

Seeing Music? An Inquiry into the Place of Music in Deaf Culture¹
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INTRODUCTION

I was the only Deaf student at my college. Often I felt like I was studying abroad in a different country, because the hearing world is truly different from the Deaf world. My unexpected music education at the college exemplifies this. One uneventful afternoon during my senior year, I contacted the chair of the music department and requested to be waived from the requirement to take the music survey class. In my email, I concisely presented my case why I should be waived, and I was pretty confident that the chair would rule in favor of my case because it was rather compelling and incontrovertible. My case was: I am profoundly deaf.

But, I was wrong. Although the chair completely agreed that I should not take the music survey class, because it mostly consisted of listening to various music, he was hesitant to waive me from the requirement altogether. Thinking that music education is indispensable even to a Deaf person's liberal arts education, he suggested that I meet with him weekly for a one-on-one session discussing the history of music and what different music sounds like. At first, I scoffed at this, thinking that I have nothing to benefit from music. But then, I realized that music plays a vital role in the hearing world and if I want to better understand hearing people and their quasi-culture, then I probably should study music. I ultimately decided to take up on the professor's offer and little did I know that it would significantly alter my perspective of music.

Studying music in-depth alongside a world-class professor of music opened my eyes to the fact that to say music is vital in the hearing world is a blatant understatement. Music is beyond vital; music is deeply powerful and influential. A whisper of music has enough power to cause seismic waves to be felt throughout the world. Thus, this leads me to question: Has the cultural Deaf community been missing out on something? First, I will discuss how history reveals how powerful music is and then I will explore music in light of Deaf culture.

POWER OF MUSIC

A myriad of thinkers throughout history acknowledge that music is so powerful and at times manipulative that, like Aristotle says, "it is not easy to determine the nature of music or why anyone should have a knowledge of it" (*Politics*, VIII, ch.5, 1339a15). Some things in the world are so complicated and abstract that they cannot be clearly expressed by means of colloquialism. Music helps manifest what only the soul, not mind nor heart, can comprehend. Music creates sounds that adeptly mirror the sublime things in life and blow them into the ears, a channel to one's soul, the switchboard of the whole body.

¹ This essay was originally created in both American Sign Language and English, and has been filmed in American Sign Language and written in English.

This is the very reason why Plato claims that music is “a powerful force for good or for evil” that one ought not to use music for “mere pleasure” (Weiss and Taruskin 5). If one uses music for mere pleasure, they may be easily influenced in negative ways. Also, in the *Republic*, Plato insists that in a perfect city, children would first be intensively educated in music, because Plato did not underestimate the power of music and acknowledged that music nurtures one’s soul and intelligence more effectively and naturally than other pedagogical methods (376ff).² On the other hand, Aristotle states that music can also be used for entertainment and relaxation. Still, Aristotle warns that the pleasure of music should not become excessive and distracting because it would easily drag one down with its awesome power otherwise (*Politics*, VIII, ch.5). Apparently, Plato and Aristotle strongly believe that music is so uniquely powerful that it must be given primacy in one’s education and at the same time handled with great care as if it has the power of the ring of Gyges.

It is not necessary to become an erudite thinker to realize what music can truly do. Throughout the history of humankind, all religions, both primitive and advanced, heavily rely on music for worship and meditation. The Hebrew Bible underscores the importance of music. Psalm 98:4-6 says:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord. (NRSV)

Such decrees resound throughout the books of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible exhorts repeatedly that one ought to use musical instruments and make musical noises to praise the Lord. Why? Just because they are beautiful? Are not flowers beautiful too? Why not simply wave flowers to the Lord in praise? Music is *uniquely* influential, *superlatively* powerful. Thus, one is to use music to be inspired by the Lord's majesty and to praise the Lord, who is supposed to be the most powerful being in the whole universe.

Moreover, the Apostle Paul of the Christian New Testament apparently was a staunch advocate of music. In Ephesians 5:18-19, Paul admonishes: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord” (NIV). Paul seems to be implying that being filled with a desire to sing to the Lord is comparable to being drunk. Even if Paul never intended to make such an intimation, it is not hard to see how this is true for many religious adherents. The Apostle Paul’s epistles are indeed glutted with exhortations to make music. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are not exceptional; take any, I mean *any*, primary religious literature off the shelf in a bookstore, and in it you will find some kind of ineffable admiration for music.

² For a discussion on Plato and Aristotle and the musical education of children, see Mary B. Schoen-Nazzaro, “Plato and Aristotle on the Ends of Music,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 34, no. 3 (1978): 261-273.

There is so much more in history that lifts up music as a powerful entity. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, buildings, including enormous cathedrals, were meticulously designed to perfectly echo the music of the period. Many talented musicians were paid fortunes to create music for their commissioners. Bach symphonies made people uncontrollably weep and feel overwhelmed. Beethoven, upon finding out that he was going to be deaf, wrote, “I hasten with joy towards my death!” This is an eloquent way of saying, “I can’t live without music!” This is indeed a phrase uttered by many hearing people. I personally have asked a number of hearing people whether they would prefer to be blind or deaf, and I would say that more hearing people prefer to be blind with the sole reason being that they find a life without music unimaginable, just like Beethoven did.

DEAF CULTURE AND MUSIC

I think it is not presumptuous to say that music plays a hugely influential role in *every single* cultural group in the world...except Deaf culture. Some would argue that music is indeed part of Deaf culture since numerous Deaf people immensely enjoy and cherish music. I agree that it is part of Deaf culture because many Deaf people do enjoy music, but it is not *central* to Deaf culture like it is in every other culture. I think for something to be central to a culture, it has to be *evidently* and *indubitably* entrenched in the culture. The key word here is “indubitably”. I think there are too many Deaf and Coda people who would question the idea that music is an essential character of Deaf culture as opposed to the fact that nobody would question the idea that music is central to American culture or any other culture. My argument here is that we should not identify music as an *essential* characteristic of Deaf culture; however, the fact that some Deaf people find enjoyment in music is indeed a characteristic of Deaf culture and the Deaf community in general.

SCIENCE AND MUSIC

So, the question is why every group of people in the world has a strong predilection for music except the community of Deaf people? Maybe science can give some answers. In his book *Musicophilia*, Oliver Sacks explores the relationship between music and the brain. He presents various cases that demonstrate that music indeed stimulates the brain powerfully. For example, Sacks observes that a number of his patients’ seizures are triggered when they hear certain music. One of his patients tend to have a severe seizure when he hears a romantic song, especially one of Frank Sinatra’s songs (Sacks 27, 8). Many of the other cases Sacks presents in the book also demonstrate a strong connection between music and the brain. For this reason, Oliver Sacks states, “[...] for virtually all of us, music has great power, whether or not we seek it out or think of ourselves as particularly ‘musical’ [...] it lies so deep in human nature that one is tempted to think of it as innate” (Sacks ix, x). Thus, Sacks boldly concludes, “We humans are a musical species no less than a linguistic one” (Sacks xi).

This is rather ironic, because Oliver Sacks was the one who wrote the classic *Seeing Voices*, arguably the best book on Deaf culture written from the perspective of a hearing person who had never had any contact with the Deaf community before. Based on the book, Oliver Sacks concludes that Deaf culture is truly a *bona fide* culture, not a pseudo-culture which Deaf people have contrived in order to compensate for their hearing loss. Sacks also verifies that American Sign Language is a full-fledged language that ought to share the same linguistic status as any other spoken and written language. But, Sacks, most likely unwittingly, implies that Deaf people are less human because there is certainly not enough consensus among Deaf people regarding the

enjoyment of music for Deaf people to pass as a “musical species.” What I witnessed at an ASL music concert at the Kentucky Deaf Festival last year confirms this. At the concert, I decided to stand in the very back and observe the behavior of the audience. I would say a half of the audience demonstrated some kind of enjoyment, some more than others, while the other half portrayed absolutely no enjoyment or interest. Many of them chatted, being oblivious to what was happening on the stage, and even one of them just sat there watching Netflix on his iPad.³

Maybe Steven Pinker is right to say that music is not necessarily hardwired into the brain like language and other innate abilities, an idea with which Sacks flirts, but rather it is a byproduct of the neurological system itself (Pinker 171). What Pinker means is that when the brain discovers that music is very pleasant (i.e. the brain correlates a profuse release of chemical dopamine with hearing music), it develops a natural desire for more music. Since many Deaf people cannot hear music, their brains do not engender a desire for music as strong as the desire found in hearing people’s brains. This explains the fact that the Deaf community is not impressively productive when it comes to music.

THOUGHTS ON MUSIC IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Yet, one may argue that the Deaf community is actually fervently producing music in order to appease the neurological desire. We have been witnessing a resurgent interest in music in the Deaf community. Millions of Deaf people around the world were hooked on *Dancing with the Stars*, cheering for Nyle DiMarco. Sean Forbes is becoming increasingly popular among young Deaf people and has not stopped touring the country jamming. We see more and more breathtaking music videos produced by Deaf talents circulating social media. But, all of them rely on aural music and English songs. How many Deaf people kept watching *Dancing with the Stars* after Nyle DiMarco took the Mirror Ball home? Would you call Sean Forbes’ ASL presentations an original work in ASL or rather a translation of the English lyrics? Are not most ASL music videos produced by Deaf talents and posted on YouTube a translation work of an English song? While I highly admire their works and acknowledge that plenty of Deaf people find music to be extremely pleasant, I am not convinced enough to concede that music is indeed an *essential* character of Deaf culture. If Deaf people indeed possess a neurological desire for producing more music, why do we not see more original musical works in ASL?

Some may respond to this by saying that ASL literary works function as “music” in the Deaf world. It is true that a number of ASL literary works are overwhelmingly inspiring and poignant; however, emotions elicited by ASL literary works are not nearly as visceral as emotions elicited by music. You may ponder Clayton Valli’s “Snowflake,” but you do not say, “Drats! This poem is stuck in my head!” like hearing people say about songs that run again and again in their heads. The beautiful, somber scenery in the opening of Sam Supalla’s “For a Decent Living” may move you, but it does not make your body move and dance like music does. People forget most stories

³ To the contrary, Darrow claims that the results of her questionnaire indicate that the majority of Deaf people find enjoyment in music (93-110). Yet, Darrow equivocally admits that Deaf people do not participate in music in the same way hearing people do. Likewise, Good et al. point out Darrow’s research, but admit that research on music and Deaf culture is made complicated by several factors such as various hearing levels, education backgrounds, and other heterogeneous characteristics of the Deaf community (568).

they have read when they were young, but they do not forget songs they heard when they were in kindergarten. In “Eye Music,” Ella Mae Lentz suggests music does not have to be auditory only; it can be exclusively visual. But, I did not find myself moving my head back and forth to the “music” of the telephone poles passing the window like the guy sitting next to me did to the music he heard through his Beats headphones.

DIFFERENT KIND OF MUSIC?

Nevertheless, maybe Ella Mae Lentz is not entirely wrong. The Bison Song, Gallaudet’s famous fight song, is obviously invigorating, perhaps as much as music in general. Personally, I do not find much enjoyment in music like many other Deaf people. Sitting through songs in church is rather torturous for me at times. You would find me in the half who prefer chatting over jamming to the beats at an ASL concert, and probably even watching Netflix on my iPad. I do appreciate the artistry of various musical works that are translated into ASL such as Rosa Lee Timm’s beautiful music videos, but I, like many, if not most, other Deaf people, just do not find music as overwhelmingly emotional or exhilaratingly lively as hearing people do. Yet, I must say that the Bison Song is an exception. With its loud drum beats and rhythmical ASL lyrics, it really does move Deaf people in the way music is supposed to. Every time I see the Bison Song, I feel inspired and proud and energized and all of the other emotions on the positive side of the emotion spectrum. Now, that is music!

ASL percussion songs like the Bison Song trump sign language translations of aural songs for a few reasons. Translating into another language is like blowing a dandelion. A significant amount of content, especially nuances, subtleties, and emotions, erodes in the process of any translation. On the other hand, original ASL songs speak directly to those whose heart language is ASL. Translated songs project an image of someone playing a musical instrument, but original ASL songs pluck the very strings of one’s heart. Moreover, the beats that interpreted songs follow are beats of the ear; they are exclusively designed to soothe the sense of hearing. To the contrary, Deaf people’s own reactions to various beats shape the beats of percussion songs. Those beats are like an expensive bespoke suit that fits its wearer so perfectly that they gasp the first time they put it on. But, why is there a dearth of such songs in the cultural Deaf community? Maybe Oliver Sacks is right after all, that the Deaf community is also a “musical species,” and we just have not discovered our deep-seated musical intuition. Maybe we just need to awaken it by discovering a different type of music that appeals to all Deaf people, something like the Bison Song, and then we will find ourselves fervently producing music that touches even our most visceral emotions.

CONCLUSION

At our last session, my music professor told me that one of his friends has hearing loss and yet she works with music using the senses of seeing and feeling. He was so curious whether it is possible to make music fully accessible to Deaf people. I told him straightforwardly, “Deaf people cannot enjoy music as much as hearing people no matter how accessible it is.” After reflecting more on what I have learned from that independent study and witnessing what admittedly is a resurgence of interest in music in the Deaf community in recent years, I have come to the conclusion that I would keep my answer I gave to my music professor, but with a qualification: “...but perhaps there is a completely different kind of music that touches all Deaf people in mystical and indescribable ways waiting to be finally discovered.”

So, have we, Deaf people, been missing out on something? Yes, we are missing out on the indescribable power of music that elicits the whole gamut of human emotion in enigmatic ways, something that we cannot fully experience through sign language translations or simply feeling the beats. Of course, for many of us, life without music is perfectly fine. In actuality, hearing people might miss out on more things than we do, because we get to enjoy “Deaf gains.” But, *what if* there is a way for us to fully experience the power of music in our own culture and language but it has not been discovered yet? We have so much to look into. We need scientific research on whether auditory music actually appeals to hearing people significantly more than Deaf people. We need to investigate whether particular music devices such as the SubPac cause Deaf people to be more emotionally moved by music or not. We need to compare the reactions of Deaf people to auditory music and to ASL songs like the Bison Song. Last but not least, we need more Deaf artists to boldly trek into unknown territory and experiment with music in order to discover whether there is a different type of music that can appeal to virtually all Deaf people. O Music, how powerful and what a mystery art thee! Your fair voice my ears never met, your beautiful echo my soul understands not. Tell me, O Music, can you sing differently?

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