in this clip. Melody and harmony are much harder to pin down or to quantify in this clip as well as across the performances from these two performers. Texture, on the other hand, can be identified in both performances. It is clear that Witcher’s performance was more emotionally tight and tense while Cripps’ performance was much softer with the “animal” and “nature” themes. In Witcher’s clip, she appears angry and frustrated based on her facial expression and through her lyrics expressed with intensity and speed demonstrating crowds of people walking by and individuals saying “f-ck you”. Cripps expresses signed music using notes (such as the movement of water and of birds) while Witcher expresses notes along with lyrics in her work. And, their texture can be seen based on how both of the performers use their video camera to express themselves. Both performers overlaid video technologies to deliver their signed music performances (e.g., notes and lyrics) and combined them in a singular performance.

There are clear differences between these two performers related to timbre. Both Witcher and Cripps had their own poetic signing style and both of them used similar repeated handshapes and rhythmic movements (i.e., Cripps “ocean waves” expressed with open “5” handshapes, grasping and releasing in a circular motion, moving up and down repeatedly and Witcher’s “people walking around” expressed with open “5” handshapes moving horizontally in a circular motion”). However, the difference between these two signers is evident based on their stylistic qualities even though they used similar signs. Both of them used different rhythmic beats and tempo as well. In addition to this, the mixture of notes and of visual effects used by these two performers differed significantly. Cripps used visual effects to enhance abstract images of nature expressed in her signed music performance in order to elucidate her signed music imagery, while Witcher used visual effects to conjure up abstract notions of being a spectator of her performance that clearly indicated a sense of alienation through her specific lyrics ex-

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<sup>7</sup>Audism is the term to define the oppressing view towards deaf people due to their inability to hear and the view of superiority of spoken language over signed language (Bauman 240-245; Cripps & Supalla 96-97; Eckert and Rowley 105-117; Humphries 12).

pressed in her performance. Indeed, there were times in their performances when Cripps and Witcher used similar techniques to achieve very different results.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The preliminary analysis above, addresses the first three musical elements of rhythm, texture, and timbre. This analysis, which is quite new, has just touched the surface and invites further study. The principles of music are important for verifying signed music. Verifying signed music is made possible by breaking down the two signed music performances. These three musical elements as is found in the music of non-Western societies were met. Presence of these musical elements shows that signed music is a real music. The concept or imagery of music performances in the signed modality may be different but there are analogies between signed music and auditory music are evident. Furthermore, use of visual technology in these video signed music performances can be seen as analogous to auditory music videos that are produced not only to preserve music performances but also to enhance the performance itself. As a caution, the study here is preliminary, thus, more analysis is needed to identify the musical elements of harmony and melody in the signed modality.

The authors acknowledge that there are limitations in this ethnographical study based on the small number of scholars who analyzed these two performances, which may be difficult to generalize at this point. Next steps for future research include analyzing a number of signed music performances and conducting interviews with the signed music performers. Both performers' perspectives along with scholars' perspectives/analyses will complement analyses made to date and provide a more comprehensive picture of how their signed music performances are culturally and linguistically constructed. Nevertheless, the preliminary findings from this case study initiate the discussion and provide a promising direction for future studies.

One suggestion for future studies is to investigate harmony and melody in signed music performance created with a large numbers of performers such as the sea rescue performance by the National Theatre of the Deaf that was mentioned earlier in this paper.<sup>8</sup> A performance such as this is conducive to studying harmony because the performers were signing simultaneously with different lyrics. There was much interaction between the performers who were signing different lyrics to create a unified visually appealing performance. Whether or not it has melody and harmony, it will be much easier to discuss harmony and melo-

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<sup>8</sup> The authors thank Christopher Flygare for suggesting that harmony and melody in the signed modality should be easily identified in the National Theatre of the Deaf production of *My Third Eye*.

dy with this type of signed music performance than with the performances that have been analyzed in this paper. The sea rescue performance is more like a choir where each performer has his/her own part. That kind of performance has groups of performers each doing their part that they overlay in the performance to create harmony. In contrast, it is more difficult to identify harmony through solo performances as described in this study.

Another suggestion for further investigation is to have a number of perceptions from the audience and performers who are acculturated with cultural knowledge from within the deaf community. That is for the performing artists and for the audiences to observe and determine what constitutes signed music. It is possible that their perspective will be different depending on the performance. An example of what constitutes auditory music as part of the cultural phenomenon can be seen from a well-known composer of the twentieth century, John Cage, who performed *Four Minutes and Thirty-three Seconds of Silence*. He was supposed to play the piano but for four minutes and thirty-three seconds he was in the silence mode. He did not move at all. Is that considered music? Some people were furious with his performance and said it was ruined while others said it was performance art. It forced hearing people to think about how they understand music. Cage's performance is both "playful" and evocative. In that context, what constitutes signed music, should be based on deaf people's perceptions of cultural experience. The first author of this paper, Cripps did a performance called *Jody Cripps' 2'17" Silent Opus*, which resembled Cage's silent opus work (Cripps, "Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey"). The response from the deaf audience was found comparable to what was discussed for the hearing audience.

Using an ethnographic approach, the decision regarding whether a performance is considered musical should be determined by individuals from a culture itself. Rather than asking the question, "is it music or not?", the more important question is, "who owns the music?". When people or viewers from within the same culture claim their own music then their performers become people of music. This approach gives authority to people from the particular culture to decide what is music in their own creative practices (e.g., linguistics, dance, media, etc.). This approach provides music scholars with a broader lens with which to view and consider what music is. Deaf people are expected to view the performances, *Eyes* and *Experimental Clip* in different ways and some music scholars may be interested in these performances as examples of music while others may not.

One area remaining to be discussed is the boundary between signed music and signed language poetry. Based on this paper's first author, Cripps' observations, signed language poetry uses less repeated rhythmic patterns than signed music. Even though, signed language poetry does include rhythmic beats, it is more constrained such as one to two beat(s). This one to two rhythmic beats is sufficient for signed language poetry whereas they are not in signed music as three or four beats are frequently used. Also, signed language poetry does not

have a chorus in which repeated rhythmic patterns and melody are emphasized. For example, Clayton Valli's performance, *Hands*<sup>9</sup> has rhythmic beats where Valli expressed several of his poetic signs in four locations forming a large circle in space and delivered it once. In contrast, in signed music, the performer uses poetic signs in a large circular motion three or four times before jumping to another rhythmic pattern. More research is needed to determine the distinction between signed music and other signed language performing arts (e.g., dance and ASL poetry using literary analysis).

Further delineation of musical elements within signed music is also required to better understand signed music. Ethnomusicological research has proven to be a good theoretical starting point for examining signed music, because the discipline infers a musical understanding based on cultural context. This study serves as a first step in analyzing signed music performances from the deaf community. The team was intentionally compromised of an insider, an outsider and a mediator. This case study used a mixture of socio-linguistic, anthropological and ethnomusicological analysis. The major point of this research study was to explore and openly define signed music and its musical elements. It was made possible through the Thick Description model that included a detailed explanation of signed music video clips performed by Witcher and Cripps. Furthermore, the study of signed music as introduced here encourages scholars to broaden the definition of music by including different experiential and expressive forms of performance. The preliminary findings from this ethnographic study broadens our understanding of signed music as a performance art and paves the way for scholarship in Music Studies and Deaf Studies.

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<sup>9</sup> Hands is performed by Valli in *Poetry in Motion*.

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