

Deaf People and the Role of Music in the Churches

Renca Dunn

INTRODUCTION

It will not be much of a surprise if you happen to meet a Deaf person who is not that interested in music. What is even more common is if you happen to meet a Deaf person who does not want to go to church because (other than beliefs) the worship service is too long or just not appealing. The word “worship” is defined as a feeling or expression of adoration for a deity. (Merriam-Webster). For churches, according to the Reformed Church in America Organization, worship means expressing words about God from their hearts into songs and music often plays a big role by enhancing the songs with sounds that make the songs “come alive.” (rca.org).

In the category of churches, this article focuses mainly on Deaf people in Low Church contexts. To avoid misunderstanding this terminology, which may come off as unfamiliar, “Low Church/High Church” does not imply or reflect a certain level of status. This terminology is more about distinguishing the difference of churches based on being traditional or non-traditional. This terminology is often used in theology discussions. To further this discussion, Low Church is category of churches that practice less emphasis on rituals, ceremonies, liturgy, etc. in worship, which may include, but not limited to, churches that are non-denominated, Baptist, and Pentecostal. (Got Questions Ministries). There is more flexibility with types of worship music meaning people can add, change, and adjust the songs, the musical instruments, and the setting. High Church means higher emphasis on performing traditions, ceremonies, liturgy, etc. in worship which may include, but not limited to, churches such as Catholics, Anglican, and Episcopal. (Got Questions Ministries). The purpose of focusing on Deaf people in Low Church setting is because of the information gathered is mostly based on this context. More research will need to be pursued to collect information for the contexts in High Church.

Have you ever met Deaf people who were quick to dismiss music? Have you ever seen a Deaf church not wanting to add music to their services because they feel that music does not benefit them or they are not able to relate to it? Have you ever gone to a hearing church with interpreters provided and seen the Deaf people who attend to that church, show up when the worship service is finished? It can be easily assumed that Deaf people and music do not cross paths. Before going into my theories on why I think Deaf people are not fond of music, specifically music in the churches, I would like to clarify that generally, there is insufficient research on Deaf people and the role of music in their lives. So, the following information gathered in this article is based on what is available and applicable. In terms of this article, there is hope that more research can be pursued for this topic in order to have sufficient information to justify various theories.

Music- some people can argue that everything is sound related and cannot function without humans producing sound. (Merriam, 6). A few others beg to differ that music does not always have to consist sounds, but music can be expressed in different ways. (Kania, 1.2). Generally, the majority of our population usually associates sound which is transmissible through only our ears as Emmanuel Deruty describes it as “progressive acoustics waves”.

(soundonsound.com). Since music is typically connected with sound, Deaf people are, unintentionally, singled out. Therefore, the “ownership” of sound has been taken away from Deaf people just because they are not able to hear. This means that when the majority (people who can hear) sees some Deaf people interacting with music of any sort, it will come across as shocking, bizarre, or out of the ordinary kind of thing for them. These interactions with music may be examples of a Deaf person signing a song, a Deaf person dancing to the music, a Deaf person playing a guitar, a Deaf person rapping, or so forth.

There are Deaf people who challenge the majority to take equal “ownership” of music and to recreate a new perspective on sound to be able to appreciate music in various ways. Here is an example of one of the few people who challenge this thinking is Christine Sun Kim on TEDTalk. She mentions in her presentation about Deaf people should be taking equal ownership with hearing people on music, “So, I decided to reclaim ownership of sound and to put it in my art practice. And everything that I had been taught regarding sound, I decided to do away with and unlearn. I started creating a new body of work.” (TED, 5:04). Another person to consider is Nyle DiMarco who is Deaf and he was featured on Dancing With The Stars. He won the mirrorball trophy in 2016. Sean Forbes is a Deaf rapper. Rosa Lee Timm is a Deaf woman who makes music videos through signing various recorded songs. I have come to believe that the reason why many Deaf people are not that interested in music is because hearing people have taken full ownership of it. They have made music so “audio-centric” as Christine Sun Kim mentioned. They have set up the category of music which always includes the ability to hear them and whatever does not “align” is automatically singled out which means some Deaf people are out of the picture for any music related things.

However, categorizing Deaf people outside of the “norm” is not a new thing for hearing people to do. We can see evidence through thousand of years ago when famous philosophers such as Aristotle or Socrates have mentioned their views on Deaf people in which they think Deaf people were incompetent to learn. (StartASL). This kind of mind-set already existed for a long time and it has been passed on from generation to generation. This mind-set has become “reality” for Deaf people. In other words, the “truth” for hearing people about their views on Deaf people has continued to be the “truth” for us today without us realizing it. So, when we see certain Deaf individuals fighting back to have equal access in politics, businesses, schools, or even music in our world today, hearing people become flabbergasted that Deaf people are “capable” of doing this. Now, this kind of “truth” also applies to churches out there with Deaf people who attend. Looking at these Deaf role models, it is necessary to consider and discuss on how Deaf people can be more involved with churches especially with music.

Deaf churches and mainstream churches (hearing and Deaf mixed) may differ for how they handle worship music due to the culture and setting/environment. As for some Deaf churches, typically Deaf people would be in charge of how they plan their session. This means there is more room for adaptability for how the Deaf churches want to handle their worship sessions. As for mainstream churches, typically it is more of a challenge for a group of Deaf people to try to change the way in which the churches design their worship set.

The first focus is the worship sessions in most Deaf churches. Since there is not much research on this area, it requires me to physically visit a few Deaf churches to collect data on how they handle their worship services. I will not be naming the Deaf churches, but instead name the state they are located in, in order to protect the church members who attend those churches. The first Deaf church I visited was located in the western part of Iowa. This Deaf church decided not to add any worship music, as they believe that music is not part of Deaf culture. The church

members agreed that there is no need of adding any form of music to their church services. The second Deaf church I visited was located in southern part of Washington State. The members of that Deaf church chose to follow music videos with lyrics from YouTube. Typically they will choose two or three songs to follow. The third Deaf church I visited was located in the southern part of Minnesota. This Deaf church had its' own room inside a large hearing church. For their worship services, they followed music videos from a Deaf non-profit organization called Deaf Harbor. The Deaf people in this organization write and create their own songs and then they make videos for other Deaf people to follow. So, this church in Minnesota chooses various songs to use from Deaf Harbor for their worship services.

The second focus is the worship sessions in most mainstream churches, which can be more of a challenge than Deaf churches in general. One of the biggest barriers, in my opinion, on Deaf people not being viewed, as an equal in a mainstream church setting is the mind set of hearing people. Deaf people can face challenges when hearing people approach them about healing their ears or when hearing people feel sympathetic that Deaf people cannot hear. We cannot ignore the fact that there is a Bible story in Mark 7 that discusses about Jesus healing a deaf man's ears. Without trying to dismiss some Deaf people's possible desire to be healed, it is wise for us to take a quick look on what that story really means. Conducting an interview with Noah Buchholz, a theologian, who did an in-depth study on this passage, he suggested a different perspective. Buchholz implies that Jesus was a very empathetic person, instead of sympathetic. He mentions that Jesus was not being sympathetic simply because the man was deaf, but more of empathetic because the deaf man was being deprived of language and community." Now, taking this notion of Jesus being empathetic, it is critical for hearing people to analyze themselves on how they can be empathetic towards Deaf people in churches rather than sympathetic. With that being said, the mind-set on Deaf people can be changed. The real question that hearing people should ask us is, "How can we work with you," and not "what can I do for you?" The word "how" enables Deaf people to be put in a position of equality which means their voice matters. So, for music in the churches, how can it become more welcoming for Deaf people? How can more churches include Deaf people for worship? How can music become more mainstreamed among Deaf people in churches? How can Deaf churches be more involved with worship music? There are a few suggested changes that we can take in for the future. The suggestions will be split up in two parts. The first part is specifically for churches in general. The second part is suggestions for our general society to be aware and how we can make an influence.

Suggestions for churches

Ownership: This is probably the first and foremost step before change can happen. Deaf people, generally, need to take up more ownership for music. Music is not limited to people who can hear only. Deaf people can be involved and appreciate music. Deaf people can appreciate church music more if hearing people see Deaf people as part of a diverse body of Christ and not as a separate group that is out of the "norm."

Portable Shirts: With our technology driven society today, there are already companies that are inventing devices for Deaf people to feel every beat of the music. A company called CuteCircuit has invented a sound shirt that allows Deaf people to feel the vibration of every sound. A Deaf person would put on this shirt and the technology in this shirt will absorb every musical sound and turn them into various levels of vibration. (Meyer, 2016). This would be

applicable for both Deaf and mainstream churches. More Deaf people can feel included to be part of the music when they feel the beats.

Background Visual Noise: Most mainstream churches have lyrics on the screen when worship songs come on. There can be an additional visual noise in the background on the screen such as ripples following the beats of the music. For example, if there was a very slow song with violins or acoustic guitar and no drums, on the background screen for the lyrics, ripples can be added following through the sound of the music. If there are drums included then perhaps it can be spots. So there will be repeated ripple effects with spots coming on screen following the drum beats. Through this way, Deaf people can follow the concept of the beats during worship songs instead of reading only the words and have no idea what kind of music is being played. This can be applicable for Deaf churches as well.

Inclusivity/Creativity: Mainstream churches need to open a platform for an opportunity for a Deaf person to feel welcome to write a song if desired. Many times hearing churches would have their worship bands write up new songs. Churches that have Deaf Ministries can challenge themselves to open up an opportunity for some Deaf people to create a song if they want. Or perhaps open up an opportunity for a Deaf person to join the worship team with a different role.

As for Deaf churches, it would be more about creativity of how Deaf people can engage into worship music. This can be from encouraging each other to create songs together, create their own beats, use ASL stories as worship, drama worship, dance worship, etc.

General suggestions:

The next following two suggestions are long shots, but worth suggesting. These suggestions are general for our society as whole and not limited to churches only. It is critical to see where the root of our “truth” comes from. Our learning process and perspectives actually start from our homes, our schools, and ourselves.

Schools: If we begin incorporating music classes in Deaf schools or schools with Deaf programs to teach Deaf people about music, more Deaf people will become appreciative of music. We will be able to learn the history, the rhythm, and the beauty of various kinds of music. By assuming Deaf people cannot learn about music just because they cannot hear actually deprives the learning opportunity for Deaf people. The curriculum for music being taught to Deaf people can be adapted to fit our needs.

Genre: We have a long list of different kind of music genre such as country, hip-hop, rap, jazz, and so forth. I believe Deaf music is a different kind of genre and it should be accepted as one of the genres. There is no name for it, but it could be called, “Deaf Beats” or something under the category of music. If many places are willing to incorporate country style, contemporary, or rap music- why not give “Deaf Beats” a try? First thing is to actually identify Deaf Beats as one of the genres under music.

To conclude this brief research, I do recognize that there is not much study on Deaf people and music. With more music becoming more mainstreamed in our technology today, it is

critical to increase research on how the Deaf community can become more inclusive with music and how more Deaf people can reclaim ownership of sounds. My suggestions are to push further discussions within our Deaf community in hope that we can reach a better understanding and appreciation for music.

On a personal note, I absolutely love music and appreciate the variety in church music. It is liberating for me to be able to express myself through music. Bottom line, the expression of worship really comes from the heart. Once the heart opens, everything else flows. I believe that when the perspective of hearing people on Deaf people and Deaf people's attitude about music begin to change, we all will reach an euphoria on the beauty of music which can be understood through all just as Henry Longfellow states, "Music is the universal language of mankind."

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