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## ‘Visual music’? The Deaf experience *Vusicality* and sign-singing

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**Abstract.** This article aims to consider the visual dimensions of music, based on the Deaf practices represented by the *vusic* and the sign-singing (song in Sign Language), seeking to think how they can bring to a de-normalized consideration of music, namely the *vusicality*.

**Keywords:** Deaf people; Deaf musical experience; *Vusic*; *vusicality*; Sign-singing.

### 1 Introduction

Culturally, Deaf people<sup>1</sup> define themselves as ‘visual beings’ and the specificities of their condition necessarily imply that their capacities for perceiving the reality rest on particularly on its visual and dynamic aspects. But beyond to specify only a characteristic feature of world perceptions and representations for the Deaf, the visible presents itself for the ‘People of the Eye’ - typical Deaf expression - as the founding principle for the development of artistic practices and, in this way, as the primary sense of all aesthetic experiences.

Rather than simply content with the visual or visible arts, Deaf also seize, in their own way, practices that may initially seem inaccessible to them, unreachable or even ‘forbidden’ in some cases, such as dance and more specifically music. With their cultural affiliation to a community rich to its specificities, Deaf produce an extraordinary music that goes beyond the ordinary conceptions of current musical practices, developing what they call the *vusic* – a contraction of visual and music. A music of the eye, for the eye, which gives to see abandoning the aural dimensions commonly established to define the musical experience. More cultural still, they

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we use the designation ‘Deaf’ with capital D which, as specified by Charles Gaucher “announces a quest for identity which falls into a very precise historicity and is stated in terms which seek to turn the deaf difference into a cultural particularity detached from the physical incapacity which stigmatizes it” [1, p. 17].

For information, according to the SIL International census and estimates (2019), there are 144 Sign Languages around the world. However, the number of native speakers of these Sign Languages remains difficult to establish formally but can be estimated around 10 million (information available via [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)).

develop a typically deaf practice of the song in sign language, the sign-singing, where the signifying gesture takes musical values, the words becoming a visual melody, silent and embodied.

This article aims to consider the visual dimensions of music, based on the Deaf practices represented by the vusic and the sign-singing, seeking to think how they can bring to a denormalized consideration of music, namely the *visicality*.

## 2 “Attitudinal deafness”<sup>2</sup>: the Deaf visual specificity

In view of the sensory specificities that characterize them, the Deaf develop a specific relationship to the world, putting aside the auditory realities and focusing primarily on visual and bodily qualities; because as Oliver Sacks specified, the Deaf community is “a community adapted to another sensory mode” [3, p. 251]. It is recognized today that the absence or the deterioration of a sensory modality can lead to the development of other sensory modalities, and recent studies emphasize this Deaf visual specificity [4; 5; 6; 7].

Therefore, and in the words of Owen Wrigley, “deafness is primarily a visual experience” [8, p. 29], and the Deaf willingly take possession of this ‘visible’ specificity that represents their singular relationship to the world. As writes Yves Delaporte:

Deaf culture is a visual culture. Because hearing people also have a sense of sight, it is not sure that there is not much in common in the use that each makes of their eyes. Their eye gaze is invested with language functions [...]. [9, p. 36]

The Deaf visual qualities are characteristic of the Deaf identity, because “if for hearing people, being Deaf is defined by not hearing, for the deaf, being deaf is defined by the fact that to be visual” [10, p. 29]. The eyesight is thus essential for the Deaf sensory modality of the world apprehension. In a paper devoted to the issue of the ‘Deaf eye gaze’ [11], Yves Delaporte is interested in this self-designation of the Deaf as ‘being-visual’ and states:

There is a specifically deaf way to permanently immerse yourself in all that the world can bring as visual information. The eye gaze is never passive or at rest, it is constantly attracted by everything in motion [...].

This extreme sensitivity to everything within the visual field reflects recurring behaviors in time and space that we must consider them for what they are: cultural characteristics. [11, p. 50]

For the Deaf, the visual plays a fundamental role in their experiences of the world, exceeding the simple function of sensitive expression becomes the main modality of understanding and realization of the real. In addition, the specificities of gestural languages, fundamentally embedded into a visual expression, emphasize the importance given to the visual field by the Deaf. Thus, in the words of Yves

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<sup>2</sup> “The most basic factor determining who is a member of the deaf community seems to be what is called ‘attitudinal deafness’. This occurs when a person identifies him/herself as a member of the deaf community, and other members accept that person as part of the community” [2, p. 4].

Delaporte, we approach “what it is for the deaf to be deaf: it is to have capacities that hearing people do not have” [9, p. 38]. Indeed, for the Deaf, their condition is not defined primarily from their 'losses' but their abilities. They do not primarily think itself like beings whose the auditory system is impaired, but rather as individuals whose visual system is particularly operative: “We are visuals: this is the self-definition of the deaf” [9, p. 50]. This first cultural representation leads to consider the 'Deaf world' as a visuo-centered universe opposing the audiocentrism characteristic of the hearing world.

Moreover, the Deaf are fundamentally ‘speech beings’. This is the main cultural feature of the Deaf identity, and the Sign Language formalizes the essential criterion of membership of the Deaf community. The latter is defined as a linguistic and cultural minority; Sign Language is the natural language of the Deaf, their language which “reflects the culture, the traditions and the way in which the individuals who use it to communicate see the world” [12, p. 61]. More than a mere means of communication, the Sign Language represents for the Deaf the physical and ideological support of their identity representations. It is from their linguistic specificity that the Deaf have affirmed throughout History their identity and that they have elaborated their community gathering. Thus, the Deaf identity develops around another norm, visuo-centered and deeply embodied, which defines their relationship to the real, but also to the music.

### 3 ‘*Vusicality*’: seeing music

Indeed, in the Deaf musical experiences, the visual occupies a fundamental place. The Deaf specificities making the sight the dominant reception to perceive the material realities, in the musical experience, the eye complements the impaired ear to give meaning to sound phenomena. As Claire Paolacci points out, the Deaf “have a highly developed visual listening” [13, p. 55]; in this way, the music agrees with another sensitive dimension and takes on a specific value, singularly expressed in the ‘musical’ paintings by the deaf painter Chuck Baird which illustrate this *music for the eyes*.

However, the sounds are not materially seen and remain elements to hear and to feel; in the Deaf consideration of musical reality, certain elements involved in the creation of sounds become carriers of musical qualities. The deep sensitivity to vibrations that animate the body of the Deaf [14; 15; 16] agrees also with the elements perceived by the eye, attentive to visible movements that animate - in music, for music or by music - the visual space. As Emmanuelle Laborit explains:

The concert show influences me too. The effects of light, the atmosphere, the many people in the concert hall, they are also vibrations. I am conscious that we are all together for the same thing. The saxophone shining with golden flashes, it is fantastic. The trumpeters who inflate their cheeks. [17, p. 30]

Thus, the music exceeds its only sound dimension, the musician bodies and musical objects are invested with a profound significance for the realization of the musical experience. Separated from its ordinary nature, music is no longer simply an

Art that *is listened* but is primarily an Art that *is looked*. As an artistic activity, music is a living Art that is performed in live and the concert represents a fundamental dimension of musical reality both to the Deaf and to the hearing people. To attend a concert is to see music being performed and the visual dimension, which also concerns the hearing audience, assumes a deep musical signification for the Deaf audience. In the words of Pierre Schmitt, “When music becomes a show, it is also through an increased focus on the visual aspects of the live performance that the musical experience takes on a particular significance for the deaf” [18, p. 228].

Deaf musical listening is not only perception and feeling of sounds, but it is also and fundamentally visualization of dynamics and movements that participate in the creation of the sensitive environment. Thereby, in the Deaf musical experience “the sight is a sense that draws the sound” [19] and brings to sound reality a more concrete existence revealing another form of materiality. Because the eye is sensitive to movements and visual rhythms, and as the deaf musician Maati Hel Hachimi points out,

the deaf are able to understand the rhythm, to feel it without hearing, if only visually. For example, the train that passes with the wheels turning, the subway windows that scroll: we know very well if it goes more or less quickly and we feel the rhythm of what we see. [13, p. 49]

Thus, the movement and rhythm of the visual elements contribute to animate the Deaf musical experience. In this sense, the movements of the musicians seem essential, both for their participation in the reception of sound (felt and seen) and for their fundamental involvement in the musical practice. The gesture produced by the instrumentalist participates in this way to realize the perception of the sound elements, by bringing them a concrete origin and by giving to the vibratory feeling a visual base. As Maïté Le Moël points out: “every gesture is the cause of a bodily perception of the sound vibrations transmitted by the musical instrument” [20, p. 52]. Thus, the gestuality gives meaning to the Deaf musical listening but also contributes to the understanding of the dimensions and qualities peculiar to the musical practices.

Indeed, like for the hearing people, the musical practice for the Deaf requires a perfect command of specific technical gestures for producing the musical sounds with the instrument; however, in the Deaf practices, the gesture also presents itself as the fundamental understanding support of the musical elements, by participating to determine the sound differences and to define the notions of nuance, intensity or even rhythm. In fact, “it is by the meticulous control of the gesture and by the fine analysis of the bodily perceptions [that the Deaf] can discover the different variations of the sounds [...] and apprehend the notions of intensity, duration, and of height” [20, p. 53], making musician gesture an essential element for the musical practice. For the perfect command of the gestuality leads in a first instance to a control of the body in the musical activity, but it also leads to an understanding of the bodily perception capacities of sounds. The gesture presents itself as “a preferred means to feeling sensations and integrating certain sensory data transmitted by a sound emission” [13, p. 36]. Therefore, the musical gesture makes it possible to realize the sound event on the basis of visual and corporal elements.

But the gestuality is also for the Deaf the basis of their communication modality, and the Sign Language participate to define a singular facet of the Deaf musical reality revealing a specific practice, the sign-singing.

## **4 The sign-singing: ‘the body sings silently’**

Real musical practice from the Deaf world, the sign-singing proposes a soundless expression of a verbal text in the form of a signed song, where the body carries the melodic and rhythmic values by the exploitation of a “choreographed Sign Language, abstract and poetic” [18, p. 222]. Beyond presenting a simple translation of a vocal song into Sign Language, the sign-singing is deeply invested with musical dimensions that transform the common practice of Sign Language. Here, the musical experience accords with the Deaf specificities: the melodicity takes the body as the production space of the musical expression, whereas the rhythmicity of the gesture exploits the visual space as the realization place of the musical event. The signed song performances synthesize the specificities of the Deaf musical reality: the visual modality and the embodied practice of the musical experience. Affirming part of their musical identity with this singular practice, the Deaf distort the ordinary codes of the singing to produce a visual music which borrows the expressive values of the vocal to develop an exclusively bodily song. The sign-singing is, in a way, a silent musical expression, the silence of the Deaf expressed through the body like musical expressiveness support.

### **4.1 Musical parameters of sign-singing**

The musical qualities of the sign-singing are close to ordinary musical parameters, although using them in specific ways according to the Sign Language characteristics. In this way, we can identify 5 criteria [21] that allow us to consider the musical dimensions of a signed song performance:

#### *4.1.1 The rhythmicity of language*

We find in the sign-singing a rhythmic transformation of the signs production; in a musical situation, these are indeed produced with a particular movement, which exploited the discourse energy with a specific dynamic more structured and orderly but less natural than the spoken communication.

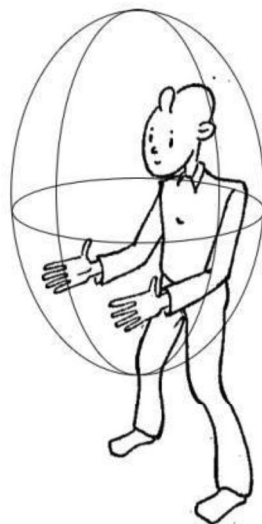
The rhythm is also integrated into the whole body, which characterizes the global musical dynamics and animates the gestural production of lyrics. During the gestural communication, the body is not engaged in regular movements and is often adapted to the gestural specificities to the signs produce. In a musical situation, it is more specifically invested with marked movements that bring to the gestural production a particular expressiveness and give it these aesthetic qualities.

#### 4.1.2 *Embodied melody*

The melodicity of a signed song rests on the development of the gestures in the communicational space and on the enlargement of signs production framework. In everyday gestural communication, Sign Language involves mostly the upper body - above the waist - in defined proportions; the 'sign space' designates the signs production sphere in the spoken communication, which defines

The space surrounding the signer and that is reachable by these two hands. The sign space is used to locate the entities or notions associated with certain signs, possibly to specify their shape and size properties and to establish the spatial relations between the entities. [22, p. 220]

The sign space thus reports a specific area on the front of the signer's body, mainly between the shoulders and the waist. Forming "roughly a volume with a depth, a width and a height equal to the length of the speaker's arms" [23, p. 9], it defines the communicational framework of signs realization.



**Figure 1.** « sign space » [24]

The sign-singing, in its musical exploitation of Sign Language parameters, broadens the communicational sign space proposing an enlargement in height, width, and depth of signs production. The amplitude of signed song performances thus distinguishes the spoken production from its musical expression, bringing to the discourse its melodic form. The melody of sign-singing stands out from ordinary conceptions of the melodicity, which associate it with a succession of notes and pitch producing a characteristic and identifiable sound movement. In a signed song, the melody is coming from a movement, not a sounding movement but a visual

expression; the dynamics succession of signs produces a silent melody based on a specific usage of the sign place in a poetic way.

#### 4.1.3 *Nuances and intensities*

The sign-singing is based on nuances, which do not appear here as sound qualities but as dynamic intensities. Rhythmicity and melodicity of the gestures are associated with a diminution or an enlargement of the verbal signs, formal transformations that intensify the musicality of the performance defining its aesthetic qualities. In a musical context, the body extends or reduced giving to the signs significant values, a phenomenon that is also found, to a lesser extent, in current gestural communication. Indeed, the sign-singing intensifies the expressive dimensions inherent in Sign Language, in order to requalify them into musical elements.

#### 4.1.4 *Nuances and intensities*

The repetition process is significantly used in the sign-singing, firstly to add an expressive effect, but also to inject dynamism into the musical performance or accentuate its rhythmicity. It is common to find repeated signs, sometimes several times in a row, in a purely visual aesthetic perspective that transforms the gestural expression into a musical interpretation.

#### 4.1.5 *Transposition of signs*

Finally, we find a transposition of the usual form of the verbal signs, which can sometimes be modified in their production (gestures enlargement or reduction; the speed of execution; production delocalized in the sign space) or totally transformed to perform the lyrics in a visual or poetic way (close to mime).

For example, in the Signmark's song *Against the Wall* [25], performed in American Sign Language (ASL) by the Finnish sign-singer, we can find a formal transposition of the sign [WALL], whose usual configuration in ASL [Figure 2a] is transformed in a mimetic expression in the sign-singing execution [Figure 2b].

We can see that the musical using of the verbal sign [WALL] (hands side by side on the front of the body, which separate laterally at the shoulder width) transforms its initial disposition (in Signmark's performance, the hands are not side by side on the front of the body in the center of the torso, but at the shoulders close to the body) and its final resolution is extended (the hands do not stop at shoulders; the arms are outstretched). This transposition of the sign agrees with the expressive orientation of lyrics: "against the wall", words that the sign-singer performs physically.



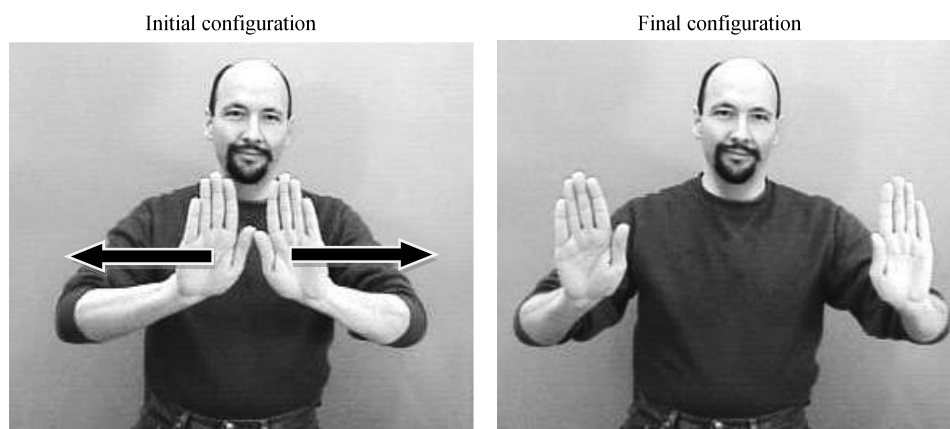


Figure 2a. [WALL] in ASL [26]

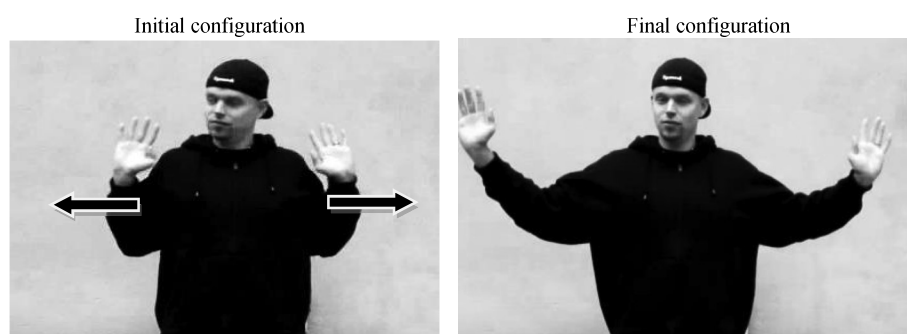


Figure 2b. [WALL] in Signmark's performance [27]

We can take another example of musical transposition, more explicit this time. In the same Signmark's song, the production of the verbal sign [WORLD] is totally detached from the usual sign [Figure 3a.] to be closer to a formal expression of the World [Figure 3b], formal expression that the linguistics of Sign Language calls the 'highly iconicity' [28], namely the insertion into the language of "structural indications of an illustrative representation of the sensory experience" [29, p. 23].

In his signed song, Signmark uses two configurations to perform [WORLD], which stand out from the usual sign. The first [Figure 3c.] is related to the round shape of the World and in no way to the verbal sign [WORLD]. In ASL, the sign [WORLD] is based on a configuration reflecting a low degree of iconicity (few illustrative values) and consists of two 'W' (the form of the hands into the manual alphabet), which rotate around each other to symbolize the Earth's rotation. In this, this sign has little iconic dimensions but refers more specifically to the word itself in its writing.



Figure 3a. [WORLD] in ASL [26]



Figure 3b. [WORLD]: formal representation

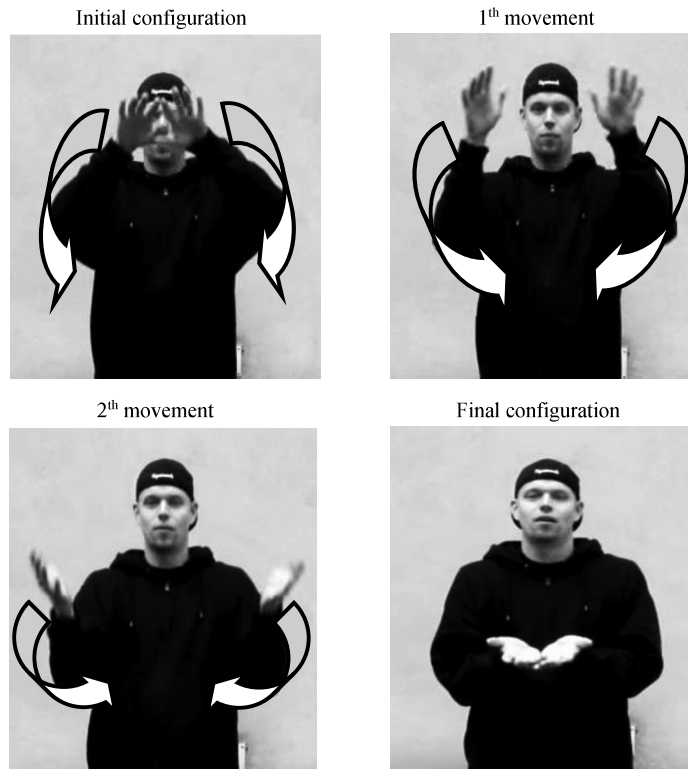
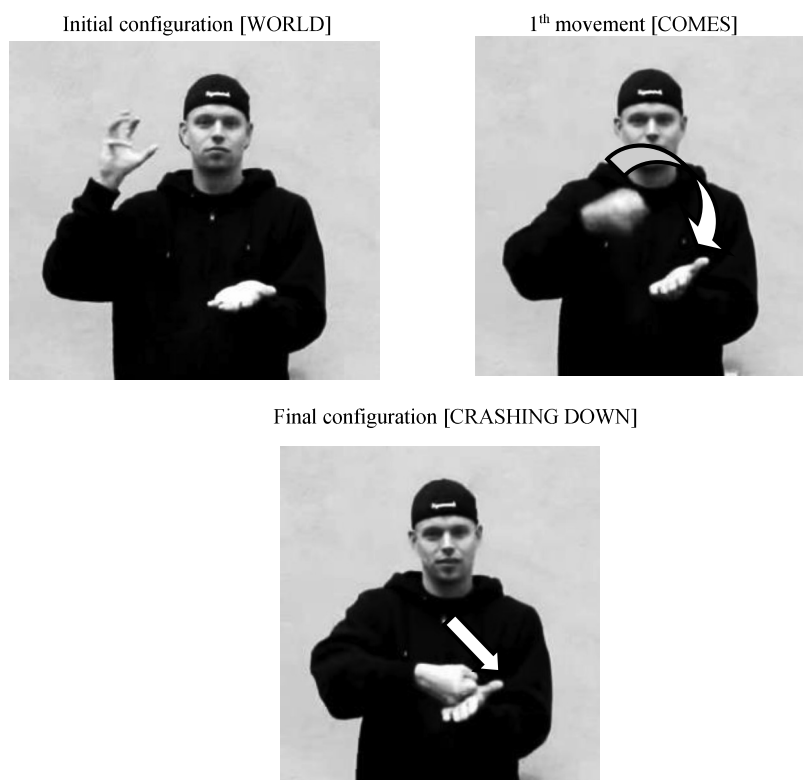


Figure 3c. [WORLD]. First expression by Signmark [27]

In the second evocation of [WORLD], the round shape evoking the Earth is transformed into a new expression [Figure 3d.], which presents again the shape of the world without referring to the usual verbal sign. This second expression is again part of an expressive process; in order to musically produce the lyrics "Even if the world comes crashing down", Signmark formalizes and choreographs the Sign Language to make visible his poetic and musical intentions. The WORLD is represented in its round shape (with the clenched fist) and this expression is used to express the lyrics in a mimetic way: the clenched fist 'crashes on' the hand. The expressiveness of the lyrics leads to transform the usual dimensions of Sign Language to bring a concrete and illustrative dimension to the sign-singing performance.



**Figure 3d.** [WORLD COMES CRASHING DOWN]  
Second expression by Signmark [27]

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The sign-singing thus reveals the silent appropriation of the musical codes of the ordinary song, adapting its expressive modalities to the Sign Language specificities. The music then becomes specifically Deaf and reveals the culture that defines the Deaf community, offering a singular way to claim a 'musical otherness'. The sign-singing involves the Sign Language in a musician practice that, transcending the ordinary norms of the song, revalorizes the notion of silence: *by the hands, for the eyes*, the sign-singing becomes a visual expression of music. So, we can consider with Pierre Schmitt that

The musical experience claimed by the deaf exceeds the only sound sphere. Its meeting with the Sign Language poses the visual dimension not as a further or an additional dimension, but as a constitutive value of a musical form whose conception is enlarged. [18, p. 229]

More than just a communication mode, the Sign Language unveils aesthetic qualities that lead to the realization of original Deaf music, revealing singular creative perspectives and a strong musical identity, embodied and integrating primarily visual dimensions. Thus, the Deaf practices, by revealing the 'musical qualities' of the music, make it possible to relocate the current conceptions of the music and offer to think the musical in its multimodal dispositions: the ear, but also the eye and more broadly the body proposing to concretize, together and jointly, the musical experience.

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