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Ethnomusicology & Signed Music: A Breakthrough Jody Cripps

INTRODUCTION

Today I will be discussing Ethnomusicology and Signed Music (for the time being, when I refer to signed music, I will use these signs, SIGNED MUSIC): A Breakthrough. I've been studying signed music for a while—a few years now—and numerous people, including Deaf scholars and members of the Deaf community, have approached me, expressing concern about an issue. They had noticed hearing people, some scholars, and some deaf people, who did not know anything about Deaf community or Deaf culture; plowing forward with exploring and creating signed music. They felt the results were inappropriate and inconsistent with the Deaf community's traditions and standards for signed music. It has been a recurring problem, and I agree with their concern.

There are four parts to the presentation: the history of signed music; how the signed music team—my team—came to be; what 'Cultural Appropriation' means and how to prevent it, and lastly, closing remarks. Once we're through with these four topics, I hope you'll have a better understanding of signed music and how we go about it as a community.

HISTORY OF SIGNED MUSIC

Now I'll be discussing the first part: the History of Signed Music. Signed music started back in 1902, when a deaf woman was filmed, in a black and white silent film, signing 'Star Spangled Banner,' the American National Anthem. Her performance was filmed at Gallaudet University. At the time of the film's production, those in the Deaf community did not speak and did not have hearing devices, so the release of a film with sign language in it was an exciting thing.

After the 1902 film, there were no other records of signed music made until the 1930s. A man from Chicago named Charles Krauel, his name sign is 'K' along the side of the head, who loved making films, specifically documentaries. He filmed all kinds of Deaf events, conferences, games, and more. In his films, you can see numerous shots of deaf people signing music, in a movement of signs to a beat. Those types of songs are called percussion songs, and follow a rhythm, one example being 1-2-3, 1-2-3 or 1-2, 1-2, 1-2. People could play around with the rhythm and get creative.

There have been deaf scholars who discussed this. For instance, Ben Bahan in an article published in 2006 and Carol Padden and Tom Humphries in their book published in 1988, so people have had access to information on the deaf community's relationship with percussion songs.

After Krauel's films in the 1930's, there were no more documented examples of signed music until the 1960's, when the National Theater of the Deaf came into the picture. They were a new troupe and soon came up with the idea for a performance called "My Third Eye." They had two songs in the performance; the first was called "Rescue at Sea," about a helicopter going in to save a person stranded at sea. That song included one person who acted out the helicopter and an ensemble of performers who worked together to create the scene for the song.

The second song was called "The Three Blind Mice," and was translated from an old children's story and again, and was told by an ensemble too.

After these performances, there was another lag up until the 1990s', when more performances started appearing, but this time, most were done individually. One example is Mary Beth Miller's percussion song about a Hispanic cowboy, and used a beat similar to that of Gallaudet University's Bison Song. Another example is a song performed by David Supalla (sign name, D-on-chin), he had the idea to do a song about the American Flag, using a similar rhythm, too. And then we have Bill Ennis, who had two songs, which he translated into an ASL version, using percussion beats too, like when he described foot-on-pedal, car going backwards, a squirrel, and all, using beats to show movement.

After the signed music of the 1990s', out emerged a new kind of signed music—a style that mainly used hand movements. This new style caught my attention, and the person signing the music was my sister, Janis Cripps. At the time, my sister felt that she needed to show deaf people what music looked like using hand movements. She got her music from my cousin, who was a CODA and a musician who played the guitar. There were no lyrics, no words to the song, but her objective was to show what sound looked like using hand movements. My parents and I never took any interest in music, but my sister was determined to show us what music looked like. This time, her performance caught my attention. I want to show you a short clip of her song, "Eyes."

Now that you have an idea of this new approach, in 2009 another person named Pamela Witchter did some creative, experimental clips of her performances with music, she even included some lines, and played with ASL signs and phrases. I decided to study both Janis and Pamela's works, and I also have a collection of films, "Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey."

SIGNED MUSIC TEAM

Now, this brings me to the second part of this presentation, how the Signed Music Team came to be. It began in New Orleans, while I was attending a conference there, for an unrelated reason. Late one night, I went out on Bourbon Street (sign name, B-on-chest), which is famous for having all these different bars and a big Jazz music scene. Anyways, I met up with two other people at a bar; their names were Anita Small and Joanne Cripps. We got into a discussion about music, signed music, and the kind of music my sister, Janis did, and then started talking about how we should start doing research on this. Anita mentioned that she had a son named Ely Rosenblum (now

Lyonblum) who was pursuing a PhD in music at Cambridge University in England, and would be a great person to collaborate with on the research project. Then we determined that it was important to first study an approach called ethnomusicology because that approach was sensitive to the cultural connection to music, and emphasized the importance of respecting cultures while doing research, discussions, and analyses. That is how we came to adopt the ethnomusicology approach.

We established an approach in where we had three subjects: an insider, a mediator, and an outsider. I was the insider, since I was deaf, came from a deaf family, and had strong ties to the Deaf community. The mediator was responsible for facilitating communication between the insider and the outsider, and we decided on Anita Small. Anita is hearing and has had 20-plus years' experience working and socializing with the Deaf community and is sensitive to and respectful towards deaf people. The outsider was Ely Rosenblum...no, Lyonblum. Ely did not know anything about the deaf community, but he knew music and the principles of music. We were able to learn from him and gain insight into the parallels between signed music and aural music. This is how our research began and has continued since then.

The research team has been using the method, Thick Description, which is the well-known work of Geertz and expands on important parts of the subject. For example, we took the two music films I mentioned, Cripps' "Eyes" and Witcher's experimental clip, and selected three clips from each, then used thick descriptions to go into detailed account of. Our focus was on the musical elements, which has five segments; rhythm, timbre—the character of the music, texture—the ups and downs, softness, emotions of the music, melody, and harmony. The last two, melody and harmony, are difficult to capture and because of this, I was able to find examples of rhythm, timbre, and texture but not melody or harmony. We would need more people doing these types of signed music to gather examples.

To clarify, it isn't a bad thing that we only found examples of the first three elements. This is typical of non-Western music, to have just the first three elements, while Western music includes all five. Examples of non-Western music includes Indian, Australian, and African music while Western music includes Northern American and European music, and this is what the music world is divided into. These discoveries that I've made fits the criteria for signed music, as well as music in general. This is very exciting and I published an article on this subject in 2017.

CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

The fourth part of this presentation will cover cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation happens frequently in the arts, like with the Native Americans, who have had bad experiences with people appropriating their art, clothing, and designs for their own gain. Their designs have special meanings and often represent rites of passages, religious symbols, and traditions called rituals. People need to respect others' cultures and if they want to use something from another culture, they need to ask, find out what is OK to use and what isn't. There are articles out there for us, which discuss cultural appropriation in Canada.

This brings me to the discussion of the similar experiences the Deaf community had with appropriation. Signed music has cultural significance, as does ASL to deaf people who use it. Some hearing people use ASL too, but for deaf people who use ASL 24/7—primary signers, the Deaf culture is deeply ingrained in us.

With that, my research team—remember the ‘insider, mediator, and outsider’ process—it was a really long process. We started in around 2012 and finally published our work in 2017. It took us five years to work on, analyze, discuss, and go back and forth on just two clips. As the insider, I know the Deaf community and it is a part of me, so the mediator would pass on questions to the outsider and do the same from the outsider back to me. I would show them a segment and ask if it was a music principle and through the mediator, the outsider would study the segment and compare it to aural music. The outsider would then determine if the signed music paralleled with the principle. It didn’t have to match exactly, just as long as the idea—the principle could be applied, because music is such a human thing. Almost all cultures—no, all cultures have music, it’s a part of us all. Deaf people have their own culture, music and all. In the discussion between us, the mediator would say, ‘Yes, that’s the general, rough idea’ or ‘Yes, that’s the same concept, there’s a parallel.’ This is how we went back and forth on our views and ideas, and why it’s important to have an insider, mediator, and outsider.

The bottom line is, yes, I am willing to work with hearing people as long as they respect the culture and people, do not take advantage of us, and are not destructive. To do so would be inappropriate. In their work, they need to be careful in their observations and make sure their music research is authentic—as in coming from the Deaf community.

If scholars, hearing or deaf, know nothing about the Deaf community or culture and still go ahead and do research on a related subject—that is cultural appropriation. That needs to stop. We need to keep an eye out and speak up if we see this happening. We need to explain to them what they’re doing, why it’s wrong, to be careful and respectful, and then try to steer them in the right direction. It will mean they will need more time to do their research and study the culture. People often get overexcited and rush through their research on translated music that they see on social media platforms, YouTube, etc. They need to stop, take a few steps back, because more and more people are abusing our community. They need to be careful.

CONCLUSION

Now we are on the final part of my presentation, the closing remarks. In my observations, I think it’s important that deaf people understand what music means, what the principles are, and how it relates to culture. To understand the strong connection between music and culture, the influence that culture has on music, and how the ethnomusicology approach is connected to it. The more deaf people understand, the more they will be able to prevent the cultural appropriation and speak up against it. Then the research and discoveries that are made will be true scientific findings and will better reflect our community, us as signers. They need to look at us with more respect and be

more careful in their approach. We can explain to them what they're doing wrong, so they can take a step back and make changes so we can move forward.

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