

Signed songs, signed music, and the Italian experience

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Abstract

In this article, I aim to show to hearing musicians and music students a part of the rich musical landscape of Deaf culture, with a focus on the Italian experience. I will present three different musical forms: signed songs that involve the translation of the text of a pre-existing song into sign language, signed songs that involve the composition of an original song in sign language, and signed music that has no vocal or sound components. For each of these musical forms, the article will present one or more performances by an Italian artist, in the attempt to outline its characteristics in the light of the international literature on the topic and to show the peculiarities of the Italian artistic experience, which has so far found little space in musicology and music analysis studies.

Keywords: Deaf culture, signed song, signed music, *Visual Vernacular*, Italian Deaf culture

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Music belongs to whatever culture it comes from.
(Cripps et al., 2022, p. 206)

Deaf¹ people are not only people with sensory impairments, but members of a specific culture, with their history, their language, their identity: Deaf researcher Paddy Ladd (2003) expressed the concept of Deaf identity using the term 'Deafhood'. Deaf culture has its own artistic forms: visual,² performative,³ and musical.

The misconception that d/Deaf people cannot perform or listen to music is now outdated, and many scholars have dealt with the relationship between music and deafness, the perception of

sound by d/Deaf people, and the musical expression in Deaf culture: among others, Jessica Holmes, Joseph Straus, Anabel Maler, Robert Komaniecki, Jody Cripps, and Ely Lyonblum. In this article, referring to their thoughts and studies, I will present some musical forms related to Deaf culture. Then, I will discuss some Italian performances (Angelina Mango's *La noia* interpreted in Italian Sign Language, *Sono sordo mica scemo* by Brazzo, *Musique dans la voiture* by Giuseppe Giuranna, and *The conversation* by Francesca Grilli) in the light of the studies of the

¹ "The lowercase 'deaf' refers to those for whom deafness is primarily an audiological experience. It is mainly used to describe those who lost some or all of their hearing in early or late life, and who do not usually wish to have contact with signing Deaf communities, preferring to try and retain their membership of the majority society in which they were socialised. 'Deaf' refers to those born Deaf or deafened in early (sometimes late) childhood, for whom the sign languages, communities and cultures of the Deaf collective represents their primary experience

and allegiance, many of whom perceive their experience as essentially akin to other language minorities" (Ladd, 2003, p. xvii). According to another view of the distinction between deaf and Deaf, all persons with deafness should be defined as Deaf and the only time the lowercase 'deaf' is used is to describe a medical diagnosis or an adjective, such as "he is deaf to reason".

² For example, *Art de' VIA*.

³ For example, signed poetry and *Visual Vernacular*.

above-mentioned authors, in order to try and outline some characteristics of the Italian experience. In doing so, I do not claim to act as a representative of Italian Deaf culture: my studies are conducted as an interpreter of Italian Sign Language and a music scholar, trying to combine the two experiences to outline an analysis of both texts and musical structure.

When referring to musical forms related to Deaf culture, the term 'Deaf music' is widely used in the literature: in this article, following the studies of Cripps and Lyonblum (2017), I will use the terms 'signed song', 'signed rap', 'dip hop' and 'signed music' (p. 86). However, before delving into the music of Deaf culture, it is appropriate to make a premise about the concept of deaf listening.

1. Deaf listening

In this article, I will not discuss the different degrees of deafness or medical aspects of hearing impairment. Both the presentation of the musical forms and the analysis of the performances are done from a musical perspective.

Regarding deaf listening, the scholars I had as reference are Jessica Holmes and Joseph Straus. Jessica Holmes dedicated two articles to deaf listening: *Singing Beyond Hearing* (2016) and *Expert Listening Beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness* (2017). Joseph Straus dedicated a book, *Extraordinary Measures - Disability in Music* (2011), to the relationship between music and disability, focusing in chapter eight on the various types of listening.

The deaf mode of listening is different from merely using the auditory channel, and listening becomes a multisensory experience. With respect to multisensory listening, beyond the merely audible, it is necessary to mention the deaf percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie, who attended the Royal Academy of Music in London and is an acclaimed musician and composer, has performed worldwide both in

orchestras and as a soloist, and played at the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games.⁴ A few years ago, Glennie gave a *Ted Talk* [21] during which she recounted her experience in teaching people (d/Deaf and hearing people) *how to truly listen*, without suffering the limitations of hearing but using the whole body as a resonating chamber: "Of course, my job is all about listening, and my aim, really, is to teach the world to listen". Talking about her experience as a deaf person who wanted to study music, the musician recounts how her first teacher had told her that "music is about listening": presumably, she was then somewhat precluded from it. However, Glennie replied, music is indeed about listening, but she asked the teacher: "how do you hear it?" He said that he hears through the ears, and Glennie replied "I think I do too, but I also hear it through my hands, through my arms, cheekbones, my scalp, my tummy, my chest, my legs and so on".

Joseph N. Straus (2011) devotes a relevant section of his book to the different ways of listening. Among these we find 'deaf listening', a type of listening in which the approach is the one Glennie describes: listening defined as 'deaf' is a multisensory listening, in which hearing is not the only sense being used. What, then, does multisensory listening mean?

The deaf person⁵ listens with their ears, because it must be clarified that a deaf person does not necessarily live in a world of total silence, but may have some residual degree of hearing.

The deaf person listens with their eyes, and signed languages are indeed a form of communication that uses the visual channel instead of the auditory one: for example, the Italian Deaf singer Brazzo says he follows the rhythm by watching (rather than listening to) the metronome.⁶ Gallaudet University Company dancers "rely primarily on sign counts in order to ascertain rhythmic patterns and master individual dance steps, using residual hearing and underfoot vibrations to a lesser degree" (Holmes, 2017, p. 194).

⁴ Evelyn Glennie's website is <https://www.evelyn.co.uk/>.

⁵ I do not deal, in this article, with the subject of listening for deaf people with cochlear implant, a subject that would require too much space and

would take us away from the topic.

⁶ About the metronome, see also Begue & Cripps (2018).

This type of listening is fundamental for deaf people: “George Veditz, a president of the National Association of the Deaf, famously observed in 1910 that *deaf people were first and foremost and for all time, people of the eye* [...] In Benjamin Bahan’s phrase, deaf people are *a visual variety of the human race*” (Straus, 2011, pp. 167f).

The deaf person listens with touch. In 2023, the British rock band Coldplay performed in Italy for the *Music of the Spheres World Tour*. In order to make the concert accessible for d/Deaf people, in addition to the Italian Sign Language performers, Subpacs were made available. Subpacs are small backpacks with sensors that vibrate to the rhythm of the music, facilitating a ‘bodily’ perception of the sounds (the backpacks have also been used at other events, such as the Italian Locomotive Jazz Festival in 2019). The same function of Subpacs can also be fulfilled by vibrating vests, such as the *Woojer Vest 3*. Another means offered by technology for listening with touch is the vibrating platform,⁷ i.e., a wooden platform (on which you sit or lie down) connected to a subwoofer that converts the low frequencies of sounds into vibrations. These are then perceived by the part of the body placed on the platform (just the hands, a part of the body or even the whole body, if one lies on the platform). The platform is connected to a microphone, a stereo or other multimedia sources: in this way, it is possible to hear music or watch a movie or simply listen to a story told over the microphone while also participating in the event through vibrations. Finally, Toyota Sensitive Spheres were used during some events (e.g. in Turin on 29 May 2015, during Turin Jazz Festival): these are large spheres (on which to place your hands) that ‘translate’ music into colors, lights and vibrations.

Glennie and Straus, in a musical context, propose a holistic listening model – one that is not based on the primacy of hearing.⁸ Holmes (2017) writes that “[...] deaf people have a stake in musicology. Not because they tell us what we want to hear, affirm deeply cherished ideals, or share a universal love of music;

but because they challenge us to listen anew, beyond symbolic constructions, universalizing discourses, naturalized sounds, and handed-down sensory hierarchies. Deafness and d/Deaf people belong in musicology, and we would do well to take our cues from their expertise” (p. 188).

With respect to multisensory listening for deaf people, it is also crucial to remember the concept of Deaf Gain, which has been recently coined in Deaf studies to define deafness not as a disability but as sensory diversity, thus moving away from a purely medical concept: if deafness is not an impairment but a sensory diversity, one stops seeing deafness as a limitation and this is fundamental to a different approach to listening to and performing music.

Music, therefore, or rather its enjoyment, can be a multisensory experience – one that is not limited by a hierarchisation of the senses in which hearing is placed at the top. In summary, deaf listening is a multisensory listening that privileges the visual channel. This clarification will allow us to understand why, in the musical forms we will analyze, I mention the use of bass and vibrations and why Deaf culture has elaborated signed music, which is a ‘visual’ form of music.

2. Signed songs

Having concluded this brief introduction on deaf listening, I would like to move on to present three different musical forms related to Deaf culture: signed songs that involve the translation of the text of a pre-existing song into sign language, signed songs that involve the composition of an original song in sign language, and signed music that has no vocal or sound components. The scholars I have taken as reference points, in this case, are Anabel Maler, Robert Komaniecki, Jody Cripps and Ely Lyonblum.

Anabel Maler’s article *Songs for Hands: Analyzing Interactions of Sign Language and Music* is a fundamental text on signed songs that involve the translation of the text of a pre-existing song into sign

⁷ See also [15].

⁸ See also Oliveros, P. *The difference between hearing and listening* [28].

language.⁹ “Song-signing performances comprise four principal forms of expression: music, lyrics, the signs of ASL, and other gestures independent of the signed language (i.e. dancing, swaying, pulsing, etc.)” (Maler, 2013, par. 1.3). Anabel Maler deals with signed songs in American Sign Language (ASL), but a signed song may also include lyrics and signs in other languages: for example, in this article, we will discuss some songs in vocal French and French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB) and others in vocal Italian and Italian Sign Language (LIS).

In the context of translating a song in signed languages, the work of the interpreter is far from being limited to translating the lyrics, and rather involves choosing the signs and adapting them to the rhythm and metrics of the piece. The signs must follow each other in such a way as to maintain the mood of the piece. The performer’s body must render the melodic aspect of the piece appropriately, e.g. by placing the hands higher or lower depending on whether the notes are higher or lower; then, the performer maintains the pulse with their body. Any melodic part of the song without lyrics should be visually displayed, for example mimicking a performance on the instrument being played. The signs are accompanied by facial expressions, by the rhythm of body movements, by the *rallentando* and *diminuendo*, and by reducing or increasing the amplitude of the movements to represent the *piano* or *forte*.

Types of translated signed songs include live music interpretation services or performances by signed song artists, videos featuring the performance of an original signed song or of a preexisting song translated into ASL (Maler 2015), and what Cripps et al. call “signed music video performances,” which involve “highly abstract meanings and encourage artistic interpretation” (2017, p. 7). Listman, Loeffler, and Timm also point out that there is a range of translation types in translated signed songs “from literal, word-for-word translations, to translations where modifications were made for ASL, to more loose, creative translations” (2018, p. 1). Maler (2013) presents an analytical approach to translated signed songs, revealing how hearing song signer Stephen Torrence “portrays musical elements like rhythm, pitch,

phrasing, and timbre through productive musical signs and non-linguistic gestures. (Maler & Komaniacki, 2021, par. 2.5)

With regard to the translation of the lyrics into sign language, some clarifications must be made. Anabel Maler and Robert Komaniacki, in their article *Rhythmic Techniques in Deaf Hip Hop* have analyzed some bilingual performances (in vocal English and ASL) by dip hop artists Sean Forbes, Wawa, and Signmark, precisely to highlight the relationship between the verse of the vocal part and the signed one. This relationship is complex because the sentence structure in signed languages and the corresponding vocal languages is not exactly superimposable.

In this article, by translation, I mean in particular the translation between Italian lyrics and Italian Sign Language (LIS): many elements I will refer to are common to the translation between the different vocal languages and sign languages of the same country, although it should be pointed out that different sign languages have different characteristics and that the use of facial expression in a grammatical sense (which I will discuss in a moment) is also different: in some signed languages it is stronger, in others less so.

Italian language and LIS are not perfectly overlapping for a number of reasons. Firstly, the auxiliary verb ‘to be’ does not have a corresponding sign in LIS. In LIS there are no grammatical persons of the verb: the person of the verb is rendered by preceding it with the sign indicating the pronoun. Nor are there verb tenses in LIS: the various verb tenses are rendered by inserting signs to indicate the past (recent or distant), the present or the future. Finally, LIS has no signs for articles nor for prepositions (the latter are mainly expressed through directional signs). Clearly, I have greatly simplified the features of LIS but, for the purposes of this article, it is not necessary to elaborate further.

Another important feature is that “The articulation of LIS signs is frequently simultaneously combined

⁹ See also Holmes (2017, p. 191).

with mouthing, i.e. mouth movements that voicelessly reproduce the full or partial articulation of the corresponding Italian word” (Branchini & Mantovan, 2020, p. 252).

The sentence structure is also different between

Italian and LIS: for example, in Italian language, the sentence “what is your father’s job?” has the structure “che lavoro fa tuo padre?”. In Italian Sign Language, the structure is “padre tuo lui lavoro suo quale?”. As we can see, the words are different and placed differently within the sentence:

Words in Italian				
che	lavoro	fa	tuo	padre
1	2	3 not present in the LIS sentence	4	5

Signs in LIS				
padre	tuo	lavoro	suo	quale
5	4	2	not present in the Italian vocal language sentence	1

If we give a number to the position of the words within the sentence, we see that the word ‘padre’, which occupies position 5 in Italian, is in place 1 in LIS; the verb ‘fa’ is not found in the sentence in LIS, while in LIS we find the adjective ‘suo’ which is not present in Italian. Given these characteristics, it becomes clear that signs could be realized while the singer sings words that do not have the same meaning.

I mentioned the importance of facial expression in LIS: facial expression does not only have a role related to meaning, it also has a grammatical function. In LIS, when I have to ask a question whose

answer can be ‘yes’ or ‘no’, the eyebrows will have to be raised upwards. Conversely, if the question requires a different answer (e.g. ‘What is your name?’) eyebrows will be frowned. Facial expression also has the function of rendering the degrees of the adjective.

During an internship in Belgium, I collaborated with the CREE association,¹⁰ that deals with entertainment and training for d/Deaf people. There, I had the opportunity to witness several signed-song performances and to participate in composing one of them,¹¹ after studying French Belgian Sign Language (LSFB). I would like to discuss this experience of

¹⁰ <https://www.creeasbl.be/>.

¹¹ In Belgium, a signed song is called *chansigne*. There are more types of *chansigne*: the *chansigne pi-entendant*, in which one starts from the audible musical material to translate and interpret it artistically through signs and the use of the body (for example, the Belgian singer Noa Moon’s *Alive* [27], or the Belgian *chansigneuse* Christine Pagnoncelli’s performances. *Chansigner*, or the feminine form *chansigneuse*, is a person that sings using sign language. Christine Pagnoncelli is also a French Belgian Sign Language interpreter), and the *chansigne pi-sourd*, in which, instead, one starts from an original creation, with a defined

rhythmic and metric structure, in sign language and visual elements to which one can subsequently add the audible data, whether it is an oral text or audible musical elements or both. The creation of *chansigne* can take place *ex materiae* or *ex nihilo*. In the first case, one starts from an existing production into which the missing datum is artistically inserted. In the second case, on the other hand, the creative process disregards pre-existing material and the artists create by structuring the different elements (signs, Visual Vernacular, other visual elements, words, music) within the composition, working out how to integrate them with each other, according to their own personal creative process, starting from the

translating the lyrics of a song into LSFB to show the difficulties encountered, and to try and clarify in concrete terms what has been said so far. Collaborating in this activity allowed me to experience the difficulty of realizing an interpretation in signs of a song.

The song chosen was *Les petits poissons dans l'eau*, in French vocal language and LSFB. As I discussed, different sign languages have different characteristics. However, when one interprets a pre-existing song, some problems between ASL, LSFB and LIS are common: mainly, the sentence structure between spoken and signed languages is different and there cannot be a perfect overlap between words and signs. Secondly, a word-for-word translation would lead to losing the meter, rhyme, and rhythm of the song. However, I found many similarities between LIS and LSFB, especially in terms of expression and its role.

The Deaf animator I worked with and I chose the signs and how to connect them to each other. At the beginning, when I thought about which signs I would have liked to use to translate the words of the song, the signs were too many and they involved handshapes that were too distant from each other. This made the execution too rigid and disjointed, more similar to a speech than to an artistic product. The work with the Deaf animator allowed me to notice these limitations, and together we searched for a way to create a composition with defined rhythm and repetitions, allowing us *to see* the sound of the sea.

In consideration of the maritime theme, we decided to organize the song using only two signs: the one for '*poisson*' (fish) and that for '*mer*' (sea). Both signs involve an handshape with completely open hands and fingers¹². We organized the musical structure to start with the handshape for the sign '*mer*' (Figure 1), in order to show the environment in which the fish



Figure 1. *La mer.*



Figure 2. *Le gros poisson.*

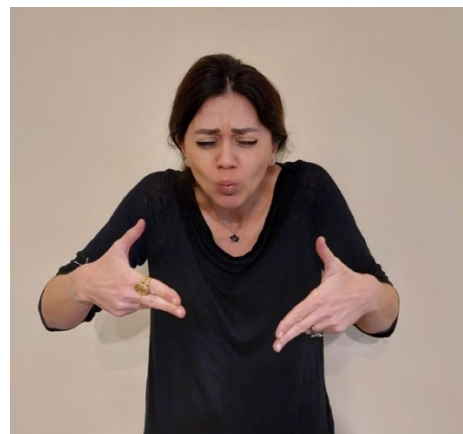


Figure 3. *Le petit poisson.*

music or the sign or the word or even thinking of all the elements as a whole to be interwoven without one of them having to prevail over the others. The *chansigne pi-entendant* is a translation of a song proper to the hearing culture, then there is no doubt that it is music. In the case of *chansigne pi-sourd*, sound is expressly provided for, albeit subordinate to

sign language creation. In the case of *chansigne ex nihilo*, likewise, sound is present in a creative form that, however, neither the sound element nor the visual and kinaesthetic element prevails.

¹² For the concept of rhyme in sign language, see Maler & Komanićki, (2021, par. 5.2), citing Clayton Valli and Rachel Sutton-Spence.

would have moved. Afterwards, we decided for an alternation of the right and the left hand with the handshape for the sign ‘poisson’, waving the two hands in order to simulate swimming but also to create a dance in which the two elements would approach and move away. But the sea contains bigger and smaller fish: therefore, using the *transfert de taille et forme* technique,¹³ bigger fish were represented using the handshape for the sign ‘poisson’ and puffing out the cheeks (Figure 2), the smaller ones using the hand with only three fingers open, a hunched posture, slit-like eyes and a narrow mouth (Figure 3).

The alternation of the three signs ‘mer’, ‘grand poisson’ and ‘petit poisson’ allowed us to create the visual structure of the song, the succession of verse and choruses, the meter, and the rhythm.

In poetic as well as song signing, signs can be manipulated and altered. Artistic signers often use neologisms, or newly coined words, for creative purposes. In sign language, these are called productive signs. To create a productive sign, the signer can either modify an existing sign or produce a totally new sign out of the basic elements of sign language. (Maler, 2013, par. 3.6)

In this case, we have created a neologism by manipulating a sign in favor of the musicality of the composition: in fact, the sign for ‘poisson’ involves an open hand with joined fingers. The choice to use the three-finger handshape is not official, but created as a neologism to maintain the poetry and musicality that would have been lost by using also the signs for ‘big’ and ‘small’.

As we read in this description and see from the video in [9], in this signed song there are only three signs but the lyrics are many more. Table 1 below shows, for each French sentence, which signs were used in correspondence. I found it interesting to note that this song changes completely whether the singer and LSFB performer are the same person or not: as we

see from the video, when I just sign I can keep the facial expressions (puffing out the cheeks and hunched posture, slit-like eyes and a narrow mouth); when I sing and sign at the same time, the expressions suffer and I cannot realize them.

The same characteristics and technique of my interpretation can also be found in Argentina Cirillo’s interpretation¹⁴ of the song *La noia* (*The boredom*) by Italian singer Angelina Mango [26]. In particular, look at the lyrics of the opening part of the song and its interpretation, arranged in Table 2 in a similar scheme as that already adopted for *Les petits poissons*.

As can easily be seen, the signs are less than the words and there is no word-to-word translation. Also, some words are changed: the sign for ‘slowly’ is used instead of the sign for ‘lazy’ and ‘value’ instead of ‘precious’. The first two verses are translated with classifier handshape¹⁵ for ‘page’ and, instead of using the sign for ‘look’, the interpreter looks at the classifiers.

The first reason for these changes is the same as for the use of signs and neologisms in *Les petits poissons*: ‘drawing’, the classifier for ‘page’, ‘going forward’, ‘slowly’, ‘hurry’ and ‘value’ are all signs that involve the same handshape, i.e. the open hand with fingers close together. This avoids a too fast succession of different signs and gives the piece an artistic character and visual rhyme.

The second reason for these changes is that the use of these signs allows for the rhythmic character of the song to be maintained, without losing its energy. If we look at the refrain, the words being “la noia, la noia, la noia, la noia”, the interpreter chooses one of the two signs that indicate the word ‘boredom’ in LIS: the sign used is the one that maintains the energetic character of the refrain (hand with the palm facing upwards and the fingers clasped together with the

¹³ The *transfert de taille et forme* it’s a technique for describing the characteristics of an object, in particular its size and shape.

¹⁴ Argentina Cirillo is an Italian Deaf interpreter.

¹⁵ “Sign language classifiers are morphological categories which denote both animate and inanimate entities by depicting one or more salient

properties by means of dedicated handshapes. Specifically, entities are classified considering their visual-geometric characteristics, the abstract semantic category, their handling or manipulation” (Branchini & Mantovan, 2020, p. 431).

Table 1. Lyrics of *Les petits poissons dans l'eau* in French and in the LSFB setting.

Sentences in French	Signs in LSFB
<i>Les petits poissons dans l'eau</i> Little fish in the water	<i>mer</i> sea
<i>Nagent, nagent, nagent, nagent, nagent</i> Swim, swim, swim, swim, swim	<i>petits poissons, petits poissons</i> little fish, little fish
<i>Les petits poissons dans l'eau</i> Little fish in the water	<i>mer</i> sea
<i>Nagent aussi bien que les gros</i> Swim as well as the big fish	<i>petits poissons, gros poissons</i> little fish, big fish
<i>Les petits, les gros</i> <i>Nagent comme il faut</i> The little ones, the big ones Swim the right way	<i>petits poissons, gros poissons</i> little fish, big fish
<i>Les gros, les petits</i> <i>Nagent bien aussi</i> The big ones, the little ones Swim well too	<i>gros poissons, petits poissons</i> big fish, little fish
<i>Les petits poissons dans l'eau</i> Little fish in the water	<i>mer</i> sea
<i>Nagent, nagent, nagent, nagent, nagent</i> Swim, swim, swim, swim, swim	<i>petits poissons, petits poissons</i> little fish, little fish
<i>Les petits poissons dans l'eau</i> Little fish in the water	<i>mer</i> sea
<i>Nagent aussi bien que les gros</i> Swim as well as the big fish	<i>petits poissons, gros poissons</i> little fish, big fish

fingertips joined), while the other sign that indicates 'boredom' in LIS (which prescribes the open hand brought from the mouth downwards with the palm facing upwards) has a less energetic character. Furthermore, Orazio Romeo's Italian – LIS dictionary (1991) distinguishes between the two signs that indicate 'boredom': the sign with the open hand, not used by the interpreter, indicates 'boredom' in

general while the one chosen by Argentina Cirillo indicates 'boredom' as inactivity, a meaning that is more in line with the lyrics of the song. The performer keeps her pulse throughout the song and her gestures are very similar to those of Angelina Mango, thus maintaining the character of the song and its energy.

Table 2. Lyrics of the song *La noia* in Italian and in the LIS setting.

Sentences in Italian	Signs in LIS
<i>Quanti disegni ho fatto</i> <i>Rimango qui e li guardo</i> How many drawings I have made I stand here and look at them	<i>disegno + classificatore di pagina</i> drawing + classifier to indicate page
<i>Nessuno prende vita</i> None come to life	<i>andare avanti + movimento 'no' con la testa</i> going forward + say 'no' with head shake
<i>Questa pagina è pigra</i> This page is lazy	<i>classificatore di pagina, piano</i> page classifier, slowly
<i>Vado di fretta</i> I am in a hurry	<i>fretta</i> hurry
<i>E mi hanno detto che la vita è preziosa</i> And I've been told that life is precious	<i>dire a me, vita, valore</i> tell me, life, value

3. Dip hop¹⁶

Signed songs can also involve composing an original sign language song: “Music is not just something to be interpreted for Deaf people; rather, music exists in many forms in Deaf culture and Deaf musical culture should be analyzed and understood on its own terms” (Maler & Komaniecki, 2021, par. 2.3).

In this section I will refer, in particular, to signed songs attributable to the rap genre, which are referred to as ‘signed rap’ or ‘dip hop’. This does not mean that there are not original signed songs of other genres: for instance, the Deaf band *Beethoven’s Nightmare* performs rock songs.¹⁷

I have already mentioned, in relation to signed songs that translate a pre-existing song, the different sentence structure in Italian and LIS: the sign performed while the singer sings a certain word does not necessarily correspond to that word. When composing an original signed song, the problem is the same. Signing and singing together actually involves telling different things simultaneously: this

is a metrically complex situation.

In addition, while rhyme consists of a phonetic choice in vocal languages, in sign languages it takes on spatial connotations and is related to hand configuration. When discussing translated songs, I mentioned the emergence of neologisms and the manipulation of signs to maintain the same handshape: this is done in an attempt to create a visual rhyme and metric.

The concept of rhyme exists in sign languages as well, although it takes different forms due to the visual-spatial modality of sign language. Clayton Valli (1990) has identified four types of rhyme that may occur in ASL poetry: handshape rhyme (the repetition of the same or similar hand configuration), movement path rhyme (in which the same or similar movement is repeated inside successive signs), nonmanual signal rhyme or NMS rhyme (in which nonmanual signals such as facial expressions, eye gaze, or head orientation are repeated in successive signs), and line division rhyme (in which the terminal segments are similar in one of the preceding parameters). In her work on sign language poetry, Rachel Sutton-Spence expands this framework to include sign location as an important parameter. Sutton-Spence also points out, however, that while repetition of these

¹⁶ On the topic of *Dip hop*, see Maler & Komaniecki (2021). Examples of dip hop are J. Cacao’s *Letter 2 Dip Hop* [4] or the song *Mama-Deaf* [5].

¹⁷ For example, *Turn It Up Louder* [2].

parameters may loosely be called “rhyme,” “the distinctions of rhyme, assonance, alliteration, consonance and others that are made in spoken language poetry are not directly applicable to signed poetry,” and “there is no strong evidence for the regular occurrence of rhymes at the end of lines in most sign language poems” (2005, pp.42-44). Dip hop makes use of the kinds of poetic rhyme identified by Valli and Sutton-Spence, but it does so in conversation with the norms of the hip hop genre more broadly. (Maler & Komaniecki, 2021, par. 5.2)

Composing an original signed song involves paying attention to both the textual and visual data, bearing in mind that one has the possibility, unlike in the context of translated songs, to compose a song while controlling all the elements, without being confronted with a given, unmodifiable text.

Anabel Maler and Robert Komaniecki, in their article *Rhythmic Techniques in Deaf Hip Hop*, have analyzed some bilingual performances (in vocal English and ASL) by dip hop artists Sean Forbes, Wawa, and Signmark. They investigated the interaction of hip hop beats and the rapper’s ASL and English flows, also dealing with the choice of rhythm and volume and with the use of bass and drum in dip hop, taking into account the statements of Deaf musicians such as Ed Chevy of the Deaf rock band *Beethoven’s Nightmare* about musical perception. We have already discussed what the characteristics of deaf listening are: for example, high volume allows for any residual hearing to be exploited. Similarly, composing a musical base with many low frequencies rather than high frequencies improves the perception of vibrations (for example, when listening to music with a subwoofer, we perceive many tactile vibrations). When faced with a translated song, one can only try to make the material accessible to d/Deaf people. When composing an original signed song, on the other hand, one can choose to use more bass and a very high volume, increasing accessibility in a way that is not limited to visual data only. In the bilingual compositions of Deaf artists they analyzed, the two authors show specific choices of instruments, volume, bass and specific relationships between rhythm and rhyme in the vocal and signed parts. Dip

hop performances are, therefore, complex works where the d/Deaf and hearing cultural worlds are integrated.

In the aforementioned article, Maler and Komaniecki (2021) analyze some dip hop performances in vocal English and ASL. In this article, which refers to their studies while focusing on the Italian experience, I will analyze the bilingual (vocal Italian and LIS) rap by Brazzo, a Deaf Italian singer, entitled *Sono sordo mica scemo* (“I am deaf, not dumb”) [3].

In *Sono sordo mica scemo* there is a persistent use of bass that punctuates the rhythm of the song and Brazzo, with his body, maintains the same pulse. During the stanzas, signs are fewer than words: we see, in fact, that the performance of the signs, in each stanza, ends long before the utterance of the words. On the contrary, the signed sentence has the same duration as the vocal sentence during the refrain (Table 3). Regarding the choice of signs, all the signs used during the refrain have the same handshape, thus emphasizing a visual rhyme corresponding to that of the words: the rhyming words ‘vibrazione’ (‘vibration’) and ‘emozione’ (‘emotion’) correspond to two signs with the same handshape. Both signs are made on the body, although ‘vibrare’ (to vibrate), in LIS, is a sign to be made with the hands at belly height. The signs that translate the words ‘hands’ and ‘human’ involve open hands with the same handshape. The refrain, therefore, has been constructed with a perfect correspondence between vocal rhyme and visual rhyme. On the contrary, the signs used during the stanzas do not follow the rhymes in the lyrics, have no defined rhythm and, as mentioned before, their execution in each verse ends earlier than the words: it almost seems as if lyrics and signs are two completely independent lines.

If we look at the video of one of the songs examined by Maler and Komaniecki, *I’m Deaf* by Sean Forbes [16], we see that, although there is not a perfect correspondence in the metrics between signed and vocalized rapping, the signs begin and end together with the words: in Brazzo’s performance, on the contrary, words and signs are completely indepen-

Table 3. Lyrics of *Sono sordo mica scemo* in Italian and the LIS setting.

Sentences in Italian	Signs in LIS
<i>Adesso senti queste vibrazioni</i> Now feel these vibrations	<i>dentro + segno 'vibrare' realizzato sul corpo</i> inside + sign for 'to vibrate' realized on the body
<i>spacca tutto rilascia emozioni</i> breaks everything releases emotions	<i>aprire, emozione</i> open, emotion
<i>fammi vedere le tue mani</i> show me your hands	<i>guardare + il coro mostra le mani</i> look + chorus show hands
<i>in fondo siamo tutti esseri umani</i> After all, we are all human beings	<i>umano</i> human

dent of each other in the stanzas. Only in the refrain do signs and words start and end at the same time, and rhymes are perfectly coordinated. As far as metrics are concerned, on the other hand, there is no coordination, because the signs provide a continuous gesture while the words have a clearly defined metric.

Before moving on to other musical forms related to Deaf culture, I would like to clarify that there are also examples of signed rap in which music and signs are present but lyrics in vocal languages are absent. An example can be found in the movie *Here/Not Here* by director Bim Ajadi [1], a movie in voiced English and British Sign Language (or BSL), that tells the story of some young British people who meet in an abandoned shed, as there are no other meeting spaces available. In the central part of the movie, the protagonists recount their lives, problems and aspirations with rap monologues: the hearing protagonists with vocal rap, the Deaf ones performing rap in BSL with a musical base. The rap by performer Nadeem Islam can be seen from minute 28. The set design, with the performer located in a room full of mirrors (in which his image is reflected) and white walls showing his shadow, is intended to

show the multiple facets of the character who does not want to be seen only as a person with disability, and at the same time gives the viewer the impression of being confronted with a visual counterpoint. The next rap monologue (from minute 30), performed by Deaf interpreter Ryan Pendley, is interesting for the choice of staging both the performer and other people (of whom only the arms are visible) who try to block Pendley's movements and thus 'shut him up'.

There are several such examples in the context of American Sign Language – ASL and French Sign Language – LSF, in particular during Deaf festivals such *Clin d'Oeil*.

4. Signed music and percussion song

The signed songs we have talked about so far, both translated and original, did not have an unequivocal reception among the Deaf people. As Cripps, Lyonblum and Small (2022) note:

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.¹⁸ (p. 196)

Cripps and Lyonblum, in their article *Understanding Signed Music*, wrote that hearing signers and translators believe that they are helping d/Deaf people listen to music performances (Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017, p. 82): on the contrary, a translated song is but an accommodation.

This is not the case with ‘signed music’ that does not involve auditory elements, an art performed by culturally Deaf individuals that create 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” (Cripps et al., 2022, p. 191). They do not involve any sound.

The precursor of signed music is the percussion signed song, a performance involving the use of signed language that is not a mere interpretation of auditory-based English vocal lyrics. The original percussion signed songs use a large drum typically used in schools for deaf students (Cripps et al., 2022, p. 198).

Signed music is not composed, performed, or recorded with audible sound, and it does not interpret preexisting musical pieces. [...] [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 [...]. (Cripps et al., 2022, p. 196)

Signed music, then, is not a musical accommodation. In a documentary on YouTube, *Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey* [12], Jody Cripps shows a collection of prerecorded and live signed music performances from 1902 onwards, along with some interviews in which an attempt is made to define what is meant by signed music. Deaf poet Ella Mae Lentz explains that, for her, music is the perception of the rhythm of the heart, the rhythm of the Earth, the rhythm of the environment around us.¹⁹ Rhythm is something we can hear, but hearing is only one of the senses that allow us to perceive rhythm. Rhythm can also be visual, and internal to us: humans tend to focus only on the audible, but music, for Ella Mae Lentz, is everything in which there is rhythm.

An interview with performer Pamela Witcher sheds light on the difference between dance, signed language poetry and signed music. With dance, the entire body is used to create meaning. Poetry is characterized by a defined structure, stanzas and repetitions: meaning, in poetry, is not only in the words but in the structure around which the text is constructed. Signed music, like poetry, always has a structure, but is more rhythmic insofar as it makes it possible to state that a certain structure is, for example, in 2/4 or 3/4.²⁰ This idea of music in which sound is completely absent, unlike signed songs, is reinforced by the final part of the documentary *Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey*: Cripps proposes his own version of 4’33’ by John Cage in which silence becomes visual, with a performance, called 2’17”, in which two white gloves are placed on a surface for the duration indicated by the title. The white gloves are used by Cripps to sign throughout the documentary, they are used by numerous Deaf performers (also during *Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey*), they are used by the *Manos*

¹⁸ About musical accommodation, see also Witcher et al., 2021.

¹⁹ Ella Mae Lentz’s and Witcher’s comments are from a different video. The symphony video included this video as part of the program. The original video can be found at [7].

²⁰ About the difference between signed music and signed language poetry, Pamela Witcher says “[Signed music] is more rhythmic, it has more beats. It has beats that you can manipulate to create rhythm, similar to 2/4 time or 3/5 time. Having studied percussion for three years, I learned about 2/4 time—one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four—or

3/5 time, they have subdivisions within the beats to add color, it adds interest ... between the beats. And I thought that is the same for Sign. In Sign we use one-two, one-two-three, one-two, one-two-three, repeating that. But if we had one-two, one-two-three and then threw in a rapid succession of claps or polyrhythmic features, then visually we can create those same rhythms and beats. Throwing in bursts of beats within it to add to it. There would be this interplay of rhythm. In Sign, it becomes, like, the color of movement.” (in Witcher et al., 2021, p. 13).

*Blancas*²¹ choir that performs signed songs in the context of the Abreu method: overall, they are a symbol of sign language. It is the white gloves that, by standing still, represent silence.

This leads us to another reflection: the scholar Joseph N. Straus, in his book *Extraordinary Measures - Disability in Music* (2011), notes the possibility that audiences may come to witness performers with disabilities not only to listen to music but also to stare at the disabled body. “In such situations, the disabled performer has a dual task: to perform music and to perform disability” (Straus, 2011, p. 126). Signed music is a musical performance that does not privilege audible sound and where disability is not performative. The performer could be d/Deaf or hearing, the spectator d/Deaf or hearing, but the presence or absence of the hearing impairment does not matter, because hearing capacity has no place in this performance: we are not participating in an event of ‘performing disability’, but in a musical event in which the level of hearing capacity, as well as the presence or absence of deafness, are completely indifferent.

I would like to focus on two performances of signed music within *Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey* [12], as it will be useful to recall them later when discussing the Italian experience.

The first performance, *Three Blind Mice*, inspired by the nursery rhyme of the same name, is in ASL. The performers wear white gloves; they are all dressed in dark clothes and have bare feet. The performance begins with one artist signing the number three. Next, a second artist performs the sign for ‘blind’. A third artist intervenes, who uses the sign for ‘mouse’ and, immediately afterwards, the three artists approach each other and perform in succession (each performs the sign presented earlier) the signs indicating the words ‘three blind mice’. After these first signs, the group of other artists goes into action performing the rest of the nursery rhyme. They move around the

stage and interweave their performances, in a sort of visual chorus and visual harmony that reaches the final crescendo. The rhythm of the signs is constant, with a 4/4 structure.

The second performance I want to focus on is *Food Chain*. In this case, unlike *Three Blind Mice*, the three performers do not use ASL, but rhythmic gestures of the fingers, hands, arms and upper body, creating visual music.²² Also in this case, as in the previous one, the performance involves a succession of soloists and *ensemble*.

Before continuing, two things should be noted. First, signed music is closely related to deaf listening, as characterized above. Specifically, deaf listening is a multisensory listening that privileges the visual channel, as discussed in the first section of this article and highlighted by Veditz’s phrase, “deaf people were first and foremost and for all time, people of the eye”, and Bahan’s, who defined deaf people as a visual variety of the human race (cit. in Straus, 2011, pp. 167-168).

The second is that signed music theory addresses the question of the relationship between music and sound and the possibility of defining a performance without audible elements as ‘music’: this question has also been raised by other authors in musical contexts.

The idea that music is not just a set of auditory elements is also present in some hearing authors, such as composer Tiziano Manca, who dedicated his book *Before Sound: Re-composing Material, Time, and Bodies in Music* to the relationship between music and sound (and silence), tracking its evolution over time. It is not possible here to retrace the historical path of reflection on the role of sound in music, from the theorisation of Plato and Pythagoras to the avant-garde and contemporary music of the 20th century. However, it is interesting to read the concluding part of the fourth chapter in Manca’s text:

²¹ Garcia, N., Gomez, J., Manos Blancas, *Non esiste un'anima sorda o cieca* [19].

²² Cripps and Lyonblum distinguish between lyrical and non-lyrical elements of the music: in signed music, the use of ASL or otherwise of signs

traceable to a specific sign language is defined as lyrics, the use of gestures not traceable to signs representing specific words is defined as non-lyrics (Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017, p. 86).

“There are two ways of understanding the question of sound in music. First, it is a question that could be posed alluding to the possibility of making music *without* sounds. [...] Second, the question could suggest that the starting point of making music lies elsewhere—regardless of whether there is sound or not” (Manca, 2023, p. 132). Manca then goes on to ask whether it is possible to rethink contemporary music as an artistic practice capable of exploring the boundaries of corporeality, overcoming a compositional perspective that consider “the sounding body as an instrument destined to the realization of a work created from an abstract material” in order to arrive at a compositional practice that assumes the sounding body as its main object of attention instead: “In other words, the creative act could start not so much from the sound material but from the instrument itself and its interaction with the musician’s body and gesture, (almost) to the point of excluding the sound event” (Manca, 2023, p. 133).

Although the author’s research, his considerations, and his point of arrival are centered on his compositional practice and not on the relationship between music and deafness, they allow us to reinforce the inclusion of signed music into a musical context, without being discouraged by the fact that the starting point of those performances is not sound and the consequent primacy of hearing, but rather the rediscovery of the performer’s body and gesture.

Anabel Maler (2013), too, mentions the problem of the relationship between music and sound, citing Berry and Godøy on gesture used as music:

Recent publications by Michael Berry (2009) and by Rolf Inge Godøy and his colleagues (2006) address the importance and independence of musical gestures. Berry, for his part, argues that we do not “need sound to interpret the gestures that we are seeing” when we observe the movement of musicians (2009, 3). To demonstrate the musical capabilities of the body, Berry analyzes Sofia Gubaidulina’s use of gesture in her silent pieces, in which she fills the musical space with “gesture instead of sound.” He proposes that Gubaidulina creates a “musical sign language” where musical gestures

“suggest sound production and keep the listener focused on the performers” (2009, p. 23). [...] Rolf Inge Godøy and his colleagues Egil Haga and Alexander Refsum Jensenius (2006) address a gestural situation similar to the one found in song signing in their study of “air instrument” performance. They assert that “images of sound-producing gestures are an integral part of the perception of musical sound” and can aid in “identifying, discriminating, grouping, or doing ‘auditory scene analysis’ of musical sound, as well as remembering, recalling, and imagining musical sound”. (Maler, 2013, par. 5.2 and 5.3)

In summary, the idea that music is not to be confined to sound alone is not limited to Cripps’ studies, but is common to several authors, even in fields other than Deaf studies. The reflection about the relationship between music and sound and about music without auditory elements is also present in the work of Deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim, with a focus on the relationship between music and ASL. As for Evelyn Glennie, Christine Sun Kim talks about her music in a *Ted Talk* [32]: “I was born deaf, and I was taught to believe that sound wasn’t a part of my life. And I believed it to be true. Yet, realize now that that wasn’t the case at all. [...] I actually know sound. I know it so well, that it doesn’t have to be something just experienced through the ears. It could be felt tactually, or experienced as a visual, or even as an idea”:²³ sound is a part, an essential part, of her artistic life. The sound artist, who was born deaf (unlike Glennie, who was born hearing and became deaf around age 12), says that music is more than sound (as we have seen for signed music), and audible sound is not necessarily the center of musical experience. She underlines the points of contact between ASL and music: “For example, a musical note cannot be fully captured and expressed on paper. And the same holds true for a concept in ASL”. We can think, for example, about a piano performance, when the ten fingers move together and the use of body is fundamental to obtain the desired sound: even for sign language, each finger can have its own movement and to communicate using sign language need to use different parameters

²³ See also Straus, 2011, p. 167, citing Padden and Humphries.



Figure 4a. The staff.

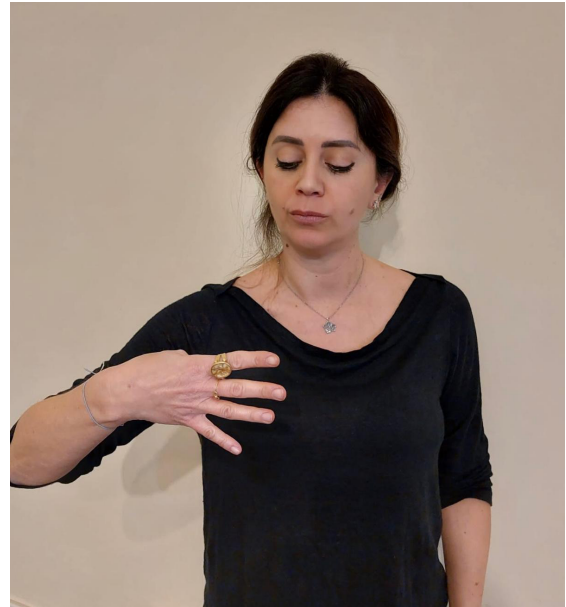


Figure 4b. The staff (continued).

(handshapes, facial expressions, body movements, and so on).

Sign language is not linear²⁴ and it is more like a piano chord than vocal language: words are linear, piano performance and sign language require simultaneous actions and not-merely-linear gestures. Kim refers to ASL, but these characteristics are common to other sign languages as well.

If a parameter changes, both in Western music and in signed languages, also the meaning of what is being performed can completely change: “I then started thinking, what if I was to look at ASL through a musical lens? If I was to create a sign and repeat it over and over, it could become like a piece of *visual music*” [32].

Kim shows in a drawing how she represents the gestures and the signs that create *visual music*. The staff, for example, is drawn with four lines. This is because the sign ‘staff’, in ASL, is an open hand with the thumb bent inward and four open fingers: the hand, moving horizontally in the air, ‘traces’ the lines of the staff (Figures 4a,b). Kim says that we live immersed in an audiocentric world,²⁵ in which sound

is *power* and that fact automatically places signed languages on a lower level than spoken languages, with less value: it is necessary to allow signed languages to develop their value and understand that, just as it is not necessary to be deaf for sign language, it is not necessary to be hearing for music.

Among the artist’s works, *Face Opera II*²⁶ is very interesting. The work, performed by a choir of Deaf performers, can be divided into two parts: a first part related to sign language and the use of the body, and a second part in which voice and sound without pitch prevail.

In the first part, Kim shows the choir conductor some words that indicate feelings, moods, emotions, ways of being (‘face-glow’, ‘presence-shine’, ‘obsessed’, ‘sick’, ‘masturbate’ etc.), but also words such as ‘technology’ or ‘why’ by alternating them in different rhythms and repeating some of them: the conductor ‘translates’ the words into expressions and he proposes these expressions to the choir, which will imitate them. Then, it is the conductor himself who reads out the words to be realized (while also changing conductor: the choristers alternate in the function of chorister or conductor). The conductor

²⁴ See Fontana, 2013.

²⁵ Also in Straus, 2011, p. 168.

²⁶ *Face Opera II* is on Vimeo [31].

‘translates’ and proposes the expressions to one chorister at a time which will imitate them, while the others have their backs turned, and finally the stimuli are proposed directly without a word to offer the cue.

In the second part, the choir performs vocalizations without pitch: the phonatory apparatus is not impaired by deafness. The conductor, using different handshapes and gestures, invites one of the choristers to make sounds with his voice. This chorister, following the indications, proposes voice emissions to which the other choristers (who do not see the conductor) respond by replicating the posture assumed in the emission, the position of the mouth and the duration of the emission.

This is *Face Opera II*. But when we speak about ‘Opera’ we are referring to melodrama, thus to a type of representation typical of Western musical culture: in this case, in reverse, “Kim adopts the opera format to show the visual and grammatical aspects of American Sign Language (ASL) and how most of its content is conveyed through the face” (Holmes, 2016, p. 544) or, if there are audible sounds, to show sounds without definite pitch in a Deaf context. Referring to the first part of the work, Jessica Holmes writes: “In certain radical instances, visual cues and silent coordinated gesture are wholly constitutive of musical expression, as in the case of the silent facial singing in Christine Sun Kim’s *Face Opera II*” (Holmes, 2017, p. 211). In the second part, the sound and the voice are not absent, but take place with the characteristics proper to the d/Deaf person.

The choir in the first part has no defined rhythmic structure in the succession of expressions: the choir expresses the relationship between music and ASL that Kim describes in the *Ted Talk*. The written word from which the conductor starts to give directions on expressions cannot encapsulate the whole experience of ASL, just as a note on a score cannot encapsulate what music is.

In the second part, sound is present but in a different

way than it is in signed songs. The sound in the second part is the voice of d/Deaf people not mediated by ‘obligations’ given by hearing people: it is a sound that does not have to be bridled, emitted by those who do not hear it with their ears and, therefore, do not feel the need to domesticate it; it is a sound emitted by those who experience it with their bodies.

Christine Sun Kim’s approach to music is, in my opinion, a deeply personal and intimate one: there is, here, an externalization of the sound experience of d/Deaf people. There is no bridge between the d/Deaf world and the hearing world²⁷, but a window on the d/Deaf sound experience.

In this section so far I have dealt with music without auditory elements in Deaf culture: the signed music in Cripps’ studies, some reflections about the relationship between music and sound and the *visual music* by Christine Sun Kim. I would now like to discuss the Italian experience related to signed music and to music without auditory elements, in particular referring to the *Visual Vernacular* and Giuranna’s work *Musique Dans la Voiture*. First, however, a premise must be made as to what is meant by *Visual Vernacular*.

In 1960, Deaf actor Bernard Bragg (1927 - 2018) developed the *Visual Vernacular* (VV), an art form specific to Deaf culture: *Visual Vernacular* is similar to mime, with some differences related to the traceability of VV to the artistic context of Deaf culture. Mime is a representation of actions that disregards speech and is based exclusively on body movement. In mime, though, there is a strong adherence to reality: if one mimes the use of scissors, they must first be grasped; on the contrary, in *Visual Vernacular* the scissors can ‘appear’ in the hands because absolute adherence to reality is not necessary.

Visual Vernacular is not a language but adopts some elements of sign language, such as the use of the

²⁷ Maler and Komaniecki writes, about sign singing, in particular dip hop: “Sean Forbes is a Deaf rapper from Detroit who performs his raps simultaneously in voiced English and ASL. One of his motivations in

performing rap music is to reach both the Deaf and hearing communities through his art, “creating a bridge between deaf and hearing worlds” (Maler & Komaniecki, 2021, par. 1.4).

upper body instead of the whole body, the use of role shift (i.e., assuming the point of view of the object of one's sign) and the use of the classifier handshapes (i.e., specific handshapes used to indicate a movement, a position, a shape).

Role shift is a true representation, subject to specific rules: for example, when playing a mother with her child, or a chief and their subordinate, mother and chief will always look down, child and subordinate up, regardless of actual height, because what is relevant is not physical height but social role. When interpreting two subjects, moreover, the signer will shift slightly and turn their gaze to different points, to show that they are interpreting different people. Finally, just as in signing one looks at the interlocutor, while role shifting one turns one's gaze towards the imaginary interlocutor or, in any case, looks at what the subject would look at, placing oneself at a different point than where the real interlocutor is.

Role shift entails one 'becoming' the other, be it a human being or an animal: if one represents a cat, it is necessary to assume the cat's movements and point of view. It is interesting that it is possible to read about the role shift already in Plato's *Cratylus*: when speaking of sign language, Plato writes that "We should imitate the nature of the thing; the elevation of our hands to heaven would mean lightness and upwardness; heaviness and downwardness would be expressed by letting them drop to the ground; if we were describing the running of a horse, or any other animal, we should make our bodies and their gestures as like as we could to them" (Steph. 423A, translation by Jowett, 2012).

With regard to classifiers handshape, for example, if communication concerns a car that overtakes another car on the highway, the sign for 'car' would be used first, then it would be specified that the cars are two, and finally the classifier would be used (in this case, in Italian Sign Language - LIS, the hand

stretched out palm down with fingers close together) to show how the overtaking takes place in space.

VV uses nine parameters:

1. Facial expressions;
2. Zoom technique;
3. Three-dimensionality;
4. Use of space;
5. Parallel signing;
6. Visual metaphors;
7. Rhythm;
8. Pantomime;
9. Role shift.

The performer remains stationary at a fixed point, but they use these nine parameters to represent a word, a concept, a scene in a cinematic way: the spectator has the sensation of seeing a scene from a movie, with zooms, slow motion, changing points of view. In Italy, among the best known VV performers are Nicola Della Maggiora and the brothers Giuseppe and Rosaria Giuranna.

I would like to discuss three performances by Italian artists that can be traced back to the *Visual Vernacular*. The reason why I want to talk about some performances of VV in Italy is because I see it as connected with signed music: I think that one performance in particular, *Musique dans la voiture* by Giuseppe Giuranna [20], is an Italian example of signed music despite its definition as VV.²⁸

In this VV, auditory elements are totally absent. The piece lasts about one minute and 45 seconds and has a 3/4 metric structure. Giuranna visually shows, with his gestures, the sounds inside a car: the horn, the exhaust pipe, the use of pedals. The structure is rhythmic and continuous, the gestures repeated, first each gesture for three times and then alternating in a more frenetic manner. At the end of the piece, the closure to the conclusion is in visual *fortissimo*. In

²⁸ When I speak about VV, I will call the performer's movements 'gestures' and not 'signs', because VV, as I have already clarified, is not a language and does not use the signs of LIS or other sign languages.

Musique dans la voiture there is a connection to sound, because the performer creates a visual structure in which he ‘shows’ the sounds to the spectator, even though the spectator (whether hearing or not) cannot hear them: the performance does not involve listening to any sound, but the sound can be ‘seen’.

In *Musique dans la voiture* there is an alternation between elements, almost like Ravel’s *Bolero*. The repetition of the initial gestures and the subsequent alternation between them also creates a visual harmony: in the initial part, when the gestures appear, repeated three times, the structure of the piece recalls that of an instrumental solo; the subsequent part, on the other hand, is ‘orchestral’ in the alternation between gestures. There is an approach to sound that does not pass through the auditory channel, but through the visual and kinaesthetic one, also for the hearing spectator. There is a visual melody and harmony, a visual rhythm and meter.

I have previously examined two performances of signed music in the documentary *Signed Music: A Symphonious Odyssey*. *Musique dans la voiture* is not a performance in which LIS (or other sign languages) is used and is therefore not related to the experience of *Three Blind Mice*. However, it shares with *Three Blind Mice* a structure that involves first the repetition of the same gestures, then their increasingly frenetic alternation. Giuranna’s performance also has a very strong connection with *Food Chain*: in both cases gestures and not signs are used. The interviews in Jody Cripps’ documentary allow us to define when a visual performance can be defined as ‘poetry’ and when as ‘music’: what allows the definition is the rhythm, the structure in which the signs or gestures are inserted. *Musique dans la voiture*, beyond the framing within the VV, is undoubtedly a performance of Italian signed music.

The difference between Giuranna’s VV and other

Italian VV experiences that cannot be traced within a musical experience becomes evident if we look at another VV performance: *Soffione/Sopraelevato*²⁹ by Nicola Della Maggiora [13], a poetic, delicate and extremely expressive performance in which the performer impersonates a dandelion and its wandering in the air. The structure is ethereal, the performer has a breathtaking expressiveness, there are *rallentando* and *accelerando*. However, one cannot define an exact rhythmic structure that remains for the entire duration of the performance: *Soffione/Sopraelevato* is poetry, storytelling, a stunning and poetic visual history without a defined musical structure. *Soffione/Sopraelevato*, in my opinion, is signed poetry, but not music.

In Italy there is also a particular form of VV, called *Musical Visual Vernacular* or VVm. Researcher Anna Ambra Zaghetto, in her article *Musical Visual Vernacular. How the deaf people translate the sound vibrations into the sign language: An example from Italy*,³⁰ offers an overview about this practice. “Music accompaniment is an essential element of the VVm performances” (Zaghetto, 2012, p. 274): in the *Musical Visual Vernacular*, the Deaf performer listens, with his own auditory capacity and through his own personal way of listening, to a musical composition and on the basis of this listening elaborates his own VV performance, the rhythm of which is linked to the perceived rhythm of the composition.³¹ *Musical Visual Vernacular* is a musical work combining sound, visual and kinaesthetic aspects, given by the multisensory listening and the translation of sound perception by the Deaf performer.

Anna Ambra Zaghetto describes two works, *La Terza Conversazione* and *The Conversation*, both by Francesca Grilli. Part of *The Conversation* can be seen at [22]: on stage we see two cellos and many rubber balloons. The sound system, which also includes the use of these balloons, is designed to allow the

²⁹ It is interesting to compare this VV with Clayton Valli’s VV on the same subject, *Dandelions* [34].

³⁰ It would have been more correct to write that “Deaf people translate the sound vibrations into gestures”: the VV does not involve the use of

sign language.

³¹ With respect to the *Musical Visual Vernacular*, the article “*Della resilienza ovvero abbracciare la sordità*” is also interesting [30].

vibrations produced by the sound to be perceived as best as possible by the Deaf performer Nicola Della Maggiora. The performer stands on an upturned wooden boat, which in turn amplifies the vibrations, and interprets the sounds according to his perception, making this interpretation not a mere translation of sound but a creative artistic performance. Watching the video, we can see that when the cellos produce a series of short, *staccato* sounds, the performer chooses short, *staccato* gestures. When the sound of the cellos is continuous and *legato*, the gesture also takes on the same characteristics. Nicola Della Maggiora uses only his upper body, a choice connected to the fact that this is a VV performance.

The Conversation cannot be defined, in my opinion, as signed music as understood by Cripps, as it is a work in which sound is a fundamental and constitutive part of the work. However, the Italian *Musical Visual Vernacular* experience is extremely interesting and inclusive: it is a work that unites the Western musical world of hearing people with that of Deaf culture without positioning itself as a 'concession' to d/Deaf people, or an accommodation. The setting is not such that there are "signers and translators who believe that they are helping deaf people listen to music performances" (Cripps & Lyonblum, 2017, p. 82) but, on the contrary, a performance that draws stimulus from the hearing cultural world to show the rich perception of the sound world for a deaf person, without the need for accommodation by the hearing. The VVm shows both d/Deaf and hearing people the richness of the Deaf cultural world, without accommodations and without paternalism, and the richness of multisensory listening.

5. Conclusion

Culture and music define the identity of a people. Christopher Small, in his book *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, clarifies that music "is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing 'music' is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely" (Small, 1998, p. 2).³² For Small, music is not the score, but human activity. Sound, therefore, does not exhaust the entire musical experience:

The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world. (Small, 1998, p. 13)

The musical forms in Deaf culture show music as an activity, highlighting the existence of a people and an identity.

In my opinion, this idea of music emerges strongly in the plot of the signed-music musical *The Black Drum*, presented at the *Clin d'Oeil* Festival in 2019. *The Black Drum* tells the story of young Joan, who embarks on a fantastical journey after the death of her wife Karen into a sinister 'in-between' world controlled by the 'Minister', without music, laughter, love or freedom. Joan has two tattoos: a Butterfly and a Bulldog, both deaf animals. In the fantasy world to which Joan has traveled and where she struggles to find her place in the world and her music,

³² When Small talks about music as a social event, he makes it clear that "There is no dearth of studies, many of them brilliant and illuminating, of musicking's social function, that show the ways in which musicking functions as a social and even a political act. Nor do we lack for studies of the dazzling series of interactions, fusions, crossovers and hybridizations that are taking place today between musicians the world over. In this book there is no way in which I could possibly deal with all these phenomena even if I had the knowledge and experience to do so. Nor am I trying to give an account of what musicking has become in our

time or of how it got to be that way; I shall have little to say about recording, broadcasting or what has become known as the music industry. My purpose here is different—at the same time more modest and more ambitious. It is to propose a framework for understanding all musicking as a human activity, to understand not just *how* but *why* taking part in a musical performance acts in such complex ways on our existence as individual, social and political beings. What I am proposing is a way of interpreting what we already know about human musicking, a *theory of musicking* if you like" (Small, 1998, p. 12).

the tattoos come to life. Joan finds Karen and, with the support of new friends and the tattoos, discovers signed music and authentic Deaf identity, defeating the Minister. She must let Karen go, but returns to the world of the living, aware of her place in it and of her purpose (Cripps et al., 2022, p. 201).

There is music in Deaf culture, music that defines an identity: I hope I have shown in this article, to some extent at least, the richness of the musical landscape in the Deaf culture and the characteristics and peculiarities of the Italian experience. The musical landscape within Deaf culture is very rich and includes signed songs that involve translating a pre-existing song's lyrics into a signed language, signed songs that involve composing an original sign-language song, and signed music that has no vocal or audible component, but also peculiar experiences such as the Italian *Musical Visual Vernacular*.

Music belongs to whatever culture it comes from (Cripps et al., 2022, p. 206): Deaf culture and its musical forms deserve space in Italian academies, conservatories and theaters, just as, in the past, musical performances specific to cultures other than the Western one have found space. Deaf culture has musical forms that can give new life not only to studies about listening and musical theory but also new ideas for composers and performers.

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