NON-THEMATIC ARTICLE

Signed Music in the Deaf Community: Performing The Black Drum at Festival Clin d’Oeil

Jody H. Cripps
Clemson University, United States

Ely Lyonblum
University of Toronto, Canada

Anita Small
small LANGUAGE CONNECTIONS, Canada

ABSTRACT

In the spring of 2019, the first signed musical stage production was performed at Festival Clin d’Oeil—the world’s largest deaf arts festival that brings thousands to Reims, France, biennially. Surrounded by visual and performing arts, an invited delegation from Canada debuted the musical The Black Drum internationally, incorporating physical theater, signed music, projection, and dance. Signed music is an inter-performance art that demonstrates musical elements by culturally deaf individuals who have explored creating musical performances with their hands and bodies. These performances operate according to a distinct artistic style, incorporating elements of signed languages; rhythmic hand, facial, and/or body motions; and media video arts. This article offers insight into the performers’ process and development of a deaf-created signed musical for an international audience, the ways signed music galvanizes community and identity through self-expression, and the impact of The Black Drum on an international audience at Festival Clin d’Oeil. Through ethnomusicological analysis and reflection with perspectives as insider-outsider-mediator, signed music has been researched by the authors and observed throughout the development of The Black Drum in preparation for its Canadian and European premieres. The festival setting is a place where new types of performances are welcomed and evaluated for their acceptance into the community. Responses from audience members and performers revealed that signed music is an emerging genre of its own.
Signed Music in the Deaf Community: Performing The Black Drum at Festival Clin d’Oeil

Jody H. Cripps, Ely Lyonblum, Anita Small

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the cast and crew of The Black Drum for allowing us to work with them. We are grateful for funding from the Canada Council for the Arts in sponsoring the development of The Black Drum, support from the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf for this research, and to Clemson University’s Humanities Hub for travel expenses for Jody H. Cripps.

Introduction

Festival Clin d’Oeil held in Reims, France, is the largest ongoing deaf performing arts festival. Since 2003 the CinéSourds organization has held this festival every two years, with the goal of featuring signed language with all of its cultural and artistic manifestations. Live performances, street arts, a film competition, concerts, visual and plastic arts exhibitions, and a professional stand exhibition are all available at the festival. The festival organizers work on multiple areas at the same time, including youth education and arts workshops for children aged six to seventeen, as well as research and development related to deaf cultural heritage through seminars, conferences, and professional meetings. More than twenty thousand festival goers attended the 2019 festival (https://www.clin-doeil.eu/en-gb/festival). In this article, we argue that culturally deaf performers expand the present concept of music within the performing arts by exploring the impact of signed music as an art form prior to and during the festival.

The signed musical stage performance called The Black Drum was featured at the Festival Clin d’Oeil in 2019. The Black Drum is the first full-feature signed musical produced, directed, and written by deaf individuals in Canada and internationally. It was produced by the DEAF CULTURE CENTRE, Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf (CCSD) in 2019. This all-deaf cast was selected for the featured performance at Festival Clin d’Oeil as one of ten performances out of hundreds from over thirty different countries that applied. Representing Canada, this signed musical performance is done entirely in American Sign Language (ASL), one of several signed languages in Canada. ASL, like other signed languages around the world, has its own set of linguistic features (phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics) that are both different and similar to those of spoken languages. Furthermore, by watching performances from many countries at the event, the Canadian performers exhibited their deaf cultural norms representing Canada, and a variety of cultures and signed languages were exchanged. This festival’s international visual and performing arts and cultural sharing are what brings deaf individuals from all over the world to Reims biennially.

We have investigated and observed signed music throughout the construction of The Black Drum in preparation for its Canadian and European premieres, using an ethnomusicological approach with our respective cultural perspectives as insider-outsider-mediator. The research conducted with the deaf cast and production crew in Canada and Europe took place over six months through participatory observation, video ethnography, field notes, and interviews. This article begins with the necessary cultural context of signed music’s development as an art form.
We describe the process of how signed music performances were developed by the culturally deaf performers in *The Black Drum* and how they changed from preproduction to the end of the performances at Festival Clin d’Oeil.

**Context**

**Deaf Festivals**

Various deaf festivals have taken place in North America and internationally. Expos and festivals with performing and visual arts, films, and gatherings of signing adults and youth from around the globe have taken place at DeafNation World Expo, Canadian Deaf Children Festival, and the Rochester Deaf Film Festival. The deaf festival setting is a place where new types of signed language performances are welcomed and, in some instances, accepted into the community. For years, deaf people have been subject to discrimination for using signed language, thus affecting restriction of signed language performing arts.⁶ Festivals, in general, are known to welcome new artworks, create innovation, and affect community identity.⁷ Playwright and professor of drama Temple Hauptfleisch has examined how arts festivals support cultural change in post-apartheid South Africa:

> In the face of the enormous task of reconstruction, reconciliation and self-realization now facing the country, the arts (in the very broadest sense) have once more been mobilized in a most remarkable fashion in a new “cultural struggle” in which not only the theatrical event but the theatrical system as a whole is once more becoming increasingly important not only in understanding and re-interpreting the past, but also in coming to grips with the present and in shaping the future, thus shifting perceptions across a wide spectrum and the many chasms that divide people and communities. In this process, the arts and culture festival has come to hold a special place.⁸

This experience parallels deaf people facing discrimination related to signed language use. Besides festivals being welcoming, there are some constraints related to festivals as well. For example, the organizers of music festivals are frequently considered gatekeepers, which professor emeritus of management and organizations Paul M. Hirsh calls a "preselection system," in selecting the music performances.⁹ The same holds true for deaf festivals, as the festival organizers select musical performances related to signed language that prominently feature deaf artists to counteract generations of cultural oppression.

One of the first large-scale international performance arts festivals for deaf people was called The Deaf Way, held at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, in the United States in July 1989.¹⁰ The Deaf Way hosted over six thousand deaf individuals from around the globe from South Africa and internationally. Expos and festivals with performing and visual arts, films, and gatherings of signing adults and youth from around the globe have taken place at DeafNation World Expo, Canadian Deaf Children Festival, and the Rochester Deaf Film Festival. The deaf festival setting is a place where new types of signed language performances are welcomed and, in some instances, accepted into the community. For years, deaf people have been subject to discrimination for using signed language, thus affecting restriction of signed language performing arts. Festivals, in general, are known to welcome new artworks, create innovation, and affect community identity. Playwright and professor of drama Temple Hauptfleisch has examined how arts festivals support cultural change in post-apartheid South Africa:

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One of the first large-scale international performance arts festivals for deaf people was called The Deaf Way, held at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, in the United States in July 1989. The Deaf Way hosted over six thousand deaf individuals from around the world, who gathered to celebrate deaf performing arts and to honor deaf culture. This festival includes signed language literature (storytelling, poetry, and more) and signed language theater as part of the performing arts section.

Originally planned as a one-time festival, the popularity of the event led to The Deaf Way II. Like the first iteration, the festival brought together almost 9,700 deaf individuals from around the world in Washington, DC, in July 2002 to share their arts, research, and languages. The Deaf
Way II recaptured the enthusiasm of the original event. Deaf professor of math Harvey Goodstein and advocate Laura Brown’s photography of the festival created a uniquely detailed pictorial record for the deaf community that ranges from the formal grandeur of the opening ceremony to fascinating behind-the-scenes glances at the arts festival and the intellectual conference program.14 The engaging portraits of the individuals and technology from The Deaf Way II expose a transnational community of deaf people. Like with the first festival, the signed language performers demonstrated their pieces in signed language literature and theater categories.

Both The Deaf Way and The Deaf Way II festivals made a great impact on the planning of deaf festivals globally, including the establishment of Festival Clin d’Oeil in France in 2003. The festival’s director, David de Keyzer, noted that he would like to create a festival that focuses on films and performing arts performed by deaf artists. He then asked the city of Reims if they would be interested in having a deaf performance arts festival every two years. The city of Reims was thrilled to have this kind of international festival and gave their support by providing the festival with ongoing funding.15 Through Festival Clin d’Oeil, de Keyzer has provided opportunities for deaf performers to create and share their new ideas in theater, film, and other performance arts.16 In that context, new signed music works were welcomed in this four-day international festival during the summer of 2019.

Creative influence of signed music can be detected across American and European signed language poets from international festivals. Clayton Valli, a well-known ASL poet, performed his poetry at The Deaf Way in 1989. His poetry is strongly influenced by American English poet Robert Frost.17 Similar to Frost, the genre of his poetry is focused on natural landscapes and the four seasons. Valli was also a signed language linguist who specialized in conducting linguistic analyses of ASL poetry.18 It was at The Deaf Way that Valli’s work made an impact on Wim Emmerik, a deaf Dutch ballet dancer, mime artist, and theater performer. Emmerik was impressed by Valli’s repeated handshapes and movements to create a rhyme; his use of space, rhythm, meter, and symbols; and the layers of meaning in Valli’s poetry in signed language. Because of Valli’s impact on him at the festival, Emmerik attended Valli’s workshops at Gallaudet and created his own poetry in Dutch Sign Language (NGT). Emmerik later became a renowned NGT poet in the Netherlands and other European countries.19

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10. Gallaudet University is the only liberal arts college that serves deaf students through ASL and that focuses on teaching English in the written form. See Carol J. Erting et al., eds., The Deaf Way: Perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1994).

11. Carol J. Erting, introduction to The Deaf Way, xxviii.

12. For further details of signed language literature, see Andrew P. J. Byrne, “American Sign Language Literature: Some Considerations for Legitimacy and Quality Issues,” Society for American Sign Language Journal 1, no. 1 (2017): 56–77. For further information on signed language theater, see Dorothy S. Miles and Louie J. Fant Jr., Sign-Language Theatre and Deaf Theatre: New Definitions and Directions (Northridge: Center on
Valli’s and Emmerik’s poetry pieces share lyrical parallels in that they both feature nature. For example, Valli’s poem “Hands” shows the four seasons with the “five” handshape represented as flurries (going down to and fro), flowers growing (up), grass breezing (to and fro), and leaves falling (down).20 Figure 2 demonstrates Valli’s “Hands” poetry. Like Valli, Emmerik created a short nature poem, “Falling Leaf.” He uses two hands where one moves from the other alternating dominant hands, to create a Haiku poem with only two handshapes (a “five” and “one” handshape), revealing strong influence from one signed language poet to another. Emmerik learned from Valli, alternating movements, drawing out, continuing flow from one hand to the other. Emmerik, who lived another decade after Valli passed away, continued to grow from Valli’s poetic style to soar with his own.21 Emmerik’s piece can be seen in figure 3.

Figure 2. Valli’s ASL poetry, “Hands.” Photo: Open source – YouTube (The HeART of Deaf Culture, “Hands,” streamed on November 30, 2018, YouTube video, 0:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r2VNzOns5q0).


Interviews with renowned European sign language poet, Emmerik, affirm Valli’s profound influence on his poetic style and career framed in the context of their encounter at The Deaf Way Festival, 1989.

I think in terms of internal structure and movement flow—rhythmic flow. That was Valli’s message to use two hands. I didn’t understand at the time, but then later I came to understand alternating movements drawing out...
What Is Signed Music?

Signed music is an artistic technique that includes non-lyric (or less lyric) and non-audible-based pieces as well as signed language lyrics. Signed music is not composed, performed, or recorded with audible sound, and it does not interpret preexisting musical pieces. Performer Pamela E. Witcher, performer and professor of ASL Jody H. Cripps, and performer Hodan Youssouf clarify that signed music is not a form of accommodation. Auditory culture has made attempts to "enable" deaf individuals to hear people's music by providing accommodations. It is common practice to have deaf people listen to music by having spoken lyrics translated into signed language, imitating audio-centric music (such as deaf hip-hop or dip-hop), and experiencing vibrations. The musical accommodations as detailed here, however, are often met with ambivalence by culturally deaf persons.

Unlike the accommodated audio-centric music described above, signed music is derived from the deaf community. Detachment from the long-held traditional understanding of music as an aural phenomenon is required for this transformation in cultural perspective. Signed music performances can be expressed through visual and tactile modalities. Deaf performers are underrepresented on stage and in the media, and signers' opinions are rarely highlighted. Through this work, deaf performers were able to express their sense of ownership and engagement while developing signed music pieces for The Black Drum.

The concept of signed music has become better understood and is increasingly accepted by scholars in performance studies and has been defined in its relation to audible music:

[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. Some performances also include lyrics or "words" in ASL [or LSQ].

Cripps, Lyonblum, Witcher, and Youssouf have explained the distinction between non-lyrics and lyrics and their essential use in performance to understanding the concept of signed music.

Janis E. Cripps's performance of "Eyes" is best described as heavily non-lyric (see figure 4 to view the work in its entirety). She is a fluent ASL signer as it is her native language. The performer makes precise moves with both hands (in the signing space and in front of her face). From the beginning until the finale, the performer uses only one basic handshape (stretched fingers and thumb). Without actual signed words, the "Eyes" performance is abstract (no clear meanings as found with lyrics). It is reasonable to assume that her signing experience permits her to execute...
non-lyrics with abstract movements and hands. The performer’s most essential message, maybe, pertains to her hands and herself as a musically powerful signer. Here is another example of how she uses her eyes to send a powerful message: she suddenly opens her eyes at the conclusion, signaling that she is witnessing music, as opposed to closed eyes at the start.34

“Tick Tock,” by Ian Sanborn, the second signed music example, is mainly lyric focused (see figure 5).35 From the beginning to conclusion, a variety of signs (along with classifier constructs) are formed in a logical order with obvious meanings.36 As he signs the composition, the audience sees Sanborn to be always musical. During the piano playing phase, Sanborn does some non-lyrics, as signing appears arbitrary at that point. Sanborn, for example, communicates music notes by “dancing” on the piano keys. In several situations, the hands cannot be identified as people (as he is using “poetic license” with his handshapes) but certainly something moves musically. Sanborn uses the topic of oppression in his piece, which is set in the backdrop of deaf children receiving speech training without regard for signed language. These sessions are compared to a clock, with time moving agonizingly slowly and precision stressed (on how a deaf youngster must practice speaking correctly) over the creative freedom necessary for artistic expression, found in signed music.
Deaf, as well as hearing individuals, make and enjoy music. Jody H. Cripps and his colleagues’ article from 2017 examines the theoretical foundation for signed music. They looked for rhythm, timbre, texture, melody, and harmony in Janis Cripps’s “Eyes” and Pamela Witcher’s “Experimental Clip,” version 2 with Luc Ledoux to see if they were present. They examined musical aspects of the two selected signed music performances using anthropological concepts from anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s seminal essay, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture.” Their research reveals the rhythm and timbre found in signed music in relation to musical qualities described in non-Western music. While deaf people may not be able to hear rhythm and timbre in audible music, it has not stopped them from creating and combining such elements in their own musical creations in the signed modality. Melody and harmony, on the other hand, are difficult to discern in “Eyes” and “Experimental Clip,” and more research is needed with different signed music performances to study these characteristics.

History of Signed Music

Historically, deaf performers have experimented with signed music on the stage, at social events, and on video media. None of the performances below has been shown at the deaf festival. Regardless, it is critical to comprehend how signed music came to be a part of today’s culture and how it inspired The Black Drum’s performance. Before proceeding with a discussion about The Black Drum, it is necessary to have some prior knowledge of signed music performances dating back to the early 1900s to grasp how The Black Drum came to be.

Through their scholarship, Cripps and his colleagues have compiled a list of historic signed music pieces performed by deaf performers. Typically, deaf people have created percussion singing using signed language, which is a sort of original song. Deaf culture is reflected since it is not a mere interpretation of auditory-based English vocal lyrics. The lyrics originate with deaf performers based on their deaf experience. The original ASL percussion songs use one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three rhythm beats for each word, with body gestures from left to right and vice versa. These original percussion signed songs used a large drum typically used in schools for deaf students. These original signed songs are precursors to signed music that originates from within the deaf community. George Kannapell, a deaf man, led a group in singing the ASL percussion song, “Boat, Drink, Fun, Enjoy…,” in the sample below.

BOAT (left) BOAT (right),

BOAT (left) BOAT (right), BOAT (left),

BOAT (right) BOAT (left),

DRINK (left) DRINK (right),

DRINK (left) DRINK (right), DRINK (left),

DRINK (right) DRINK (left)...

Another example is a chorus of deaf males signing “Oh Darn, I Hear Nothing!” in ASL, with the...


35. Such analysis on Sanborn’s “Tick Tock” can be seen in Witcher, Cripps, and Youssouf, “Gaining Insights,” 7.

36. The classifier, a combination of noun and verb with a meaning dependent on the handshape.

words meant to be humorous. These early percussion signed songs underwent further evolution in the signed songs of the 1970s.

In the 1970s, a signed song piece was performed. During the My Third Eye production for both stage and television in 1971–72, deaf actors from the renowned National Theatre of the Deaf developed this work. The ensemble song, “Rescue at the Sea,” was performed by a group without any auditory-based instrumentation. Rhythmic beats were used in this visually impressive performance. No audible musical instruments were used by the performers. Throughout the remainder of the performance, one of the performers did “up-and-down” hand motions that mirrored the rhythm of ocean waves (see video clip of this performance below in figure 10).

During the 1990s, the deaf community had more opportunities to enjoy original ASL songs by culturally deaf individuals, either live or on videotape or DVD. “Mexican Cowboy,” a percussion song sung in ASL by Mary Beth Miller (one of the performers in My Third Eye), and “A Ballad of the USA Flag,” an American patriotic song sung by David Supalla in ASL, are examples of signed music pieces. Supalla’s piece, like Miller’s, featured rhythmic beats through signed lyrics that included soldiers marching in time from beginning to conclusion.

Since 2000, signed music performances have changed dramatically, with many now being disseminated on or created for social media composed entirely without the reliance on auditory instruments and created with ASL lyrics as well as without lyrics or reduced ASL lyrics. While some of these signed music performances have had audible sound added after the signed music composition was complete, such as Witcher’s “Experimental Clip_version 2 with Luc Ledoux,” many have no audible component whatsoever in their composition or performance. Janis Cripps (“Eyes”), Sanborn (“Caterpillar”), Rosa Lee Timm (“River Song”), and Witcher (“Experimental Clip version 1”) are among the participating deaf performers whose work can be readily found on YouTube. Their work presents audiences with new styles of signed musicianship. Their artistic expression uses highly varied rhythmic layers of handshapes and movements—“signed musical notes”—as well as visual media.

A number of deaf performers performed live on stage at the Signed Music: A Symphonic Odyssey event in Towson, Maryland, in November 2015. All of the performers from Canada and the United States were culturally deaf: The Fenicle Brothers (Ron, John, and Jonas) presented “The Food Chain”; Sanborn performed “Rooster Seeks Music,” an ASL narrative-style music piece; and Witcher played “Nice and Slow” with ASL lyrics and non-lyrics. The musical qualities of the signed modality were used in each of these live performances. The crowd, mostly deaf, gave them a standing ovation at the end of their pieces. Presenting old songs alongside the new signed music style had a profound impact on deaf individuals/performers who had recently created their own signed music pieces, including The Black Drum.

Preproduction and Production

To analyze the impact of The Black Drum, we worked closely alongside the cast. And as a research team, our perspective is from an insider-outsider-mediator position (Cripps is as an
position, and movements performed, is another type of fundamental sign. When these morphemic parts are combined, they generate a classifier production that may represent a phrase like “a human figure standing” or “a car passing by a tree.” Readers might want to read Ted R. Supalla, “The Classifier System in American Sign Language,” in Noun Classes and Categorization, ed. Colette G. Craig (Eugene, OR: John Benjamins, 1986), 181–214, for further details on classifier constructions.

Development Process of The Black Drum

The Black Drum is the first signed musical directed, produced, and written by deaf Canadian individuals (see figure 6 for the musical preview). In 2017, Joanne S. Cripps, executive director of CCSD, and Anita Small, CCSD consultant and owner of small LANGUAGE CONNECTIONS, were driven to change the mindset from translated musicals like Spring Awakening and other musicals translated from auditory performances. They envisioned creating a new kind of full-feature show with original signed music pieces throughout. This was an altogether different type of performance that would not rely on translating auditory performances but would rather showcase signed music composition created by deaf composers with no reliance on auditory sound or previously composed auditory-based compositions whatsoever. This would not be about “accommodation” to auditory sound-based musicals but rather its own artistic non-auditory musical exploration using sign language. The Black Drum was conceived during Canada’s 150th anniversary, and they received six hundred thousand dollars in grants for deaf artists to create, perform, and tour it with a mentor program in tandem. It incorporated deaf-led original signed music compositions and with deaf ownership.

The play was performed at Soulpepper Theatre in Toronto, Canada, in 2019, and at Festival Clin d’Oeil in Reims, also in 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2021, it was virtually featured by Inside Out Theatre Company, Calgary, Canada, and the Alberta Cultural Society of the Deaf (ACSD), Edmonton, Canada.
The synopsis is as follows:

The Black Drum tells the story of a young woman (Joan), whose life is upended as she mourns the death of her wife (Karen). She is propelled on a fantastical journey to a sinister “in-between” dark world controlled by the “Minister” with no music, laughter, love or freedom. There, her Butterfly and Bulldog tattoos (both Deaf animals) come alive as she grapples with her identity to find her own “place” in the land of the living. She meets Ava, mentor to young children controlled by the Minister; Squib, the Minister’s reluctant lieutenant; and finds Karen as she searches for her inner music and strength. With support from her new friends and live tattoos, she discovers her own signed music, authentic deaf identity, shares her colorful world and defeats the Minister. She must leave her dead wife behind, but returns fortified, having found her own sense of self and purpose in the land of the living. Tattoo art, physical theater, signed music composition, dance, projections and base rhythms enhance the performance.53

The Black Drum performance went through a community-led artistic process.54 The play was commissioned by the CCSD, a nonprofit organization, and written by Adam Pottle, a deaf playwright. Culturally deaf features, structure, sensitivities, and themes of identity were all woven into the plot through a collaborative screenplay revision process. Deaf animals (butterfly and bulldog) are among the tattoo characters that come to life. Tattoos have a notable resonance within the deaf community. In 1877, Thomas Edison, who was deaf, patented the electric stencil pen, the forerunner to today’s tattoo machines. The whole cast and production staff is deaf, including artistic director Mira Zuckermann, producer Joanne S. Cripps, the assistant director, the assistant set designer, and the costume designer. The deaf actors also composed the signed music pieces. One aim of the production was to encourage deaf cast and production team members to develop their artistic practice in an environment where they could freely express themselves within a deaf context. Many of the actors have a long history of working with hearing performers and production team members who rely on audible sounds to create music.55 Another goal of this performance was to promote awareness of deaf people’s artistry and cultural identity.

During the preproduction and production of The Black Drum, we conducted interviews with each of the deaf cast and production crew members. The interviewees were asked about their understanding of signed music and their process of developing signed music performances. Through the interviews, we were able to find themes related to ownership and engagement among the casts and crews of The Black Drum.56 Their thinking processes can be found in the two videos (figures 7 and 8) on ownership and engagement.


54 Their thinking processes can be found in the two videos (figures 7 and 8) on ownership and engagement.
We have previously summarized our findings on the casts’ and crews’ responses toward ownership and engagement as follows:

Ownership:

For the first time, cast and production team shifted from the majority influence of auditory music creation in isolation to exploring their OWN music their own way as a collective. (Mira Zuckermann, director, 0:04–1:55)

Intrinsic authentic signed music was created when creativity, body movements, and signs were an outgrowth of experience from the heart of the Deaf community. (Yan Liu, cast, Bree/Butterfly, 3:44–4:10)

Exposing complete identity, including intersectionality, for example, as a Deaf Black Woman, was critical in attaining full ownership of signed music. The ability to break free from absorbing hearing ways and express “the whole me” was a key component to ownership. (Natasha C. Bacchus, cast, Squib, 4:11–4:47)

Engagement:

The challenge in engaging diverse audiences was how to remain true to themselves while simultaneously open and accessible to a combined Deaf and hearing audience. (Mira Zuckermann, director, 0:04–0:54)

The signed music performance mirrored the actors’ experience of breaking free from the fear, shame, and oppression of sign language to no longer be stifled. (Corinna Den Dekker, cast, Ava, 1:36–3:11)

The vibrant, thriving, Deaf signing community growing up was the inspiration for creating an empowering collective performance to show the world. (Dawn Jani Birley, cast, Joan, 3:12–4:09)

We concluded that “through this research and participant interviews, Deaf professionals emphasized the importance of ‘having permission’ to explore signed music performance their ‘own way’ in the context of a Deaf-led production team.”

Production on Stage

In The Black Drum, each performer has an original solo piece that expresses their on-stage character through signed music. The signed music performances incorporate a bass drum...
played live on stage with rhythms composed after and based on the signed music pieces to emphasize the movements and rhythms of the signed music. The bass drum (audible music and vibration) is an additional feature of the musical. A total of nine signed music pieces were composed for this musical. In one particular signed music piece, Yan Liu’s character was the butterfly. Butterflies, born without ears, have become a deaf cultural icon. 59 Trained as a dancer, Liu uses signed music to mimic the transformation of a caterpillar trapped within a cocoon to a brilliantly colorful butterfly, hence the title of this piece, “No Cocoon Can Hold Me.” Figure 9 demonstrates the full clip of Liu’s piece.

In the final performance of The Black Drum, the cast performs an overture or coda-like piece that draws on each of their individual signed music pieces to conclude the show. The ensemble performs as a group, taking turns to perform sections from their solo pieces. An example of an early ensemble signed music piece is “Rescue at the Sea” in My Third Eye (see figure 10). In the last musical scene in The Black Drum, the protagonist, Joan (played by Dawn Jani Birley), is featured center stage challenging the audience to consider what music is: how can deaf individuals self-express through their own signed music? Joan leads the cast in a signed music piece demonstrating the feeling of freedom to express their inner music. 60 Figure 11 captures the last signed music piece performed in the final scene of the musical.


Figure 10. National Theatre of the Deaf’s “Rescue at the Sea.” Photo courtesy of Jody Cripps (Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey) (Signed Music, “Rescue at the Sea,” streamed on September 8, 2022, YouTube video, 3:47, https://youtu.be/lpw5vFFg0W0).

Figure 11 captures the last signed music piece performed in the final scene of the musical.
Production at the Festival and Postproduction Impact

The Black Drum at the Festival

In July 2019, the troupe of The Black Drum traveled to Festival Clin d’Oeil in Reims representing Canada. The theme of the 2019 festival was Canada. Thus, The Black Drum was the first Canadian deaf theater troupe to be selected to perform at this international festival, an honor for the Canadian deaf community. Also, due to the selection of this play being of paramount importance, it was not performed until the last two days of the festival. The Black Drum was the only troupe to perform signed music performances without any reliance on audible sounds and the audible sound was considered superfluous in their performances. The troupe’s first performance drew a full house, and we were there to witness the impressive turnout and sense of excitement from this production, which was performed three times at the festival.

As for the night entertainment, a small number of music performances from deaf bands incorporated audible sounds in their performances, which attempted to replicate the auditory experience of music through their work. Music performances ranged from translated sign song to imitated musical performance. Translated signed songs or audible-based performances have their own lengthy history and can be found in the signed language literature and at other international deaf events. Deaf people frequently have a variety of responses to this translated audible music or imitation of audible music (e.g., dip-hop or deaf hip-hop) because it is part of hearing people’s cultural experience. The cultural differences between these groups’ performances and The Black Drum’s work as well as other signed music pieces as discussed thus far are notable in their respective approaches to musicking and their relationship to auditory culture (i.e., the extent to which they incorporate auditory culture or are created independently from auditory culture). A short clip of other bands with translated songs seen in figure 12 serves as an example.
The Black Drum’s Impact on the Deaf Festival

After viewing The Black Drum, Cripps conducted interviews with audience members asking about their reactions toward the signed musical performance. For this article, the focus was on festival audience members. Interviewed deaf audience members consisted of eight Europeans, two Canadians, and one American. Interviewees were pleased with the performance and most found the quality of the performance impressive. Some explained that they enjoyed the play emotionally due to its music and content, which they could relate to—having been oppressed by hearing members as signed language was forbidden in educational settings in the past. Due to the differences of signed languages used in Europe, some of them began to understand what signed music meant. For example, one of the audience members said that they normally do not enjoy audible music or translated songs into signed language and would likely sleep halfway through performances with translated songs. However, with this musical they expressed that they felt thrilled right from the beginning and enjoyed it all the way to the end and wanted to see more after the performance ended.

Audience reactions showed how The Black Drum was impactful and how it stood out from other performances and night entertainment at the festival as it was thought provoking, unique, culturally appropriate, and in sync with the deaf community internationally while visually oriented and aesthetically pleasing. Signed music is sometimes erroneously confused with signed language that is superimposed on audible music in an attempt to render an auditory experience for deaf people as they do not hear the audible sounds. Instead of focusing on access to audible music, signed music distinguishes itself by creating musicality through a visual and tactile medium that is enjoyed by deaf and deafblind people. The notion of having signed music created visually or through movement with a tactile medium makes it clear that the two types of music (i.e., audible and signed) are drastically different in form and cultural context. It also highlights deaf people’s own process in creating and appreciating their own type of music. In a related case, our previous article indicates that The Black Drum’s deaf cast and production team members expressed that they finally discovered ownership of the musical, and after having understood and appreciated signed music, it became part of their lives.

The Black Drum has had an impact on an international level beyond its appearance at the festival.
Featuring the signed musical performance at the festival changed how festival participants (the ones who participated in the audience study) think about culturally appropriate signed music performances and influenced their appreciation of their own music. The Black Drum performance at Clin d’Oeil has led to a coproduction begun between Finland and Canada to create a new signed musical (in process). This kind of influence on an international level parallels the impact that Valli’s signed language poetry had on Emmerik’s poetry as discussed earlier in this article.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through interviews with the deaf performers and production crew from The Black Drum, we learned that they felt a sense of ownership of their signed music performances in the musical. In addition, they were able to engage their audience at Festival Clin d’Oeil in a similar manner and cultivated a sense of belonging in music making through signed music. These findings are in keeping with and confirm the findings that traced the mentorship process in the creation of The Black Drum. The mentorship research report summarized shared learning, collaboration, and networking of the deaf theater professionals as they were paired with experienced deaf and hearing theater professionals as mentors in the context of the deaf-led theater production, The Black Drum, 2019. The report highlighted the learnings of both mentees and mentors. Findings in the mentorship research report point to the vital role of deaf group connection, the value of the collective, collaboration, mutual learning during signed music composition, and permission to do it the “Deaf Way,” as well as institutional partnerships in supporting and asserting credibility in signed music as a valued performance art. Both the mentorship research report and the festival findings elucidated here point to the importance of the collective and sense of belonging needed to generate and generated while composing and viewing signed music performances.

As previously stated, the festival is a special place where performers and production crew members feel free to express themselves in their own way in their performances, including in their music. This preliminary finding includes deaf people discovering their identity and connection to music—that is, through signed music. The well-known mixed feeling or reactions to auditory music among deaf audience members were no longer evident when they watched The Black Drum performance. Audience reactions in both Canada and France affirm the connection of deaf audiences to signed music with their own personal experience. Festival exposure and audience reactions reaffirm and solidify the important place of this music as an outgrowth of the deaf community, belonging to the deaf community, establishing connection with the deaf community and its own music beyond national borders, and soliciting sense of belonging from deaf community audiences.

An expanded notion of music is intertwined with our concept of who music belongs to. Music belongs to whatever culture it comes from. Music can be composed and experienced through a variety of senses and enjoyed by all. Festivals play a powerful role in reinforcing the joy of music across borders experienced and shared by deaf people across the globe. Just as signed language poets influenced one another through festivals in the late 1980s, signed music composers are having an impact on one another now, thirty years later. The Black Drum at Clin d’Oeil generated impetus and inspiration for more signed musical productions and new coproductions in North America and Europe.
Signed music tours in North America were considered after the festival. Based on the strong turnout at the festival, *The Black Drum* troupe received several offers to perform in the United States (e.g., in Los Angeles for Deaf West). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, plans to perform live on tour in the US and Canada morphed into a virtual tour. Inside Out Theatre Company and the Alberta Cultural Society of the Deaf (ACSD) hosted a virtual event in 2021.72 Festival Clin d’Oeil as a well-established international festival had an impact on growing interest in *The Black Drum* and signed music among deaf people in North America as well as in Europe.

For the future, signed music performances at international festivals need to be promoted by performers and community members. Recognition of signed music performances on an international level sheds a new light for deaf people to finally own their own way of creating and enjoying music. Teatre Totti, a deaf theater in Finland, will coproduce with CCSD a signed musical commissioned by CCSD, also written by Pottle, with signed music pieces composed and performed by deaf signed musicians and supported by the Canada Council for the Arts with an eye toward production in Scandinavia, in Canada, and at Festival Clin d’Oeil in a few years (in process).

Deaf festivals like Festival Clin d’Oeil have a role in sharing new forms of signed language performance art. Festivals provide a strong platform for signed language performers to express and share their new creations on an international level. The “culture struggle” regarding what constitutes deaf art and music is beginning to fade with the performance of signed music at renowned festivals and in theaters. Festival performances, in turn, play an important role in the growing acceptance of signed music as a music genre internationally among deaf people in their communities and beyond.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


AUTHOR BIOS

**Jody H. Cripps** is a native American Sign Language signer who grew up in a deaf household in Ontario. He is a Canadian deaf researcher who has been researching signed music, particularly in the fields of music enculturation and visual sounds, as an assistant professor of American Sign Language in the Department of Languages at Clemson University in South Carolina.

**Ely Lyonblum** is the Strategic Research Development Officer in the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto. His projects, largely focusing on cultural equity and music technology, range from the history of sound recording to American Sign Language performance art and storytelling through music. He trained as a documentary filmmaker at Goldsmiths, University of London, and completed a PhD in music at the University of Cambridge. His work has been presented by the MIT Media Lab, CBC Radio 1, the Smithsonian Institution, and the British Library and has been shown at music and arts festivals across six continents.

**Anita Small** is a hearing sociolinguist, educator, cultural mediator, and researcher. She has worked with the deaf community for thirty-five years and as university educator (York University and University of Toronto) for over twenty years. A specialist in social dynamics, past codirector of the DEAF CULTURE CENTRE, and owner of small LANGUAGE CONNECTIONS, she has engaged diverse communities to cocreate collaborative, empowering award-winning organizations, program innovations, productions, and resources.

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HOW TO CITE


*The Journal of Festive Studies* (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from H-Celebration, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is the inaugural journal published through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/jfs.