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Facing the Music: d/Deafness, Music and Culture in Australia

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Abstract

“Capital-D” Deaf culture transcends the medical diagnosis of deafness as deficit to celebrate a positive cultural-linguistic identity. Shared sign languages and the lived experience of d/Deafness have fostered uniquely Deaf creative practices, including musical ones. Internationally, scholars have examined music-making within this community and amongst those who identify as audiologically, or lowercase-d, deaf. Despite a thriving Deaf arts scene in Melbourne, however, the local evolution of d/Deaf musical practice remains poorly understood. Who makes the music that d/Deaf Australians encounter, and why? How might Australian Sign Language (Auslan) combine with other local socio-economic factors to shape d/Deaf music access, understanding and production? This thesis initially uses archival research to construct the first history of music in Melbourne’s Deaf community from 1884 to the present day, positioning musical practices within a narrative of institutionalisation and resistance which offers context for today’s Deaf arts. Subsequent chapters present an ethnography of musical and cultural practice amongst d/Deaf Australians, examining how music features in arts and cultural practices led by Deaf people, how it is made accessible through Auslan interpretation, and the ways in which growing up d/Deaf in Australia shapes attitudes to music. Interviews with Deaf community members and allies—Auslan interpreters, Teachers of the Deaf and d/Deaf music fans—and participant-observation at d/Deaf accessible and Deaf-led events reveal that music has considerable value to d/Deaf Australians. This value is located not in the musical works themselves, but in the opportunities they provide for advocacy, education, social interaction and identity formation. The latter part of the thesis problematises the distinction between physical and cultural deafness in the Australian context, carving out a space for liminal deaf identities through the lens of betweenity. In doing so, the work invites broader conceptions of musical accessibility. By situating Australia on a global map of d/Deaf and disability music scholarship, this thesis paves the way for further research.

Declaration

This is to certify that:

- (i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Music (Musicology/Ethnomusicology);
- (ii) due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used; and
- (iii) the thesis is fewer than 50,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Name: Alex Louise Hedt

Date: 17 July 2020

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Note on Terminology

Throughout this thesis, I use the terms *deaf*, *Deaf* and *d/Deaf* to refer to different aspects of Deafness. I follow conventions in studies of Deaf culture that consider Deafness not as a disability but instead as an analogue to an ethnic group, united primarily by common sign languages and cultural values.¹ The capitalisation of the word *Deaf* represents this cultural affiliation and differentiates those who identify as members of the Deaf community from those who do not.² I use the lowercase term *deaf* to refer only to those who see their condition as physical or sensory, not cultural, or where only the physical descriptor is required. But where does one draw the line? On several occasions in this research, it was not immediately obvious which term was the correct one. As such, I frequently use *d/Deaf*, to acknowledge the possible permutations of Deaf identity. Furthermore, I use identity-first language. Again, this usage reflects common practice in Deaf scholarship, but also my own standpoint on d/Deaf and disability identity. As Melbourne writer and disability advocate Carly Findlay puts it: “I don’t carry disability around like a handbag.”³ Deafness and disability cannot be added or removed at will, and therefore, I place them first.

I am personally invested in this terminology; applying these conventions, I am myself “hard of hearing” or “deaf”. In this thesis, I generally describe myself as the former.⁴ I also avoid the terms “hearing loss” or “hearing impairment”. These terms are factually inaccurate for congenitally deaf people, and furthermore, perpetuate the stereotype of deafness as deficit known as *audism*. This term, coined by Deaf scholar Tom Humphries, refers to discrimination against deaf people rooted in the assumption that the values and experiences of hearing people are the default, and therefore, superior to those of deaf people.⁵

¹ Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Benjamin J. Bahan, *A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD* (San Diego: DawnSignPress, 1996), 124.

² Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003), xvii; this distinction is generally attributed to James Woodward, *How You Gonna Get to Heaven If You Can’t Talk With Jesus: On Depathologizing Deafness* (Silver Spring, MD: TJ Publishers, Inc., 1982).

³ Carly Findlay, *Say Hello* (Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 2019), xiii.

⁴ See Lyn Schraer-Joiner, *Music for Children with Hearing Loss: A Resource for Parents and Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21. Whilst both terms are correct in my case, “deaf” in popular parlance often refers to “more severe” conditions, to use distastefully medical terminology. I want to be transparent about being able to pass as hearing, and therefore, use “hard of hearing” out of respect. However, the term “deaf” should be understood in this thesis to include “hard of hearing”.

⁵ Tom Humphries, “Communicating across Cultures (Deaf/Hearing) and Language Learning” (Ph.D. thesis, Cincinnati, OH, Union Graduate School, 1977); H-Dirksen L. Bauman, “Audism: Exploring the Metaphysics of Oppression,” *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 9, no. 2 (2004): 240, <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/enh025>.

The cultural reading of deafness outlined above reinforces the *social model of disability*, in which disability is seen as socially constructed rather than an inherently “embodied impairment”.⁶ Proponents of this model seek to challenge facets of Western society which privilege white, able-bodied men to the exclusion of those outside this boundary.⁷ Here, “disability is not something you have; it’s a label you acquire.”⁸ Historically, Deaf cultural rhetoric has sought to distance Deafness from disability.⁹ Harlan Lane justifies this approach by suggesting that many people with disabilities want to be valued positively as individuals, whilst simultaneously having the negatives of their conditions recognised.¹⁰ Deaf people, Lane argues, do not share this ambivalence, and look to frame their Deafness in unequivocally positive terms.¹¹ Deaf communities are characterised thus as “adequate, self-enclosed, and self-defining” entities.¹² However, this separation is problematic in itself, with Deaf people relying on ableist ideals to assert superiority over other disabled people.¹³ This line of argument once carried some weight in refuting the medical model of disability, but becomes increasingly tenuous when the social model is taken into account.¹⁴ For instance, Deaf people are themselves socially “disabled” when society denies access to their required means of communication (e.g., sign language).¹⁵ Despite this ongoing tension between the two groups, they ultimately share a goal—to challenge pathological characterisations of disabilities—and benefit from the same social and legal frameworks which are emerging to achieve it.¹⁶ Furthermore, the intersection of Deafness and disability acquires added significance in musical contexts. As Holmes puts it, the inherent audism of musical discourse renders d/Deafness “music’s ultimate disability.”¹⁷ Whilst acknowledging

⁶ Alex Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 34.

⁷ H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, “Deaf Gain: An Introduction,” in *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), xx.

⁸ Harlan Lane, “Do Deaf People Have a Disability?,” in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 285.

⁹ Douglas C. Baynton, “Beyond Culture,” in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 307. Despite arguments to the contrary, which he suggests might be an “invented tradition”, Baynton argues that this distancing is a fairly recent phenomenon, only emerging out of the Deaf rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

¹⁰ Lane, “Do Deaf People Have a Disability?,” 285.

¹¹ Lane, “Do Deaf People Have a Disability?,” 285.

¹² Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), xiv.

¹³ Lennard J. Davis, “Postdeafness,” in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 323.

¹⁴ Baynton, “Beyond Culture,” 296; Davis, “Postdeafness,” 323.

¹⁵ Baynton, “Beyond Culture,” 300.

¹⁶ Jessica A. Holmes, “Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70, no. 1 (2017): 178–79, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2017.70.1.171>.

¹⁷ Holmes, “Expert Listening,” 179.

Deaf cultural sensitivities around disability, this study thus benefits from considering d/Deafness within broader disability frameworks.

This thesis foregrounds the activities of Victoria's society for d/Deaf people, founded in 1884 as the Adult Deaf and Dumb Mission of Victoria and today known as Expression Australia. The organisation has seen several name changes over the past century, reflecting public tastes and improving attitudes towards d/Deaf people. For clarity and cultural sensitivity, I refer to this organisation throughout this thesis using the catch-all term "the Society", except in instances where the historical or current name is particularly relevant.

Australian Sign Language (Auslan)

Auslan, today the language of Australia's Deaf communities, evolved from British Sign Language (BSL), brought to Australia from Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. It is not signed English, but a discrete language with its own vocabulary, grammar and syntax. It is thought that several individual BSL signers had travelled to Australia prior to the 1860s, but their geographical isolation and social exclusion precluded them from sharing the language with others until Deaf schools opened in Sydney and Melbourne in 1860.¹ For the first time, BSL was systematically taught to groups of deaf children by several Teachers of the Deaf who had learnt BSL. Some of these teachers were educated in Edinburgh and others in London; these differences contributed helped foster what are now the northern and southern dialects of Auslan.² Although this was not the only sign language taught in Australia, with Irish nuns in Catholic schools teaching some Irish Sign Language (ISL) signs, the primacy of BSL was maintained as most Australian deaf children travelled to Melbourne and Sydney for their education.³ As deaf people left school and dispersed around the country, BSL spread and was disseminated through family and social networks, evolving into the form first termed Auslan by Trevor Johnston, compiler of the first Auslan dictionary, in the early 1980s.⁴ Auslan was first recognised as an Australian community language in 1980s policy documents.⁵

Australia is also home to numerous signed languages used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially in Central Australia's Anandic communities.⁶ However, unlike the languages described above, which are the *primary sign languages* of d/Deaf communities, Indigenous Australian sign languages are used by both hearing and d/Deaf people in ritual contexts where speech is banned and in social situations where speech is

¹ Trevor Johnston and Adam Schembri, *Australian Sign Language (Auslan): An Introduction to Sign Language Linguistics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 54-57.

² Johnston and Schembri, *Australian Sign Language*, 58.

³ Johnston and Schembri, *Australian Sign Language*, 58.

⁴ "Where Did Sign Languages Come From," Aussie Deaf Kids, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.aussiedeafkids.org.au/where-did-sign-languages-come-from.html>.

⁵ Joseph Lo Bianco, "National Policy on Languages" (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987), 14.

⁶ Jennifer Green, Gail Woods, and Ben Foley, "Looking at Language: Appropriate Design for Sign Language Resources in remote Australian Indigenous Communities," *Sustainable Data from Digital Research: Humanities Perspectives on Digital Scholarship* (Proceedings of the conference held at the University of Melbourne, 12-14 December 2011), <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/7949>

impractical.⁷ These are thus generally known as *alternate sign languages*. Linguists disagree on whether d/Deaf people in these communities adopt these languages for everyday use.⁸

This thesis references several Auslan signs. Because they are not one-to-one equivalents of English words, I use the conventions of *glossing* to distinguish between the two languages. The English gloss of a sign, written in full capitals, is based on its closest English equivalent (for example, WHAT). Where a gloss uses two words, these are joined by a hyphen; fingerspelling is marked by individual letters separated by hyphens (A-B-C).⁹

⁷ Adam Kendon, “A History of the Study of Australian Aboriginal Sign Languages,” in *Encountering Aboriginal Languages: Studies in the History of Australian Linguistics*, ed. William B. McGregor, (Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, 2008), 383-4.

⁸ Des Power, “Australian Aboriginal Deaf People and Aboriginal Sign Language”, *Sign Language Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 268-9.

⁹ Johnston and Schembri, *Australian Sign Language*, xiii.

Introduction

In my hometown of Melbourne, certain cultural events punctuate the city's year. On Christmas Eve, ten thousand people converge on the Sidney Myer Music Bowl for Vision Australia's Carols by Candlelight. Meanwhile, ten times that number flock across the Yarra to the MCG on that "one day in September" for the Australian Football League (AFL) Grand Final, where pre- and post-match musical performances bookend the main event. Millions more people across the nation tune in to televised coverage of these events to be entertained by some of Australia's best-loved musicians. Many of us take these rituals for granted. However, these musical performances have long been inaccessible to one group. Melbourne has been home to a signing Deaf community since the late nineteenth century, and yet, as recently as 2016, requests by members of Melbourne's Deaf community to have Australian Sign Language (Auslan) interpreters at both events were initially rejected.¹ A multi-pronged advocacy campaign ensued; consequently, Vision Australia bowed to Deaf community pressure in late 2016, and the AFL followed suit in 2017. For the first time in their lives, Deaf Australians who attended these events could access the music in their native language.

This sequence of events reflects the popular understanding of d/Deaf musical experience in Australia. Even disability support organisations like Vision Australia are reluctant to provide Auslan interpreters for musical events, falling prey to the popular assumption that a deaf life is a wholly silent one and must, therefore, be devoid of music. The groundswell of interest which emerged from within the Deaf community as a result of these campaigns refutes this assumption; in fact, it demonstrates that music is valued by members of the Australian Deaf community. However, the nature of that value is poorly understood. With d/Deaf service and advocacy organisations arguing for the use of Auslan from an accessibility, rather than a cultural, standpoint, and a distinct lack of scholarly literature on Deaf culture in Australia, little is known about how Deaf people might value music *within* Auslan-using communities. In this thesis, I address this dearth of knowledge in

¹ Emily Woods, "Christmas Carol Backflip: Deaf Audience to Be Given Interpreters," *Age*, December 14, 2016, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/christmas-carol-backflip-deaf-audience-to-be-given-interpreters-20161214-gtayv3.html>; Jo Lauder, "AFL Denies Request for Sign Language Interpreters at 2016 Grand Final," *triple j* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, September 30, 2016), <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/afl-auslan-follow/7892556>; Miki Perkins, "Deaf Footy Fan Claims AFL Discrimination," *Age*, August 20, 2016, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/deaf-footy-fan-claims-afl-discrimination-20160818-gqvyo1.html>.

two ways. First, I draw on archival research to examine the history of music in Melbourne's d/Deaf community, and how audist assumptions shaped that history. The remainder of the thesis is devoted to an ethnographic study of the contexts in which music is significant to today's d/Deaf Australians.

The seed for this thesis was planted in late 2015, during a workshop on teaching music to d/Deaf and disabled children. Despite being hard of hearing and otherwise physically disabled from birth, I had never assumed a Deaf or disabled identity. Instead, I had thrown myself headlong into classical musical training, striving—often fruitlessly—to make my body fit in a mould formed by centuries of normative accumulation. Each time I mentioned my hearing to those who knew I was a musician, people would exclaim, “But how are you so good at music?” My story, I thought, was one of *overcoming* deafness, not of *being* deaf; I was an exception to the rule. This narrative was reinforced by the fact that I had never met another congenitally or prelingually deaf person who had pursued tertiary music study.² But as the teacher leading this workshop described how her d/Deaf pupils responded to aural stimuli, I suddenly felt that I had explanations for a lifetime of behaviours and experiences that I had previously passed off as individual quirks. I resolved to learn more about this group of people I felt such affinity with, and yet had never met.

Through subsequent research into music education for d/Deaf children, I came to understand the tenets and sensitivities of Deaf culture, and how music curricula rely on exclusionary, audist definitions. At the same time, I became aware of proudly Deaf artists such as Sean Forbes, Beethoven's Nightmare, Signmark and Christine Sun Kim, and specifically Deaf genres such as dip hop. Deaf and hearing people alike embrace their musical and multimodal works. What, I asked myself, was it about *this* music which endeared it to Deaf people and allowed it to flourish within the parameters of Deaf culture? And furthermore, were there any artists creating such uniquely Deaf music in Australia?

In seeking to answer the above questions, this thesis contributes to a small, but growing, body of literature on d/Deaf musical practice. It is the first of its kind to focus on and historically situate d/Deaf musical interaction in Victoria, and indeed, Australia. Examining the musical creations and experiences of d/Deaf adults in Australia in both Deaf-led and mainstream, interpreted contexts, it is the first close reading of how Auslan is

² Throughout this thesis, I avoid the medical classifications of deafness; I use them here to distinguish between lifelong conditions like mine and later-onset hearing loss, which has different implications from musical, cultural and identity perspectives.

used in musical ways. Furthermore, it offers the fullest analysis to date of the social and cultural factors affecting music access and reception amongst d/Deaf Australians.

My analysis of these factors sought not only to characterise musical interactions within Melbourne's Deaf community, but also to better understand my own position in relation to this community. In my day-to-day life, I am often able to pass as both hearing and able-bodied, though I am neither. English is my first language, and my Auslan is limited. I also had full access to a mainstream education. These factors combined mean that, despite having an insider's understanding of many of the physical and sensory aspects of deafness, I am a complete outsider in Deaf spaces. At several points in my fieldwork, my outsider status was tacitly recognised and acknowledged within the community, even in situations I had not thought it apparent. At others, my own physiology offered me experiences in common with my d/Deaf interlocutors and allowed me to experience performances in ways that hearing audiences could not. Through these experiences, this thesis explores how physiology, culture and institutional influence intersect to shape a Deaf Australian identity.

Literature Review

This review is divided into three sections. The first surveys the foundational literature on both d/Deaf history and culture and d/Deafness in music. The second problematises this work in light of dominant overcoming disability narratives, whilst the final section considers more critical approaches to the field before situating Australian texts within this framework.

Constructing Deafness

Deaf scholarship is predominantly concerned with United States Deaf history and culture. Whilst historical accounts of deaf individuals and residential institutions were commonplace throughout the twentieth century, this discourse did not critically analyse the social and cultural factors affecting deaf populations.³ It was controlled largely by hearing educators and medical professionals who sought to treat or cure deafness. This oralist and audist agenda extended to music education and music therapy, where tests of musical discrimination and vocal performance generalise that deaf children respond more positively

³ Some of the longest-running journals in this field are the *American Annals of the Deaf* (founded in 1847) and the *Volta Review* (established in 1899).

to rhythm than pitch.⁴ In these disciplines, some therapies and curricula are used as speech development tools.⁵ Others, though ostensibly teaching music for its own sake, rely on phonocentric pedagogical frameworks whilst neglecting the physical or cultural implications of deafness.⁶

However, Deaf scholars began to advocate for their own culture in the 1980s, with Padden and Humphries's 1988 *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* perhaps the most comprehensive of these early texts.⁷ Padden and Humphries's groundbreaking work acknowledges that the Deaf origin stories told within the community do not function as historical narratives, but instead, as "parables that carry the set of ideas about what makes it possible to be a Deaf person."⁸ Like this initial body of Deaf cultural study itself, these tales contributed to a larger project: to construct a positive collective selfhood in the face of oralism and thus galvanise the Deaf community against threats such as genetic testing and cochlear implantation. Serving this project, early Deaf scholars engaged in what theorist Gayatri Spivak influentially termed "strategic essentialism", attributing contingent social and cultural practices to fixed physical traits.⁹ Padden and Humphries, here, fall into the same trap they earlier acknowledged, portraying Deaf culture unquestioningly as the "light after long darkness".¹⁰

This essentialism also makes itself felt in more recent conceptual frameworks which highlight positive Deaf attributes. These include Bauman and Murray's notion of Deaf

⁴ Alice-Ann Darrow, "An Investigative Study: The Effect of Hearing Impairment on Musical Aptitude," *Journal of Music Therapy* 24, no. 1 (1987): 61–79; Li Xu et al., "Vocal Singing by Prelingually-Deafened Children with Cochlear Implants," *Hearing Research* 255, no. 1–2 (2009): 129–134; Feilin Hsiao and Kate Gfeller, "Music Perception of Cochlear Implant Recipients with Implications for Music Instruction: A Review of the Literature," *Update: Applications of Research in Music Education* 30, no. 2 (2012): 5–10.

⁵ Joan Dahms Fahey and Lois Birkenshaw, "Education of the Deaf. Bypassing the Ear: The Perception of Music by Feeling and Touch," *Music Educators Journal* 58, no. 8 (1972): 44–79, 127–28; Claus Bang, "A World of Sound and Music: Music Therapy and Musical Speech Therapy with Deaf, Hearing Impaired and Multi-Handicapped Children," in *Hearing, Feeling, Playing: Music and Movement with Hard-of-Hearing and Deaf Children*, ed. Shirley Salmon (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2008), 117–34; Schraer-Joiner, *Music for Children with Hearing Loss*, chap. 4.

⁶ Alice-Ann Darrow, "Music Therapy in the Treatment of the Hearing-Impaired," *Music Therapy Perspectives* 6, no. 1 (1989): 61–70; Paul Nordoff and Clive A. Robbins, *Music Therapy in Special Education* (Dallas, TX: Barcelona Publishers, 2006), 21; Christina M. Whipple et al., "Do Communication Disorders Extend to Musical Messages? An Answer from Children with Hearing Loss or Autism Spectrum Disorders," *Journal of Music Therapy* 52, no. 1 (2015): 78–116; Hedt, "Towards a Generative Pedagogy," 27. See also Alex Hedt, "Towards a Generative Pedagogy of Music Education for the Deaf: A Literature Review" (Unpublished Master's thesis, Melbourne, University of Melbourne, 2016).

⁷ Others include Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears* (New York: Random House, 1988) and Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan, *A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD*, as well as Padden and Humphries's more recent *Inside Deaf Culture* (2005).

⁸ Carol A. Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 26.

⁹ Paddy Ladd and Harlan Lane, "Deaf Ethnicity, Deafhood, and Their Relationship," *Sign Language Studies* 13, no. 4 (2013): 573.

¹⁰ Padden and Humphries, *Deaf in America*, 121.

Gain, which characterises Deafness as a form of biocultural diversity and suggests how the “unique sensory orientation of Deaf people” might foster insights and innovations not available to hearing people.¹¹ Beyond the intrinsic worth of Deaf culture, Bauman and Murray argue that Deafness has extrinsic value, both to Deaf people and to mainstream society.¹² They cite “acute visuospatial aptitudes”, “transnational bonds” between Deaf people, sign languages’ creative potential and the psychological benefits of increased eye contact as evidence of this value.¹³ This approach is extended to music in Straus’s *Extraordinary Measures*, which proposes alternative “modes” of musical hearing encapsulating *all* senses.¹⁴ Elsewhere, Straus offers “disability readings” of works by composers a modern audience would call disabled, suggesting that Beethoven wrote the *Eroica* symphony “to thematise his own deafness”.¹⁵ By couching their definitions within sensory frameworks, the above essentialist approaches inadvertently conflate deaf bodies and Deaf identities whilst assuming an uncomplicated collective deafness.¹⁶ For reasons that become clear in the following section, this literature poses little challenge to audist social and musicological “orthodoxies”.¹⁷

Overcoming d/Deafness?

As I described above, sensory models of Deaf Gain and Deaf music appeal to hearing audiences by asserting extrinsic worth. Despite celebrating sensory diversity, they do so by reconstructing deafness in alignment with what McRuer calls “compulsory able-bodiedness”. To be a fully-fledged member of “normal” society, McRuer argues, people are compelled to (a) engage in the capitalist systems of work, and (b) agree that the ultimately impossible “able body” is universally desired.¹⁸ In this climate, Deaf Gain posits that deaf

¹¹ H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, “Deaf Studies in the 21st Century: ‘Deaf-Gain’ and the Future of Human Diversity,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 247; H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, eds., *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

¹² Bauman and Murray, “Deaf Studies in the 21st Century,” 246.

¹³ Bauman and Murray, “Deaf Gain: An Introduction,” xxvii.

¹⁴ Joseph N. Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 167–70.

¹⁵ Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 56; “Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59, no. 1 (2006): 113–84; “Disability and ‘Late Style’ in Music,” *The Journal of Musicology* 25, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 3–45, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jm.2008.25.1.3>.

¹⁶ Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 167–70; Holmes, “Expert Listening,” 209–10.

¹⁷ Jennifer Iverson, “Review: Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music by Joseph N. Straus; Music, Disability and Society by Alex Lubet,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 2 (2012): 611–21; Alex Lubet, “Disability Studies and Adaptive Music,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Arts, Culture, and Media*, ed. Bree Hadley and Donna McDonald (Routledge, 2018), 311, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351254687>.

¹⁸ Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 7–10.

bodies *are* able bodies by showing how they can serve mainstream economic interests, trying to overcome negative perceptions of deafness in the process.

Similar “overcoming” impulses appear in musical scholarship. Discourse surrounding d/Deaf music-making is plagued by “dysconscious audism”, where deaf people, despite their negative experiences of audism, prioritise hearing values over Deaf ones.¹⁹ This even appears in culturally Deaf research, where Deaf scholar and theologian Noah Buchholz asks, “Has the cultural Deaf community been missing out on something?”²⁰ Assuming that Deaf values are inherently lesser where they diverge from hearing ideals, he argues that most visual-manual performances fail to generate the same visceral response in Deaf people as music does in hearing people.²¹ This assumption also dominates in several studies of deaf musicianship. Fulford, Ginsborg and Goldbart’s study of deaf musicians, though affirming the concept of non-auditory listening models, does not acknowledge Deaf culture or sign language.²² In fact, accounts of most prominent deaf musicians in the literature focus on those who do not identify with Deaf culture, and instead rely on overcoming narratives, portraying their musical success as triumph against the odds. Deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who situates herself as an exception to the audist separation of music and deafness, is a notable example.²³ Holmes critiques Glennie’s early efforts to reject the Deaf community and establish herself as better, through sheer effort, at listening than hearing people, highlighting how her claims over-generalise the interaction of deafness and music and alienate other deaf people.²⁴

But why might a musician like Glennie embrace an overcoming narrative? Like compulsory able-bodiedness, this rationale is embedded in the able-bodied psyche, where disability is a tragedy to be feared.²⁵ Swain and French argue that this mindset is insufficiently challenged by the original social model of disability, which redefines “the

¹⁹ Genie Gertz, “Dysconscious Audism: A Theoretical Proposition,” in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 219; Genie Gertz, “Dysconscious Audism,” in *The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483346489>.

²⁰ Noah Buchholz, “Seeing Music? An Inquiry into the Place of Music in Deaf Culture,” *Journal of American Sign Languages and Literatures*, 2018, 1, <http://journalofasl.com/seeing-music/>.

²¹ Buchholz, “Seeing Music?”

²² Robert Fulford, Jane Ginsborg, and Juliet Goldbart, “Learning Not to Listen: The Experiences of Musicians with Hearing Impairments,” *Music Education Research* 13, no. 4 (2011): 447–464.

²³ Evelyn Glennie, *Evelyn Glennie: How to Truly Listen*, TED Talk, 2013, http://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn_glennie_shows_how_to_listen; Evelyn Glennie, “Hearing Essay,” January 1, 2015, <https://www.evelyn.co.uk>.

²⁴ Holmes, “Expert Listening,” 190.

²⁵ John Swain and Sally French, “Towards an Affirmation Model of Disability,” *Disability & Society* 15, no. 4 (June 1, 2000): 572–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590050058189>.

problem” whilst leaving impairment to be seen as individual tragedy.²⁶ In Western art music contexts, overcoming narratives like Glennie’s maintain this distinction. Téllez Vargas suggests that hearing audiences would interpret performances like Glennie’s as individual triumph over an unruly body, rather than over systemically disabling cultural forces.²⁷ Overcoming narratives thus make disability more palatable to normative audiences, preserving illusions of meritocracy whilst signifying “tolerance” toward disability.²⁸ For somebody who does not assume a political disabled identity and is aspiring to commercial success, it is easy to see why such narratives might appeal.

However, overcoming narratives also disenfranchise prospective musicians and researchers within the Deaf community. Best attributes the evolution of dip hop (Deaf hip hop) to this phenomenon, explaining that its late-1990s pioneers struggled to gain traction because their music was simultaneously lacking by hearing standards and viewed as an attempt to assimilate into hearing culture. As a result, Deaf musicians turned to hearing influences—including hip hop artists—whose aesthetics best cohered with Deaf identity.²⁹ This approach reflects Swain and French’s proposed “affirmation model of disability”, which rejects tragedy and allows for positive identities to flourish.³⁰

Dismantling d/Deafness

More recently, Deaf scholarship has moved beyond its initial “liberatory imperative” towards critical readings of Deaf culture, considering factors such as colonialism.³¹ Owen Wrigley asks, “Isn’t Deaf history really about the small land wars at the margins of society and self-identity [...]?”³² His ethnography of the Thai Deaf community locates d/Deafness within a Buddhist “karmic economy” which labels deaf children as failures from a young age, a process reinscribed by educational and governmental frameworks.³³ However, it also problematises intra-community relations, arguing that the story of resistance against hearing narratives, in fact, “reproduces the standard pieties of a dominant social order.”³⁴

²⁶ Swain and French, “Towards an Affirmation Model”, 571-2.

²⁷ Alejandro Alberto Téllez Vargas, *Disability and Music Performance* (London: Routledge, 2018), 110.

²⁸ Téllez Vargas, *Disability and Music Performance*, 110; McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 18.

²⁹ Katelyn E. Best, “Musical Belonging in a Hearing-Centric Society: Adapting and Contesting Dominant Cultural Norms through Deaf Hip Hop,” *Journal of American Sign Languages and Literatures*, 2018, 4, <http://journalofasl.com/deaf-hiphop/>.

³⁰ Swain and French, “Towards an Affirmation Model”, 577-8.

³¹ Swain and French, “Towards an Affirmation Model”, 569; Ladd and Lane, “Deaf Ethnicity, Deafhood, and Their Relationship,” 572.

³² Owen Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1996), 50.

³³ Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness*, 124–34.

³⁴ Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness*, 45.

Wrigley's reading traces Deaf oppression to both external and internal forces.³⁵ Despite this more nuanced approach, Wrigley consciously excludes hard-of-hearing people from his narrative with the justification that their "way of being" is fundamentally altered by exposure to spoken language, inadvertently excluding them from the very list of "acceptable [Deaf] identities" he seeks to study.³⁶ Although Deaf culture professes to reject audiological classifications, decisions like these highlight how these classifications continue to shape Deaf discourse. Chapter Four of this thesis articulates the implications this has for the study of Australian d/Deaf communities.

Several scholars have followed in Wrigley's footsteps. United Kingdom Deaf scholar Paddy Ladd coined the term "Deafhood" to both "respect traditional Deaf cultural knowledge" and acknowledge that audism and colonialism have "affected and indeed even actively shaped" Deaf cultures.³⁷ Ladd's *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* both offers a conceptual model and counters the United States-centric nature of Deaf scholarship by applying it to the history of United Kingdom d/Deaf communities. Ladd's study of faith-based "Missions" for the deaf informs Chapter One of this thesis, contextualising the social welfare model subsequently adopted in Australia by institutions such as Victoria's own Society.

Whilst Ladd's work acknowledges that Deafness cannot exist independently of the hearing world, Deafhood still seems to be constructed around majority-Deaf spaces and identities. Though also influenced by Wrigley's work, Brenda Jo Brueggemann chooses instead to focus on the peripheries of these spaces, a perspective shaped by her own hard-of-hearing identity.³⁸ Her early work, describing the difficulty of being equally unable to pass as Deaf or hearing, gave rise to a theory of "betweenity".³⁹ This theory seeks not to delineate a culturally Deaf identity, but instead, to conceptualise the spaces that many d/Deaf people find themselves in as they move between Deaf and hearing worlds. The term references the hyphens in the term "hard-of-hearing": "the crème filling in the Oreo".⁴⁰ Although Brueggemann highlights potential sites of Deaf Gain within this paradigm, these sites are examined relationally, from both d/Deaf and hearing

³⁵ Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness*, 115; Ladd and Lane, "Deaf Ethnicity, Deafhood, and Their Relationship," 571.

³⁶ Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness*, 14.

³⁷ Ladd and Lane, "Deaf Ethnicity, Deafhood, and Their Relationship," 573.

³⁸ Brenda Jo Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1999), 182.

³⁹ Brenda Jo Brueggemann, "On (Almost) Passing," *College English* 59, no. 6 (1997): 648, <https://doi.org/10.2307/378278>; Brenda Jo Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects: Between Identities and Places* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 9.

⁴⁰ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 9.

perspectives.⁴¹ Chapters Three and Four of this thesis, in particular, adopt this theory as a useful frame for many d/Deaf musical interactions.

Brueggemann's theory seems particularly pertinent as musical disciplines, too, question arbitrary distinctions. Parallels between "betweenity" and Lubet's theory of confluence, in which a person's identity is defined primarily by the role in which said person finds themselves in at any given moment, and is reconstructed in each new context, are clear.⁴² Meanwhile, Straus and Best uncover the sonic bias inherent in everything from listening tests to reality shows like *The Voice*.⁴³ Howe problematises this bias, reminding us that Western classical music conventions—ranges, voice types, instrument sizes—exclude all people and bodies from specific contexts.⁴⁴ Through this lens, any musical inability becomes an impairment, meaning that every musician is disabled in certain contexts for which they are not physically or otherwise equipped.⁴⁵ However, the ability to hear sound is not one of these permissible physical differences. Furthermore, standardisation in classical music renders it less hospitable to physical idiosyncrasies than other genres.⁴⁶

Deaf historians and ethnographers have also begun to examine signed song forms. This study aimed to explore the potentially unique relationship between these forms and Auslan, the native language of Deaf Australians. The precedent for this work has been set through analyses of songs in American Sign Language (ASL) and Signed Exact English (SEE). Bahan and Loeffler describe songs and percussion signing as unique forms of Deaf storytelling anchored in ritual, and seek to describe the rhythmic arrangement of signs in musical terms.⁴⁷ Maler elaborates upon this, seeking to compare the linguistic, expressive and rhythmic properties of songs signed by hearing and Deaf performers in the hope of characterising a unique "Deaf music".⁴⁸ One such example of Deaf music is the

⁴¹ Brueggemann, "On (Almost) Passing," 651; Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 97; Brenda Jo Brueggemann, "On (Always) Passing," in *Deaf Identities: Exploring New Frontiers*, ed. Irene W. Leigh and Catherine A. O'Brien (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 340–41.

⁴² Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society*.

⁴³ Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 150–51; Best, "Musical Belonging," 2.

⁴⁴ Blake Howe, "Disabling Music Performance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 191–209, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199331444.013.30>.

⁴⁵ Howe, "Disabling Music Performance."

⁴⁶ Lubet, *Music, Disability, and Society*, 3.

⁴⁷ Benjamin J. Bahan, "Face-to-Face Tradition in the American Deaf Community: Dynamics of the Teller, the Tale, and the Audience," in *Signing the Body Poetic*, ed. H-Dirksen Bauman, Heidi Rose, and Jennifer Nelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 21–50; Summer Loeffler, "Deaf Music: Embodying Language and Rhythm," in *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, ed. H-Dirksen Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 436–456.

⁴⁸ Anabel Maler, "Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 86, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199331444.013.4>.

aforementioned genre of dip hop, which uses the key hip hop foundations of beats, lyrics and flow but translates them into a visual-manual modality. Artists from diverse fields including dance and martial arts are able to bring their unique physical strengths to this genre in both exploring and presenting their Deaf identity.⁴⁹

Although sign language is a central feature of Deaf culture, it is not the only means of codifying a possible Deaf music. Despite its name, the Signed Music Project at Towson University emerged from a desire to understand a range of Deaf musical practices; it was established in response to performances which used non-linguistic gesture to depict instrumental music to Deaf audiences.⁵⁰ The project's initial study saw Deaf insider Jody Cripps collaborate with a hearing musician to compare analyses of three works and decide which musical elements were represented through the interpretive gestures of the performance.⁵¹ This reveals parallels with my own previous analyses of Deaf musical works, which uncovered the importance of mixing media in Deaf music-making, drawing on music videos and installation art.⁵² For example, sound and visual artist Christine Sun Kim's work *Game of Skill 2.0* is experienced by moving through the space and listening to a spoken-word piece, the speed and direction of which are wholly controlled by the joystick-holder's movements.⁵³ The work can only be heard and understood through a multi-sensory approach. I have previously suggested that this lens could be applied to many d/Deaf musical practices.

The Signed Music Project is founded on the assertion that any "Deaf music" should reflect Deaf culture, and should, therefore, be in Deaf languages.⁵⁴ Again, one of the complexities of this review, and, indeed, this thesis, comes to light; no attempt to delineate "Deafness" adequately reflects the diversity of d/Deaf individuals. We see this in the wide-ranging opinions, even within the Deaf community, regarding the status of music as a representative cultural artefact. Cripps and colleagues note that Kim's approach is still rooted in an auditory conception of music; it is, thus, a translation of sorts, which is a point

⁴⁹ Best, "Musical Belonging," 3.

⁵⁰ "Signed Music Project – Understanding Music Through American Sign Language," accessed February 20, 2019, <http://wp.towson.edu/signedmusic/contact/>; Jody H Cripps, "Ethnomusicology and Signed Music: A Breakthrough," *Journal of American Sign Languages and Literatures*, 2018, <http://journalofasl.com/ethnomusicology/>.

⁵¹ Cripps, "Ethnomusicology and Signed Music," 3.

⁵² Hedt, "Towards a Generative Pedagogy."

⁵³ Christine Sun Kim, *Game of Skill 2.0*, Video file, 2015, <http://christinesunkim.com/performance/game-of-skill>; Hedt, "Towards a Generative Pedagogy."

⁵⁴ Jody H Cripps et al., "A Case Study on Signed Music: The Emergence of an Inter-Performance Art," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 13, no. 2 (2017): 7, <http://liminalities.net/13-2/signedmusic.html>.

of tension in itself.⁵⁵ Many Deaf musicians, such as Warren “Wawa” Snipes, Sean Forbes, Signmark and band Beethoven’s Nightmare use their music as a chance to make a political statement on the status of Deaf people in society.⁵⁶ Others distance themselves from this activism.⁵⁷ Deaf identity politics is, however, evolving, with artists such as Prinz-D changing their mind on this topic through the influence of other Deaf artists.⁵⁸ Unlike the mechanics of sign-singing, this theme has gone largely unstudied, and the role of music as a form of social advocacy requires further attention. Although it has not yet explored this side of Deaf musical practice, the Signed Music Project’s focus on ethnomusicology as a discipline within which a two-way conversation between Deaf and hearing perspectives can be established sketches a roadmap for future work in the field.⁵⁹

In contrast to the established field of Deaf scholarship in the United States, the study of Australian Deaf history and culture remains an emerging project. Auslan studies defy the small size of the Australian Deaf community to be well represented in linguistics research, but this body of work focuses on establishing and preserving the legitimacy of a language long unrecognised.⁶⁰ Although recent work in education and linguistics examines the impact of policy decisions on language and educational outcomes, there remains scope for research which articulates Deaf culture in the Australian context. Only two book-length published works provide comprehensive historical information on Victoria’s Deaf community. John W. Flynn’s history of the Society, released to commemorate its centenary in 1984, is written from the perspective one could expect from a hearing executive director of the Society.⁶¹ It provides valuable insight into the Society’s—and, therefore, the community’s—activities, but glosses over problematic elements of the Society’s social welfare model and demonstrates little awareness of Deaf culture. Deaf academic Breda Carty’s account of the Australian Deaf community in the 1920s and 1930s sheds new light on Flynn’s findings, highlighting the tensions between hearing Society staff and Deaf

⁵⁵ Alice-Ann Darrow, “The Role of Music in Deaf Culture: Implications for Music Educators,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 41, no. 2 (1993): 94; Cripps et al., “A Case Study on Signed Music,” 3.

⁵⁶ Hedt, “Towards a Generative Pedagogy”; Jeannette DiBernardo Jones, “Imagined Hearing: Music-Making in Deaf Culture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, ed. Blake Howe et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 54–72, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199331444.013.3>; Best, “Musical Belonging,” 4.

⁵⁷ David Peisner, “Deaf Jams: The Surprising, Conflicted, Thriving World of Hearing-Impaired Rappers,” *SPIN*, October 29, 2013, <http://www.spin.com/2013/10/deaf-jams-hearing-impaired-rappers/>.

⁵⁸ Best, “Musical Belonging,” 4.

⁵⁹ Cripps, “Ethnomusicology and Signed Music,” 4.

⁶⁰ Trevor Johnston, “W(h)ither the Deaf Community? Population, Genetics, and the Future of Australian Sign Language,” *Sign Language Studies* 6, no. 2 (2006): 165–66.

⁶¹ John Flynn, *No Longer by Gaslight: The First 100 Years of the Adult Deaf Society of Victoria* (The Adult Deaf Society of Victoria, 1984).

community members.⁶² These existing accounts make little mention of musical activities, an omission I hope to remedy here.

Aims and Methodology

This ethnographic study aims to explore the position of music within Victoria's Deaf community, looking at the different roles it has assumed over time and the nature of its use in culturally Deaf Melbourne today. Examining instances of music-making by and for Deaf Victorians, I situate them within an emerging local Deaf culture and compare them with those found elsewhere. I centre this study on Melbourne for two reasons. First, as home to Australia's second d/Deaf school, the city laid the foundations for a large proportion of the country's Deaf community. Second, Melbourne's reputation as the arts-minded "live music capital" of Australia precedes it.⁶³ This is reflected in an increasingly mobile Australian d/Deaf population. Deaf artists and performers move to Melbourne specifically to work in the local arts scene, whilst specialist music and theatre interpreters from other states commute for engagements.⁶⁴ My exploration is shaped by three major lines of questioning: contextual, linguistic and cultural.

First, I seek to identify the contexts in which d/Deaf Australians engage with and use music. I set out to detail the processes—creative and logistical—giving rise to these contexts, and to ascertain whether the musical products could be understood in terms of specific genres or styles. Second, I ask how Auslan might be used in musical ways, and whether this application might differ between translational and newly composed works. Finally, I look to determine how Deaf musical experience and practice reflects the general social and cultural concerns of Australian Deaf communities.

Being the first project of its nature in this country, my research relied on diverse methods and information sources. The lack of pre-existing research on the history of Deaf music-making in Australia necessitated archival research to establish the baseline for further work. Using Flynn's history as a yardstick upon which to base key events, dates and structures, I consulted both print and digital archives. The Society's digital archive on the Victorian Collections website provided a range of photos, news clippings and Society

⁶² Breda Carty, *Managing Their Own Affairs: The Australian Deaf Community in the 1920s and 1930s* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2017).

⁶³ Paul Donoghue, "Melbourne is the Live Music Capital of the World, Study Says," Double J (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, April 12, 2018), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-04-12/melbourne-is-the-live-music-capital-of-the-world-census-shows/9643684>.

⁶⁴ This freedom of movement contributes to my rationale for using "Melbourne" and "Australia" interchangeably at various points.

publications from the late 1800s to the 1930s. I supplemented this early work with a survey of mainstream Victorian newspapers through Trove, a process which not only corroborated factual information but also revealed how Deaf people were viewed by Victoria's hearing public in the early twentieth century. Once these avenues were exhausted, I turned to the State Library of Victoria's collection, which included a near-complete collection of Society newsletters from the late 1930s to the mid-2000s, as well as newsletters of the Victorian Council of Deaf People, the John Pierce Centre and, further afield, the Wimmera Hearing Society.⁶⁵ To bring the research to the present day, I finally consulted the Society and John Pierce Centre websites. Both have small archives of recent years' newsletters available for download.

Alongside my documentary research, I began engaging in participant-observation, attending a range of performances by and for Deaf and disabled people. This enabled me to familiarise myself with many Deaf cultural norms and behaviours, begin to build networks for further research and develop the base thematic material for the remainder of my fieldwork. The 2018 and 2019 Melbourne Fringe festivals, in particular, offered several opportunities to engage with Deaf and disability arts. Despite this project's primary focus on Deaf spaces, events under the general disability arts umbrella were central to my early participant-observation. Attending both types of events allowed me to better delineate the two categories and identify issues and concerns shared between the two.

Finally, I sought to recruit people who, ideally, engaged in musical practice and were members of the Australian Deaf community. The recruitment process itself had significant implications for the trajectory of the project. I conducted a preliminary interview with a music teacher I met prior to this project; her work with d/Deaf children and colleagues offered insights into Deaf language and culture. Through my early participant-observation and online research, I also identified key Melbourne Deaf arts practitioners, who I initially considered the main focus of this project. With Auslan being the preferred language of many on this list, it became ethically imperative that I approach these practitioners in Auslan as well as in English. To facilitate this, I scripted, translated and recorded an introductory Auslan video, assisted by a hearing, but Auslan-qualified, acquaintance. This video was designed to supplement and clarify written recruitment materials. Reflecting on this process, it would have been more culturally appropriate for me

⁶⁵ The John Pierce Centre is an organisation supporting Melbourne's Deaf Catholic community. See Chapter One.

to engage a Deaf person to make this video.⁶⁶ However, undertaking the work myself added another valuable dimension to the research, giving preliminary insight into the interests and priorities of the Deaf community and how these are mediated through sign language. As I explain further in Chapter Four, the material I chose to include in the first version of the video uncovered several biases and assumptions implicit in my initial research parameters, including my desire to foreground the creation and performance of original works by Auslan-using Deaf artists. However, as my participant-observation quickly revealed, there was not a large enough body of artists in Melbourne who met these criteria. As such, my initial perspective proved incompatible with the dominant trends of musical interaction amongst d/Deaf people in Australia.

Wanting to examine culturally Deaf musical *performance* as I did, I initially did not set out to interview Auslan interpreters, as I did not view them within this framework. I sought to distinguish between the *access* they provided and Deaf musical participation. As I came to grips with the landscape, though, I began to realise that one could not exist without the other; in fact, they could be understood on a continuum of musical experience. Furthermore, Auslan interpreters are central to the cross-cultural communication between hearing and Deaf Australians. As I engaged in my own cross-cultural dialogue, this seemed a logical entry point to the project. Many Auslan interpreters are themselves lifelong members of the Deaf community by virtue of being CODAs (children of Deaf adults). CODAs, raised in Deaf households, often have Auslan as their first language and are raised with Deaf cultural norms.⁶⁷ As they learn English and attend mainstream schools, they gain dual membership of Deaf and hearing cultures. I felt, therefore, that any exploration of Deaf culture would be incomplete without including this group and *their* musical experiences.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Susan, email message to author, 11 April 2019; Karen, interview with author, 4 June 2019; “WFD Statement on Sign Language Work” (Helsinki: World Federation of the Deaf, February 19, 2014), <https://wfdeaf.org/news/resources/wfd-statement-on-sign-language-work-19-february-2014/>; Gabrielle Hodge et al., “Guidelines: English-into-Auslan Video Production” (Sydney: Australian Communications Consumer Action Network, 2015), 6-9. Two of my correspondents highlighted the importance of engaging Deaf people in this work. This view matches official guidelines from Deaf organisations, including the World Federation of the Deaf.

⁶⁷ Paul Preston, *Mother Father Deaf: Living Between Sound and Silence* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 209; Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture*, 240; Robert Hoffmeister, “Border Crossings by Hearing Children of Deaf Parents: The Lost History of Codas,” in *Open Your Eyes: Deaf Studies Talking*, ed. H-Dirksen Bauman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 204. As I discuss further in Chapter Three, two out of three interpreters I interviewed were CODAs. Although demographic data on CODAs and sign language interpreters is scarce, this seems to correspond with the trend observed elsewhere of CODAs engaging in Deaf-adjacent professions, having learned to interpret for family at a young age.

⁶⁸ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 96. Brueggemann echoes these sentiments, writing about wanting to include those “who are also part of the fabric that places... a deaf identity”.

With that in mind, I approached the director of Auslan Stage Left, a Melbourne-based organisation providing Auslan interpreters, training and consultancy for theatre, music and performing arts. She agreed to be interviewed herself, and circulated my call for participants to several interpreters, which resulted in another two interviews. I also made direct email contact with some of the Deaf artists I had identified earlier; this led to participant-observation opportunities, though no formal interviews. Finally, I posted my video in Deaf-interest Facebook groups “Auslaners – Deaf Community Australia” and “Auslan Matters”, a process I describe further in Chapter Four, and recruited a final two participants with connections to the Deaf community.

This multi-faceted recruitment process resulted in a total of six interviews. Two interviews were conducted in person in University library meeting rooms, two by phone, one by Skype and one by email. Real-time interviews were approximately an hour long and semi-structured. For these interviews, I prepared five overarching questions and a range of associated discussion prompts, but let the conversation unfold naturally around participants’ own experiences and interests rather than imposing a set structure. The email interview comprised a series of set questions based on my own knowledge of the participant’s professional musical work. I had initially planned to conduct these interviews through Auslan interpreters where relevant, and obtained relevant funding in anticipation of this prospect, but all participants elected to be interviewed in English.

Whilst the demographic of my sample did not, therefore, reflect my initial desire to examine Auslan-based musical practices, my interlocutors’ chosen language signalled a potential connection between language status and access to music, which I explore further in Chapters Three and Four. The findings from these interviews, therefore, cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the wider Deaf community. My work unavoidably privileges the voices of those who have had, and desired, access to music in their lives, which seems to go hand-in-hand with the ability to speak English. However, it seeks to understand these voices within a broader historical context of d/Deafness in Australia. In combining this historical context with ethnographic insights from Melbourne’s Deaf arts scene, this thesis explores and situates the motivations, values, performance attributes and linguistic features of d/Deaf musical experiences in Australia, whilst recognising that these are not experienced by all Deaf Australians.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One provides an historical overview of musical practice in Victoria's Deaf community. Fundraising concerts, "physical culture" displays, church services, dance and social events, sign-language choirs and theatre are all identified as sites where d/Deaf performance and music have coexisted. From its establishment in 1884, the Adult Deaf and Dumb Mission of Victoria ("the Society") figures heavily in this history; its changing role in mediating d/Deaf access to music is discussed throughout. Distinguishing between music used according to hearing preferences and that used by Deaf people for their own ends, the chapter contextualises today's local d/Deaf arts practices.

Chapters Two and Three focus on the performance of works which include Deaf-accessible music. Chapter Two examines music in Deaf arts, a fledgling movement in Melbourne's Deaf community. This movement provides a platform for culturally Deaf Australians to legitimise their experiences of Deafness to deaf and hearing people alike. Brief analyses of the musical attributes and use of Auslan in these works precede discussions on the nature of participation, collaboration and leadership in Deaf arts. Chapter Three explores how Auslan interpreters make performances of live music and musical theatre accessible to the Deaf community. I introduce the specialist interpreting agency Auslan Stage Left, situating it and its interpreters within Australia's broader interpreting landscape. Delving into the hybrid translation-interpretation processes behind this work, this chapter details some of the specific challenges of making music accessible and analyses interpreters' own conception of their roles in this context.

Chapter Four conceptualises "an Aussie d/Deaf music lover", shaped by ongoing relationships with both the Deaf and hearing worlds. Problematising my own initial definitions of Deafness, this chapter examines the experiences and preferences of self-professed d/Deaf music fans in order to understand how music figures in the lives of d/Deaf Australians today.

Chapter One: Deaf Culture and Music in Melbourne, 1884-present

On December 8, 1902, a reported two thousand people gathered at Ballarat's Alfred Hall for the first in a series of "country lecture entertainments".¹ Here, Ernest J. D. Abraham, the first full-time Missioner of the Adult Deaf and Dumb Mission of Victoria, professed his aim to "bear spiritual and temporal comforts to the adult deaf and dumb who are scattered across the State."² Sign language, which Abraham grandly called "The Language of Gesture", gave rise to spoken, musical and theatrical entertainment, eliciting donations for the purchase of a permanent home for the Society.³ Despite being a hearing man himself, Abraham proceeded to give a detailed demonstration of the language, before deaf performers took to the stage with musical accompaniment from the choir of St Andrew's Church.⁴

This event is one of many in Australia's history in which deaf communities and musical practices coexisted. In this chapter, I describe how music was used within Victoria's deaf communities from the late nineteenth century to the present day. I situate these activities within what Deaf scholar Breda Carty terms an ongoing "power struggle" between the hearing people who administered Australia's state deaf societies and Deaf people who sought to "manage their own affairs".⁵ Musical activities, previously unacknowledged sites of this struggle, are found in contexts managed by hearing people on behalf of Victorian d/Deaf communities, and later, by Deaf people themselves.

Before I can position these instances of music within a Victorian Deaf community, I must define its parameters. There is very little documented evidence of cultural affiliation amongst Deaf Australians in the late nineteenth century, despite deaf schooling and sign-language dissemination in Australia dating back to 1860. When, then, did Victoria find itself home to a group of sign-language users large enough to call itself a community? John W. Flynn, in his history of the first hundred years of the Society, estimates that there were 88 deaf adults living in Victoria at the time of the Society's preliminary meetings in 1879, and suggests that this number was the critical mass for a community requiring an organisational

¹ "Mr Ernest J. D. Abraham's Country Lecture Entertainments," *Gesture*, March 1903, 12.

² "Mr Ernest J. D. Abraham's Country Lecture Entertainments," 12.

³ "Mr Ernest J. D. Abraham, F. I. M. D., and the Language of Gesture," *Gesture*, March 1903, 8–9.

⁴ "Mr Ernest J. D. Abraham's Country Lecture Entertainments," 12.

⁵ Carty, *Managing Their Own Affairs*, 1.

framework.⁶ Studies of global Deaf communities demonstrate how Deaf clubs around the world, many absorbed into Deaf missions, have functioned to provide this social interaction.⁷ With Victoria's own mission—the Society—providing a home for similar clubs, the Society's origin in 1884 provides an appropriate marker of a Deaf community's existence. Although several of the activities described in this chapter did not take place within the Society itself, this starting point reflects the tide of Deaf social and cultural interaction. As the scope of the Society changed and d/Deaf people gained more control over their own activities, music became a part of d/Deaf-led social events around the state, and foundations were laid for the Deaf arts practices of today.

This chapter draws on archival sources to track and analyse the contexts in which music was used by and for the Victorian Deaf community from 1884 onwards. Initially, it examines the tendency to use d/Deafness as a musical spectacle through fundraising and educational “entertainments”. The Society's religious roots then come to the fore, as I consider music in d/Deaf worship. The third section explores the changing role of the Society and its impact on musical practice and discourse. Finally, I discuss the emergence of Deaf-led arts in Victoria, as a precursor to the contemporary practices featured in subsequent chapters.

Deafness as musical spectacle

At the turn of the twentieth century, benefit concerts were commonplace and well-attended in Victoria. These events, held on behalf of bereaved families, educational institutions and other groups, promised their attendees not only an evening of entertainment, but also the “satisfaction of knowing they have assisted a deserving object.”⁸ Deaf and blind people were among these “objects”; several events were held for the benefit of the institutions professing to support them. At these events, the d/Deaf and blind people themselves became the spectacle. Instead of having others perform on their behalf, they became travelling performers, tasked chiefly with putting on “exhibitions of the advancement science has made in their education.”⁹

⁶ Flynn, *No Longer by Gaslight*, 1-3. He bases this figure on graduation figures from the now Victorian College of the Deaf, then the state's only deaf school.

⁷ Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan, *A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD*, 134–37, 438–39; Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture*, 334–61; Kent R. Olney, “The Chicago Mission for the Deaf,” in *The Deaf History Reader*, ed. John Vickrey Van Cleve (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2007), 182–83.

⁸ “The Deaf and Dumb and Blind Entertainers,” *Bendigo Independent*, July 26, 1899.

⁹ “The Deaf and Dumb and Blind Entertainers.”

Several newspaper articles from 1899 detail the nature of such travelling “entertainments” in various Victorian towns. The reporting recounts a range of “musical, elocutionary and pantomimic items”.¹⁰ The highlight of such events, to their hearing audiences, was the presentation of the oral system, in which deaf people demonstrated their ability to speak and to lip-read, feats “nothing short of miraculous”.¹¹ Did d/Deaf people perform music at these entertainments? Although an account of the *Avoca* entertainment mentioned “a deaf mute’s song”, it is not clear how this was performed; the description, however, suggests a recitation rather than any sort of pitched song.¹² Other instances of such entertainment included musical performances, but these were performed by blind musicians, such as the extreme feat of a “Mr Irwin... [who] performed on fully a dozen novel instruments”.¹³ Though pantomimic items and early examples of sign language also featured, these did not receive such rapturous praise or media coverage.

With little evidence that d/Deaf performers participated in musical activities, it is unlikely that these events emerged from or contributed to musical engagement in Deaf culture. Instead, organisers showcased a motley crew of people, united only by the fact that able-bodied people would recognise them as disabled. These performers were presented to audiences in an attempt to engender support from the able-bodied for their perceived “endeavour... to help themselves.”¹⁴ By featuring the novel, the outlandish and the bizarre, the events sought to entertain for maximum fundraising success. Furthermore, they sought to highlight the benevolence and educational achievements of the institutions putting on the events.

Exhibitions of these “achievements” were also commonplace in Melbourne, persisting well into the twentieth century. The Deaf and Dumb Institution, now the Victorian College for the Deaf, was most active in this field, holding annual student performances of this nature. These events are described in newspaper articles over the years with varying titles, including “physical culture display”, “gymnastic display” and “entertainment.”¹⁵ Items in these entertainments included marching, dumbbell drills, pyramids, calisthenic rod work and Indian club swinging, with musical accompaniment usually provided by a pianist.¹⁶ The items performed by deaf children were interspersed

¹⁰ “Deaf and Dumb Entertainers,” *Avoca Mail*, March 24, 1899.

¹¹ “The Deaf and Dumb and Blind Entertainers.”

¹² “Deaf and Dumb Entertainers.”

¹³ “Deaf and Dumb and Blind Entertainment,” *Kerang Times*, August 4, 1899.

¹⁴ “Deaf and Dumb Entertainers.”

¹⁵ “Deaf and Dumb Children,” *Age*, October 11, 1927; “Deaf and Dumb Institute,” *Prahran Telegraph*, October 22, 1910; “Entertainment by Deaf Children,” *Weekly Times*, December 22, 1954.

¹⁶ “Deaf and Dumb Institute,” October 22, 1910.

with musical numbers. Some of these were performed by presumably hearing singers; others continued the established trend of collaborating with other disability organisations with performances by groups including the Blind Institute Orchestra.¹⁷ Again, d/Deaf children did not participate in the music-making itself, but contributed to a bigger spectacle.

When the Dominican Sisters opened St Mary's School for the Deaf at "Delgany", Portsea, in 1948, they adopted similar approaches to student performance. A recount of the school's fete in December 1951 describes "a remarkable display of gymnastics, drill and dancing to a musical accompaniment... a remarkable demonstration of the high level of accomplishment of these handicapped young people".¹⁸ However, these "physical culture displays" and their eclectic programming were not unique to Deaf schools, nor particularly novel at the time; gymnastic displays and drills also formed a major part of mainstream school concerts in the first half of the twentieth century. These similarities notwithstanding, events at mainstream and deaf schools were portrayed differently. A detailed account of an end-of-year concert put on by the mainstream Sacred Heart College, Shepparton, in November 1941 bills the event as a concert, but gives heavy weighting to the presence of physical culture items, which were the only ones to receive their own subheadings.¹⁹ By this definition, a concert does not need to contain much in the way of live musical performance; therefore, the term could be applied quite widely across deaf and hearing contexts. The account of the Delgany event, however, is one of very few to describe a deaf entertainment as a concert. Placed in inverted commas, here the term betrays audist sentiment by implying that these deaf children could never put on a "real" concert. Like reports of earlier events, which frequently remarked on students' rhythmic precision given their deafness, the article expresses surprise at how students exceeded very low expectations. This feel-good sentiment, it appears, was the major drawcard of these events.

Although many of Melbourne's deaf children would have participated in one of these shows, it is doubtful that the performances themselves supported or represented Deaf cultural life. Indeed, any signing Deaf attendees may have been alienated by the musical items. Despite there being a precedent for having songs translated into sign language, there appears to be no history of doing so for instrumental music, and in any event, there is no evidence that any form of sign-language interpretation took place during

¹⁷ "Physical Culture Display," *Argus*, August 17, 1927.

¹⁸ "Entertainment by Deaf Children."

¹⁹ "Entertaining Concert Presented," *Shepparton Advertiser*, November 21, 1941.

musical items. A hearing journalist commented on the presence of interpreters for the major welcome speeches at the start of the Deaf and Dumb Institution's 1933 event, but there is no suggestion that this extended to the remainder of proceedings.²⁰ Having an interpreter at all appeared quite the novelty, one probably restricted to performances held by the Institution itself in recognition of the few multi-generational Deaf families likely to attend.²¹ The solely musical items, programmed ostensibly to "give the children a rest", would likely have seen many Deaf signers take the opportunity to talk amongst themselves, only holding the attention of hearing members of the audience.²² Even the journalist noted the social aspect of the event for its Deaf attendees:

It was curious to note the manner in which little dramas were enacted, old friendships renewed, introductions made, old times and scenes recalled, silently, soundlessly, until the observer experienced the sensation of watching, remote, a scene from another world, in which he had no part or being.²³

From this, we can surmise that Deaf parents attended to support their children and socialise, rather than to admire the quality of the performance. For a hearing attendee, these Deaf parents would themselves have been part of the spectacle. By attending, hearing people could thus console themselves that they had done something to mitigate the "inherent tragedy" of deafness.²⁴

Ernest Josiah Douglas Abraham, who we met at the opening of the chapter, capitalised on this popular attitude to deafness. He exerted considerable power over Victoria's Deaf community through his leadership of the then Adult Deaf and Dumb Mission, hitherto referred to as "the Society", until his death in 1940. Abraham was recruited for this task from the United Kingdom, where he had made a name for himself as an advocate for British Sign Language (BSL) and the Deaf community.²⁵ He acquired the language after being adopted by a Deaf minister in London at the age of fourteen. From his arrival in Australia in October 1901, musical spectacle was a tool in his campaign to promote himself and the Society's work to the mainstream.²⁶ Abraham's initial task, as

²⁰ "Gymnastic Display," *Age*, October 25, 1933.

²¹ Jan Branson and Don Miller, "Sign Language, the Deaf and the Epistemic Violence of Mainstreaming," *Language and Education* 7, no. 1 (January 1, 1993): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500789309541346>; Johnston, "W(h)ither the Deaf Community?," 164. Central deaf schools like the Institution have been identified as key sites of peer-to-peer and generational sign language transmission until this was interrupted by changing practices in the 1950s. I discuss the implications of these changes in Chapter Four.

²² "Deaf and Dumb Institute," *Herald*, October 25, 1906.

²³ "Deaf and Dumb Institute," October 25, 1906.

²⁴ "Deaf and Dumb Institute," October 25, 1906.

²⁵ Carty, *Managing Their Own Affairs*, 18. Although Abraham undoubtedly contributed to several deaf organisations in the United Kingdom, it is difficult to ascertain the true nature of his reputation. Many laudatory articles exist, but he is thought to have ghostwritten several of these.

²⁶ Flynn, *No Longer by Gaslight*, 24; "Our Pioneer - Mr. A. C. Muir," *Victorian Deaf*, November 1929, 2–3.

described at the start of the chapter, was to raise sufficient funds to obtain premises from which the society could operate an Institute, which would contain a church, lecture hall, adult education facilities, accommodation and office space for Melbourne's deaf adults.²⁷ He sought to do this through a series of "entertainments", in which he would introduce hearing audiences to the concept of sign language, which he called "The Language of Gesture", but would be more correctly described as the London variety of BSL.²⁸

According to Abraham's own publication, *The Gesture*, the first of his fundraising entertainments took place in March 1902, with subsequent performances throughout Melbourne and regional Victoria. These performances appear to have been well-attended, with the listing of performances to date as of March 1903 reporting full halls.²⁹ Although these entertainments were lauded for their reception in Deaf journalism (albeit by Abraham himself), they received little mainstream news coverage. Instead, newspapers continued to report on concerts held by hearing people with funds donated to the deaf.³⁰

But what, exactly, did the d/Deaf people perform at these "entertainments"? In promoting the concept of the "Language of Gesture", Abraham makes possibly the first reference to sign-singing in Australia: "graceful signs, rendered rhythmically".³¹ The link between sign-singing and rhythm, however, is not further elaborated in his writing. Following his introductory lecture on this theme, each entertainment featured a guest choir singing a short selection, which was subsequently interpreted into sign language for all to understand. The performance's feature item, "Rock of Ages in Statuary and Song", saw the guest choir join forces with a group of Deaf women, dressed as statues in flowing white robes as seen in Figure 1.1 below. Whilst the choir sang the hymn "Rock of Ages", the women formed a series of tableaux, one for each verse of the hymn.³² Later in several performances, the same women returned to depict images such as "Music" and "Cricket".³³ These images do not feature any language, signed or otherwise; instead, the women became statues, attempting to convey the overall sentiment of the hymn. This, in itself, is unremarkable, being characteristic of the *tableaux vivant* genre popular as a form of

²⁷ "Proposed Institute for the Adult Deaf and Dumb," *Gesture*, March 1903, 2.

²⁸ "Entertainments in Aid of the Adult Deaf and Dumb Institute Fund," *Gesture*, March 1903, 6. Though this was not the first sign language known to Australians, it is unlikely that any attendee would have seen the Indigenous sign languages described in the preface, hence the novelty of the spectacle.

²⁹ "Entertainments in Aid of the Adult Deaf and Dumb Institute Fund"; "Mr Ernest J. D. Abraham's Country Lecture Entertainments."

³⁰ See, for instance, Orfeo [pseud.], "Music," *Punch*, September 29, 1904; "Deaf and Dumb Mission," *Argus*, October 8, 1904.

³¹ "Entertainments in Aid of the Adult Deaf and Dumb Institute Fund."

³² "Entertainments in Aid of the Adult Deaf and Dumb Institute Fund."

³³ "Mr Ernest J. D. Abraham's Country Lecture Entertainments."

entertainment in Australia since the 1840s.³⁴ However, it seems a curious choice of genre for an event showcasing sign language and Deaf performers. Comparing these performances with coverage of the established *tableaux vivant* tradition helps us better understand the status of these performers, and therefore, of Deaf culture, at the time.



Figure 1.1. “Rock of Ages” tableau. Photo by “Sarony”, Melbourne, in “Mr Ernest J. D. Abraham’s Country Lecture Entertainments,” *Gesture*, March 1903, 12.

Tableaux vivant has been described in terms of its attempts to foster Victorian-era cultural education through amusement in Victorian-era England.³⁵ In North America, its significance at amateur level is well-researched, with Glassberg discussing its role in pageantry and Elbert suggesting that the genre offered women the chance to “indulge their fancies” through costume and “try on a variety of personae” as part of their identity

³⁴ A brief survey of Victorian newspapers suggests that tableaux vivants were regular features at the Queen’s Theatre from the 1840s, a practice which spread to other theatres through the 1850s. By the 1870s, such performances were established elements of fundraising entertainments. See George Coppin, “Queen’s Theatre,” *Melbourne Courier*, January 28, 1846; George Coppin, “Queen’s Theatre,” *Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser*, March 2, 1846; “Grand Concert,” *Bendigo Advertiser*, October 18, 1878; “Tableaux Vivants,” *Horsham Times*, December 22, 1893; “Tableaux Vivants,” *Melbourne Punch*, June 8, 1893.

³⁵ Shannon Murphy, “Tableaux Vivant: History and Practice,” *Art Museum Teaching* (blog), December 7, 2012, <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2012/12/06/tableaux-vivant-history-and-practice/>; Elena Stevens, “Striking an Attitude: Tableaux Vivants in the British Long Nineteenth Century” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Southampton, 2017), 19.

development.³⁶ Australian journalism on the subject reflects United States trends, with an article entitled “Hints for Tableaux” providing a how-to manual for amateurs.³⁷ Furthermore, most accounts of local performances give the names of all performers, even amateur women. However, Abraham’s writings generally do not identify the deaf performers. They performed entirely at his behest: dressed in generic, identical costumes, they were rendered voiceless metaphorically as well as literally. This portrayal renders the women passive vehicles of hearing cultural artefacts. Their inability to fully participate was, in part, enacted by Abraham himself. It is telling that he, not the Deaf women, signed the full text of the hymn. Although these entertainments were notable for hosting some of the earliest Australian interactions between music and sign language, they served primarily as platforms for Abraham to postulate his own benevolence and to further perpetuate the fictional separation of Deafness and music. The women’s portrayals hearing artefacts were not intrinsically Deaf, but they are nevertheless key to a narrative of Deaf music in Australia. Even after his initial fundraising goal was achieved, Abraham’s twin loves of spectacle and worship—to which we now turn—continued to assert their influence over d/Deaf musical interactions.

A “Unique Church for Unique Deaf”: music and worship³⁸

Victoria’s society for Deaf adults in Victoria owes its existence to religious forces. Its roots lay in informal signed church services held at the YMCA in Russell Street, Melbourne in 1879, which sowed the seeds for the Society’s foundation at the Collins Street Baptist Church in 1884.³⁹ Church services remained central to Society life as it moved to its dedicated Flinders Street headquarters on 22 May, 1904. This move marked the culmination of Abraham’s initial fundraising efforts. Reporting indicates that there was a “special choir” present at this first service, though the nature of this choir’s performance is not known.⁴⁰ In his role as Missioner, Abraham conducted signed services at Flinders

³⁶ Monika M. Elbert, “Striking a Historical Pose: Antebellum Tableaux Vivants, ‘Godey’s’ Illustrations, and Margaret Fuller’s Heroines,” *The New England Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 235–36, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1559765>; David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 106–56.

³⁷ “Hints for Tableaux,” *Oakleigh Leader*, January 12, 1895.

³⁸ “Unique Church for Unique Deaf,” *Victorian Deaf*, August 1930, 2.

³⁹ Expression Australia, “Vicdeaf History, Deaf Community History,” accessed October 3, 2018, <http://www.expression.com.au/content.asp?id=5&t=our-history&cid=23>.

⁴⁰ “Deaf Mutes Church,” *Herald*, May 21, 1904.

Street, in the tradition of the Anglican Church.⁴¹ It is unknown whether hymns in his “Language of Gesture” moved beyond entertainment to feature in his services.

A 1912 *Herald* account of the Flinders Street harvest festival service describes one of these signed services from a hearing person’s perspective. The author laments the absence of music—no “pealing organ note” to speak of—but nevertheless notes the hymn “We plough the fields, and scatter”.⁴² There is no detailed description of how the hymn is interpreted, which is understandable given the author’s presumed inability to understand sign language. Despite this, the author evidently enjoyed the spectacle, stating that “at least, it looked eloquent”.⁴³ Without an interpreter, the author’s motivation for attending is initially unclear. However, articles like this one cultivate the air of intrigue surrounding the Deaf community, and could well have been solicited by Abraham himself as part of his ongoing campaign.

Though his initial aspirations were realised, Abraham’s ambitions for the Society continued to grow. His empire-building efforts first manifested in the opening of the “Home and Farm for Aged, Infirm and Feeble-Minded Deaf Mutes” at Blackburn Lake in 1909, which offered both sheltered living for deaf people and a source of income through the Society’s flower farm.⁴⁴ Later, Abraham sought to expand the provision offered at Flinders Street to provide “additional facilities for Social Intercourse and Recreation. Also for Manual Training and Housing and Boarding of Youths whilst learning a Trade.”⁴⁵ His vision for an all-encompassing, segregated centre for the Deaf community followed the British Mission model, which implicitly sought to “keep deaf people off the streets and out of undesirable places”.⁴⁶ Consequently, the Society purchased the property formerly owned by Sir Charles La Trobe at Jolimont Square, East Melbourne, in 1924, and this proved a landmark for Deaf church services in Melbourne. Upon moving to Jolimont Square that same year, the Society engaged architects Gawler and Drummond to draw up a fully fledged vision for the site, which included a free-standing church specifically for the use of the Deaf community. This church, in Figure 1.2 below, was completed in 1930.⁴⁷

⁴¹ “Silent Worshippers,” *Herald*, March 18, 1912.

⁴² “Silent Worshippers.”

⁴³ “Silent Worshippers.”

⁴⁴ Flynn, *No Longer by Gaslight*, 53.

⁴⁵ Flynn, *No Longer by Gaslight*, 77.

⁴⁶ Carty, *Managing Their Own Affairs*, 20.

⁴⁷ *No Longer by Gaslight*, 86–87; Carty, *Managing Their Own Affairs*, 19–22. Flynn suggests that this church was the only part of the “Vision” to be built as initially planned, due to financial constraints. Indeed, the expense of Abraham’s grand endeavours was apparently beyond the means of the Society. Flynn questions the expenditure on the church in 1929, at a time where the Society was reportedly struggling with the £11,000 owing on Jolimont Square. However, both Flynn and Carty observe that Abraham was the consummate



Figure 1.2. *Left*, “Proposed Chapel for the Adult Deaf and Dumb Society of Victoria”. Wash drawing by George Newnham, in *The Victorian Deaf*, November 1929, 1. *Right*, the chapel today. Photograph by author, March 2019.

From the earliest stages of its development, it appears that the new church at Jolimont Square was not designed with music in mind, at least not as mainstream churchgoers would be accustomed to hearing. *The Victorian Deaf* names an overarching visual design principle for the church: to ensure that light and seating was appropriately placed to ensure that every person in the congregation could see the face and hands of those presiding.⁴⁸ As such, the seating was tiered to assure maximum visibility.⁴⁹ This was a ground-breaking approach, with the church being the first built specifically for the Deaf community in Australia.⁵⁰

Although Abraham sought to keep the d/Deaf in at Jolimont Square, that did not mean he kept hearing people out; in fact, he welcomed people of all Christian faiths. Whilst the site and building were consecrated by members of the Anglican Church, the church was non-denominational, a rarity in Victoria at the time.⁵¹ The first service in the new church was held on 5 June 1930, and from then on, regular services were held with guest preachers from many major Melbourne churches. The musical trappings of traditional Christian services became a drawcard. Some of the first services held here were advertised in

fundraiser; his ability to elicit public support for the cause may have attracted donations expressly directed to the church.

⁴⁸ “Church for the Deaf,” *Victorian Deaf*, November 1929, 3.

⁴⁹ Flynn, *No Longer by Gaslight*, 87.

⁵⁰ “Photograph - Church for the Deaf and Dumb - Jolimont Square, East Melbourne,” notes accompanying image, Victorian Collections, March 3, 2017,

<http://victoriancollections.net.au:8080/items/56ca78862162f12b9c16db0d>.

⁵¹ Expression Australia, “Vicdeaf History, Deaf Community History.”

mainstream Melbourne newspapers, with mentions of solo sung items given similar billing to the guest preachers.⁵² It appears that the aforementioned sung items were accompanied with an organ of some type, with references to its use in 1930 and 1934, despite a pipe organ not appearing to feature in the church's design.⁵³ An advertisement for the Society's Jubilee celebrations in 1934 hints at how these items were made accessible to the Deaf congregation: "The hymns, sung by hearing people attending the services, and those rendered by a soloist, will also be interpreted."⁵⁴ It is not clear how Deaf people were expected to participate in the hymns beyond being interpreted to. Were they merely to stand passively? Hearing people were encouraged to actively participate through singing hymns, though these may have been sporadic. Deaf people, in their own church, seem to have been denied that chance. An Eileen Empson's letter to *The Age* in June 1930 is particularly revealing. She writes, "Most hearing ministers find it embarrassing to give an address with the congregation not listening, and their eyes turned upon another minister standing beside them, therefore the public is cordially invited to attend these services."⁵⁵ This attitude affirms the hypothesis that music was there to attract and accommodate hearing people, rather than to foster a culture of signed song and support a Deaf congregation.

There is little surviving documented evidence of the Society's religious practices between the late 1930s and the early 1960s. Perhaps this is due to an unprecedented change in leadership during this period; Abraham's tenure ended with his death in 1940. Successor Ernest Abraham Reynolds, a CODA with extensive interpreting experience, took the reins of the organisation in 1942.⁵⁶ By the 1960s, signed and sung hymns in church services had become the exception, rather than the rule. Though the majority of weekly services held at Jolimont Square existed primarily for the Deaf community, they were joined approximately monthly by other groups, including the Wattle Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star.⁵⁷ Mentions of hymns and sung solos largely coincide with these shared services. However,

⁵² "Church for Deaf and Dumb," *Argus*, June 6, 1930; Eileen Empson, "A Church for the Deaf and Dumb," *Age*, June 21, 1930.

⁵³ "Church for Deaf and Dumb"; "Services for Deaf and Dumb," *Argus*, October 6, 1934.

⁵⁴ "Services for Deaf and Dumb."

⁵⁵ Empson, "A Church for the Deaf and Dumb."

⁵⁶ Carty, *Managing Their Own Affairs*, 40-41. Carty notes an interesting anecdote recounted by Reynolds in a 1981 interview: attending a service at Flinders Street aged ten or eleven, he found himself interpreting for a group of Deaf people who refused to watch Abraham sign. Although there is no record of Reynolds himself speaking out against Abraham, he was unwittingly set up as a challenger to Abraham's leadership from a young age.

⁵⁷ "Church News," *Deaf Talkabout*, October 1962, 2; "Church News," *Deaf Talkabout*, November 1962, 2; "Church News," *Deaf Talkabout*, December 1962, 2.

some of the language and ritual introduced by Abraham appears to have persisted long after his passing. A new type of service—the “Film Service”—was brought to the Jolimont Square chapel in February 1963, featuring a modern film portrayal of a parable and closing with a hymn in “the language of gesture”.⁵⁸ Likewise, May 1963 saw hymns “in gesture” incorporated into the Mothers’ Day service.⁵⁹ By this time, the terms “sign” and “sign language” were being widely used, so this florid echo of Abraham’s “entertainment” seems out of place.

There are no further mentions of music within Deaf church services in *Deaf Talkabout* (as the Society’s newsletter was by then known) until February 1979, which saw two services, one an “Afternoon Prayer Service” with a “Signing Chorus” and the other a more lavish affair. This was a full Communion service in which all were “asked to take part... signing the hymns”.⁶⁰ This encouragement of communal Deaf participation was unprecedented, and seemingly, not repeated. Reporting of services at the Jolimont chapel—and indeed, the actual occurrence of the services themselves—tapered off after this point. A special service was held in November 1984 in the chapel at Jolimont Square, commemorating the centenary of the first known Deaf worship in Melbourne. Despite the significance of the occasion, there is no mention of music or signed hymns at this service.⁶¹ By now, the Society had its first Deaf president, John Lovett, at the helm. Could the absence of music signal greater cultural change, or were Abraham’s successors just less inclined to spectacle?

Religious practices involving music spread beyond Jolimont Square’s walls. The Catholic Deaf community, having drifted away from the Society itself, coalesced around the John Pierce Centre (JPC), which opened in 1980 to provide services for a majority-Deaf congregation.⁶² However, several location changes over the years saw the Centre roll much of its worship into merged services for Deaf and hearing communities.⁶³ To this day, the Centre holds one Auslan service a month at its Prahran headquarters and provides an interpreter at St Francis’ Church, Melbourne, for an additional service.⁶⁴ The role of music within Deaf Catholic services is occasionally overstated in JPC publications, perhaps due to this high level of collaboration with hearing Catholics. Though JPC newsletters often

⁵⁸ “Church News,” *Deaf Talkabout*, March 1963, 2.

⁵⁹ “Church News,” *Deaf Talkabout*, May 1963, 2.

⁶⁰ “Notes from the Protestant Chaplain,” *Deaf Talkabout*, February 1979, 8.

⁶¹ “Centenary Church Service,” *Deaf Talkabout*, November 1984, 4–5.

⁶² “JPC History Timeline,” John Pierce Centre, accessed February 21, 2019, <https://www.jpc.org.au/about-jpc/jpc-history-timeline/>.

⁶³ “Easter Services,” *John Pierce Centre Newsletter*, March 1996, 1.

⁶⁴ “Spirituality,” John Pierce Centre, 2019, <https://www.jpc.org.au/pastoral-care/spirituality/>.

comment on musical happenings in Catholic services—for example, the “beautiful songs” conveyed by video link from the canonisation service for Mary MacKillop —this commentary is generally provided by hearing chaplaincy.⁶⁵

One known instance of signed music at JPC took place in September 1995, when a Eucharist service was filmed as part of the television documentary *In a Small Valley* featuring Deaf artist Peter Adams and his experience of Deaf culture. The Liturgy “prepared a celebration with a choir to lead the singing in sign”; the wording of this account suggests that such performances were not the norm for this church.⁶⁶ Despite greater Deaf participation than in Abraham’s endeavours, it appears that this presentation was also organised primarily for the benefit of prospective hearing audiences, providing both a novelty and an analogy to hearing experiences of worship. Again, it is difficult to make a case for a particularly Deaf flavour of liturgical music in Victoria.

Institutions in flux: implications for d/Deaf arts and culture

With religious influence over the society dwindling after Abraham’s passing, the Society, and Victoria’s Deaf communities, underwent considerable change in the middle of the twentieth century. It appears that creative and performing arts in Deaf circles were not immune to these changes. Society newsletter *DeafTalkabout* captures this shift, with mentions of creative endeavours decreasing in frequency between its founding in 1938 and its final edition in 1988. Does this truly represent the state of affairs within the Deaf community? Was this group as a whole actually engaging in fewer artistic fields than the rest of society? It is indeed plausible that a lack of accessibility and culturally relevant educational provision could have precluded Victorian Deaf engagement with the arts across the board. However, it is also possible that Deaf people looked outside the Society for creative outlets, and that these practices consequently escaped documentation. Here, I discuss the relationship between the changing role of the Society and Deaf engagement with the performing arts.

Between 1965 and 1975, the Society further distanced itself from Deaf social and cultural affairs. As at August 1965, the society’s objective was “To be everything to the Deaf and Dumb of this State from the day they leave school”.⁶⁷ By July 1967, this had

⁶⁵ Jules Hayes and Janette Murphy, “Mary MacKillop Celebrations,” *John Pierce Centre Newsletter*, December 2010, 8.

⁶⁶ “In a Small Valley,” *John Pierce Centre Newsletter*, September 1995, 13.

⁶⁷ “The Adult Deaf and Dumb Society of Victoria,” *DeafTalkabout*, August 1965, back cover.

changed, instead being “to assist the Deaf and Dumb”.⁶⁸ In October 1968, all references to an objective were removed, with every edition of *Deaf Talkabout* instead stating that “The Society is a Social Welfare Organisation which aims to assist all Deaf people who also have speech difficulty”.⁶⁹ Deafness was recast as a handicap to accessing the wider world, rather than as a source of community in itself. Society staff, including interpreters, became primarily social workers, with their remit lying in personal, employment, legal and medical fields.⁷⁰ Notably, this professed access to the hearing world provided by Society interpreters did not extend to the cultural realm. The Society appeared to first recognise this gap in provision in June 1976, advertising for relatives and friends of Deaf people who knew “the deaf manual language” to join a list of additional volunteer interpreters.⁷¹ December 1975 saw the completion of the Society’s rebirth as a medically driven, needs-based organisation, with the establishment of H.E.A.R. Service as a community health program offering audiology services in an external location to Jolimont Square.⁷² This conception of the Society as primarily a “needs-based” organisation perhaps explains reduced coverage of cultural events within its own publication.

The Society’s paternalistic leadership has attracted criticism at various points in its history. The Victorian Deaf Committee (also known as the Deaf Sub-Committee) was the Society’s sole consistent source of Deaf representation. At times, even these Deaf representatives were excluded from proceedings. Carty cites arrangements made at a 1930 board meeting as evidence of this exclusion; her analysis concludes that d/Deaf people could only attend four meetings a year, a state of affairs that persisted for many years.⁷³ Having thus been sidelined, the Deaf Committee assumed responsibility for the social and cultural undertakings of the Society. This could explain the dwindling number of social and creative events documented between the 1930s and the 1970s; the Committee was increasingly stretched thin as they advocated for Deaf needs as widely as they could. Tensions between the Deaf Committee and the hearing Society administration continued to brew until 1982, when delegates from several Victorian organisations for deaf people gathered for a special meeting. Attendees resolved to establish a new Deaf-led body: the Victorian Council of the Deaf (now Deaf Victoria).⁷⁴ This organisation, though designed to

⁶⁸ “The Adult Deaf and Dumb Society of Victoria,” *Deaf Talkabout*, July 1967, back cover.

⁶⁹ “Adult Deaf and Dumb Society of Victoria,” *Deaf Talkabout*, October 1968, back cover.

⁷⁰ “Social Welfare,” *Deaf Talkabout*, April 1975, 1.

⁷¹ “Do You Know the Deaf Manual Language?,” *Deaf Talkabout*, June 1976, 5.

⁷² “H. E. A. R. Service,” *Deaf Talkabout*, December 1975, 17.

⁷³ Carty, *Managing Their Own Affairs*, 22.

⁷⁴ “History,” Deaf Victoria, accessed June 16, 2020, <https://www.deafvictoria.org.au/history/>.

coexist with the Society, absorbed responsibilities previously belonging to the Victorian Deaf Committee. Whose job was it, then, to advocate for d/Deaf arts access?

While Deaf creative pursuits were falling by the wayside within the Society, the wider Deaf community was identifying the need for advancements in this area. The 1978 *DeafTalkabout* report from the International Visual Theatre Congress in Stockholm revealed that the promotion of Deaf arts was ripe for further consideration, and floated the possibility of Cultural Officers within the state Deaf organisations who would foster the creation of theatre arts, poetry, film and photography in Deaf spaces.⁷⁵ Music did not feature in this list of arts practices, though it became a moot point; the Society never appointed such a person. Likewise, the Society made no provision for the arts in further structural changes. However, 1983 saw the appointment of John Lovett as the first Deaf president in the Society's history. Could increased Deaf representation in the Society give rise to renewed concern with arts and cultural matters? In July 1985, a new group emerged within the Society: the Performing Arts Advisory Group.⁷⁶ Its first task was to make use of a State Government grant of \$3000 to aid in providing sign-language interpreters for six productions over the forthcoming year.⁷⁷ The advisory group existed primarily to choose which shows were most suitable to be interpreted and to audition interpreters for the chosen shows.

Despite these positive shifts, it appears that little changed at an organisational level. *DeafTalkabout's* final edition in 1988 heralded the establishment of a “new” newsletter, the *Victorian Deaf Society Newsletter*. The announcement suggested a change in focus for the new publication, providing a space for reporting on events with “a specific organisation link with the Society rather than necessarily club activities”.⁷⁸ No longer did the Society present itself as a “home” within which all things Deaf were contained, but instead it looked to be a conduit between the Deaf world and Melbourne's hearing community. By extension, “club activities”—and any arts practices that happened within them—were not considered by the powers that be as part of that dialogue, or worthy of public attention. The only musical events documented of late are those which would also be recognised in hearing circles, like sign-language choirs and interpreted theatre. It appears that arts coverage in Victorian Deaf institutional publications in recent years celebrates only the work that makes advances in collaboration with the hearing world, reflecting an ongoing desire for d/Deaf people to

⁷⁵ Jack Christie, “Deaf Theatre and Culture (‘OOO’),” *DeafTalkabout*, March 1978, 10–11.

⁷⁶ “Performing Arts Advisory Group,” *DeafTalkabout*, July 1985, 4.

⁷⁷ “Ministry for the Arts,” *DeafTalkabout*, April 1985, 1; “Ministry for the Arts,” *DeafTalkabout*, December 1985, 5.

⁷⁸ “Victorian Deaf Society Newsletter,” *DeafTalkabout*, November 1988, 1.

succeed on hearing terms. In this regard, “Deaf music” remains primarily a spectacle for hearing audiences. Even coverage of these events is hard-won, with more pressing matters of essential accessibility and advocacy taking precedence.⁷⁹ The following discussion covers some of these events as well as the neglected “club activities”. Despite their reduced coverage, these activities were significant sites for musical interaction in the second half of the twentieth century, and remnants of them persist today.

“Managing their own affairs”: music in Deaf-led contexts

As noted above, written documentation of Deaf music-adjacent practices in Melbourne in the latter part of the twentieth century is scarce. Without Society support, newly minted Deaf leaders would not have had a forum for this type of coverage. However, the sporadic coverage points to three key areas for exploration: sign-language choirs, the short-lived Victorian Theatre of the Deaf, and the enduring use of music at dance events. Although all started their lives within institutional clubs, the three areas dispersed to occupy different spaces in the Deaf cultural landscape.

The prevalence of sign-language choirs in Victoria gradually increased through the second half of the twentieth century. Groups formed to perform at significant events, both inside and outside the Deaf community. One such event was an annual Deafness Awareness Week church service; the 1986 event was held at Scots’ Church, Collins Street, and later broadcast on the ABC. The *Deaf Talkabout* account of the event acknowledges a “Deaf Sign Choir”, but I was unable to gather any further information on this group.⁸⁰ Likewise, photos from the 2004 National Week of Deaf People include a photo of six Deaf people signing while standing in a semicircle choir formation, though no mention of such an event exists in the program for the week.⁸¹ The 2006 Carols by the Lake event at Coburg Lake in December 2006 featured the Melbourne Deaf Choir, another group which proved difficult to trace, performing the community carols in Auslan.⁸² Like the earlier examples of sign-singing in liturgical contexts, the primary motivation of these groups seems to be to showcase Deaf language to the hearing public, rather than to foster Deaf engagement with the arts. Indeed, massed sign-singing has captured the attention of many hearing people around the country. My first exposure to Auslan, in fact, was at a community performance

⁷⁹ Susan, phone interview with author, 27 August 2019.

⁸⁰ “Deafness Awareness Week Service,” *Deaf Talkabout*, October 1986, 1.

⁸¹ “National Week of Deaf People,” *Victorian Council for Deaf People Newsletter*, December 2004, 2.

⁸² “Carols by the Lake,” *Victorian Council for Deaf People Newsletter*, December 2006, 9.

of the last movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 2010, where an Auslan choir performed alongside us. More recently, Auslan choir workshops have featured at folk festivals, including the 2019 Cygnet Folk Festival in Tasmania.⁸³ These workshops are pitched as fun, informal introductions to the language.⁸⁴ I suggest that the Auslan choir "movement", for want of a better term, is very much an amateur one which fosters connection between Deaf and hearing people. Community, rather than the development of a particular musical practice, is its aim.

Theatre, also evolving from club and Society origins, is another example of Deaf creative practice that included music. Inspired by the success of Deaf theatre groups in New South Wales and Queensland, the Society professed its support for the establishment of a "Theatre Drama Group" in February 1978.⁸⁵ Buoyed by community support, the inaugural meeting of the Victorian Deaf Drama/Theatre group took place on 12 November 1978.⁸⁶ After this point, it became known as the Victorian Theatre of the Deaf (VTD). Their first production, three performances of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* in September 1979, was well-received, according to a rapturous front-page review in the following month's *Deaf Talkabout*.⁸⁷ Later that year, the VTD followed this with their second production, *The New Step* by Leonard Cohen (for four actors and two voices). A brief review in the November 1979 *Deaf Talkabout* revealed the nature of Deaf interest in theatre, first commenting on the visual—sets and costumes—before describing the production itself: "a mixture of mime, sign language and music"⁸⁸. We therefore know that the group drew on musical devices in at least one of their productions, but it is not clear how extensively this was integrated into their creative practice.

The creative aims and objectives of the company were poorly defined in these early years. Despite touring to Adelaide with an original show designed to convey the issues of deafness to a hearing audience, original administrator Russell Woodley was at pains to explain that the company's main focus was "straight plays and review [sic] through mime".⁸⁹ Woodley's comments reject the potential for Deaf people to explore and create new works in their own language, instead reflecting a desire to establish Deaf theatre as

⁸³ "Cygnet Folk Festival 2019 Program," December 19, 2018, <https://www.cygnetfolkfestival.org/component/edocman/programmes/2019-cygnet-folk-festival-programme?Itemid=>.

⁸⁴ Karen, interview with author, 4 June 2019.

⁸⁵ "Victorian Deaf Committee News," *Deaf Talkabout*, February 1978, 8.

⁸⁶ "Victorian Deaf Drama/Theatre Group," *Deaf Talkabout*, October 1978, 8.

⁸⁷ "The Victoria Theatre of the Deaf," *Deaf Talkabout*, October 1979, 1.

⁸⁸ A. Dilettante [pseud.], "The Victoria Theatre of the Deaf," *Deaf Talkabout*, November 1979, 4.

⁸⁹ Russell Woodley, "Victoria Theatre of the Deaf," *Deaf Talkabout*, June 1981, 15.

equal in quality to hearing theatre. Certainly, any inclusion of music in the VTD's productions could be understood as a tool to furnish such a desire. This example parallels the trajectory of the world's first professional deaf theatre group, the Theatre of Sign and Gesture (*Teatr Mimiki I Zhesta*, or 'TMZh'), formally established in Moscow in 1963.⁹⁰ As Claire Shaw describes, the TMZh chose "instead to perform their deafness in terms that hearing Soviet people could understand", in productions which went as far as to include live orchestras. What drove this desire to assert equality on the stage? Deaf culture in the Soviet Union was enjoying what Shaw calls a "Golden Age" in the wake of Stalin's comments denouncing Deaf people in 1950.⁹¹ The TMZh was one of the achievements of this Golden Age, but before that was an even more significant one: the publication of the Soviet Union's first sign language dictionary by I. F. Geil'man in 1957.⁹² This established conditions under which an interest in Deaf language could flourish. Geil'man's work gave the stamp of legitimacy to what were once considered crude behaviours and, therefore, gave d/Deaf people the green light to explore them in new, creative contexts.⁹³

Following the publication of William Stokoe's pioneering American Sign Language dictionary in 1965, theatre also contributed to the development of this newfound, consciously Deaf identity in the United States. Early studies of ASL linguistics included performance in their remit; in this climate, productions like the National Theatre of the Deaf's (NTD) 1970s show, *My Third Eye*, offered valuable opportunities to "depict ASL as language" to the hearing public.⁹⁴ But by 1980, Humphries argues, ASL had moved out of this scientific domain and could be used purely to entertain. The NTD, for the first time, showed Deaf Americans that their language was more than an extension of their own practicalities; it could be leveraged for cultural and monetary capital.⁹⁵ As these examples show, Deaf theatre companies in both the USSR and the United States capitalised on this tide of scientific interest and seized the opportunity to capture public attention.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Claire L. Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR: Marginality, Community, and Soviet Identity, 1917-1991* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 132.

⁹¹ Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 19.

⁹² Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 6; Lenore Grenoble, "An Overview of Russian Sign Language," *Sign Language Studies* 1077, no. 1 (1992): 324. There are several sign languages used in the former Soviet Union, including Russian Sign Language (RSL) and Signed Russian. It is not clear from the literature which specific language was documented in this dictionary, but references to a subsequent edition imply that it was RSL.

⁹³ Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR*, 136.

⁹⁴ Tom Humphries, "Scientific Explanations and Other Performance Acts in the Reorganization of DEAF," in *Signs & Voices: Deaf Culture, Identity, Language and Arts*, ed. Kristin A. Lindgren, Doreen DeLuca, and Donna Jo Napoli (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2008), 7.

⁹⁵ Humphries, "Scientific Explanations and Other Performance Acts," 7.

⁹⁶ Humphries, "Scientific Explanations and Other Performance Acts," 16.

Returning to early 1980s Australia, certain parallels in Deaf cultural landscapes become apparent. Whilst the first Australian Sign Language dictionary did not make an appearance until 1989, the 1980s nevertheless represent a time of increasing awareness, rubber-stamped by the Society's aforementioned attempt to cultivate a body of community volunteer interpreters. Like the TMZh and the NTD, the VTD contributed to its Deaf community by staking a claim to its language rights. Making sign-language theatre deemed "as good as" anything else offered a crucial contribution to the project of affirming a Deaf culture. In the same way as sign-language choirs appeal to hearing audiences, any music within these productions could be used to attract hearing sensibilities.

Could the VTD operate in this outward-facing manner and still be received positively *within* the Deaf communities it ostensibly served? It is perhaps unsurprising that the VTD did not gain the traction it had hoped for within the Deaf community. This was lamented in the March 1983 *Deaf Talkabout*: "Many deaf people have said, 'We would love to see the show but we didn't know about it!'"⁹⁷ The company received a State Government grant in 1983, with which it proposed forming three distinct sub-groups in the hope that a more tailored approach to both professional and amateur work would attract more Deaf participants and audiences.⁹⁸ By 1986, however, coverage of the VTD's activities evaporated, with attention shifting to the increasingly popular national body Australian Theatre of the Deaf (ATOD). This organisation, though having similar problems with Deaf attendance (making up approximately ten percent of the total audience), distinguished itself from the Victorian body by advocating for sign language as distinct from mime.⁹⁹ The ATOD's success and eventual relocation to Melbourne took place among a climate of flourishing Deaf arts practices in the city, described further in Chapter Two.

Where sign-language choirs and theatre can be understood as strategies for validating Deaf culture outside the Deaf community, dancing has long been a means of fostering Deaf culture from within. Dancing as a frequent and well-received aspect of several Deaf events in Australia goes back at least as far as 1931. Over the Christmas period of that year, Deaf sporting teams from South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania joined the Victorians for a "Carnival", including sporting competitions and a wide range of social events. One of the main events was a New Year's Eve ball at Jolimont

⁹⁷ Chris Dunn, "Victorian Theatre of the Deaf," *Deaf Talkabout*, March 1983, 9.

⁹⁸ Chris Dunn, "Victorian Theatre of the Deaf," *Deaf Talkabout*, June 1983, 14.

⁹⁹ "Australian Theatre of the Deaf," *Deaf Talkabout*, May 1986, 5.

Square, complete with live orchestra.¹⁰⁰ Though it appears not to have been as well-received as the banquet held the following night, the event is nonetheless an example of a Deaf-only gathering with music at its centre.¹⁰¹ The presence and importance of dancing in Deaf society is also reinforced by the offer of dancing lessons at Jolimont Square in 1936, where a large bass drum was used as an aid.¹⁰² So, while music was not a central feature of adult Deaf culture in the first half of the twentieth century, it was more prevalent than has been assumed.

Dances remained an enjoyable and integral part of Deaf social life in Melbourne well into the second half of the twentieth century. These events raised funds for a wide variety of sporting and social groups based at Jolimont Square. These discos provided an opportunity for Deaf people to dance, but possibly more importantly, to socialise. Of course, Deaf Auslan users could do both simultaneously, with music proving no interruption to conversation. Live bands were a commonly commented-on feature of these events, both in terms of genre—"pop band"—and reception, with one particularly memorable band said to have "made music which nearly knocked everyone off the floor!"¹⁰³ The visual spectacle provided by a live band may have been just as much a drawcard as the music itself, with band choices often relating to the theme of given events, such as a French-themed event for the Deaf Film Society in 1981.¹⁰⁴ The appeal of these events did not initially dwindle with the introduction of recorded music. References to the use of a sound system occur in Society publications from the 1960s, and groups later experimented with visual elements using technology such as disco machines.¹⁰⁵ The liquor licence obtained by the Jolimont Square Social Club in 1980 set the scene for monthly events.¹⁰⁶ However, discos at Jolimont Square appear to have tailed off sometime in the mid-1980s. One contributing factor was the increasing tension between the Society and its neighbours regarding the high noise levels generated by such events.¹⁰⁷

The gradual demise of dance events may, of course, be a reflection of the way mainstream society has changed through larger forces than those in the Deaf community.

¹⁰⁰ "Our Little World," *Victorian Deaf*, February 1932, 6.

¹⁰¹ "The N.S.W. 'Silent Messenger' and the Interstate Visit," *Victorian Deaf*, February 1932, 9.

¹⁰² "Dancing Lessons with a Big Bass Drum," *Victorian Deaf News*, June 1936, 13.

¹⁰³ "Jolimont Basketball Club," *Deaf Talkabout*, July 1975, 12; "Victorian Deaf Sporting Committee," *Deaf Talkabout*, November 1975, 7.

¹⁰⁴ J. Welsh, "Deaf Film Society," *Deaf Talkabout*, June 1981, 10d.

¹⁰⁵ "Adult Deaf Sports Association of Victoria," *Deaf Talkabout*, November 1963, 4; Michael Veale, "Jolimont Deaf Soccer Club," *Deaf Talkabout*, August 1981, 16.

¹⁰⁶ Flynn, *No Longer by Gaslight*, 93; "'Western' Disco," *Deaf Talkabout*, May 1982, 13; "Disco 'Rock and Roll,'" *Deaf Talkabout*, July 1982, 15.

¹⁰⁷ "Noise in Jolimont Square Car Park," *Deaf Talkabout*, June 1984, 2; "Noise in Jolimont Square Car Park," *Deaf Talkabout*, July 1984, 18.

Melbourne's Deaf community, after all, still enjoys a diverse range of social and cultural events. For instance, Melbourne City Deaf Club's monthly social event moved to Transport Bar at Federation Square in February 2005.¹⁰⁸ This appears to reflect general trends in Melbourne's social practices, with people far more likely to socialise over Friday night drinks than attend regular dinner dances today.

Local Deaf social clubs in other Victorian suburbs and towns, however, have continued to hold dance events. One of these is the Ballarat Deaf Social Club's biennial Starlight Ball, last held in 2019. This event attracts Melbourne and interstate Deaf people as well as those in and around Ballarat. The organisers have used a variety of strategies to better include Deaf people in the musical elements of the night, replacing the traditional band with karaoke, music videos and a DJ at the 2008 event. The inclusion of karaoke meant that song lyrics were easily accessible to all, and gave Deaf people an opportunity to participate in the music-making itself by signing songs. These "karaoke songs" were reportedly such a hit that attendees wanted more.¹⁰⁹ Whilst these dance events do not frequently feature musical *performance*, music has undoubtedly contributed to their appeal, and therefore to local Deaf culture. In fact, they are perhaps the most "culturally Deaf" sites of musical engagement in Victoria's history. Music at these events does not provide a spectacle for outsiders, but only for those in the room. Shared enjoyment takes priority over the need to advocate for one's own language and culture.

Conclusions

At Abraham's 1902 Ballarat "entertainment", Anglican Dean of Ballarat Nathaniel Parkyn spoke up for Abraham's cause. He reportedly asked the captivated audience to imagine "how dreadful must be the silence of the deaf—no note of music, no joy bells, no whisper of soft voices".¹¹⁰ The earliest instances of d/Deaf interactions with music in Victoria simultaneously refuted the fallacy in Parkyn's words and mobilised the perceived "dreadfulness" as a spectacle for hearing audiences. Examining these musical artefacts contributes to our understanding of the injustices faced by Victoria's Deaf community in these early days and reveals that d/Deaf people have long defied popular expectation when it comes to music.

¹⁰⁸ "Deaf Community News," *Victorian Council for Deaf People Newsletter*, February 2005, 5.

¹⁰⁹ Marnie Kerridge, "Ballarat Starlight Ball," *Communicate*, November 2008.

¹¹⁰ "Dean Parkyn, of Ballarat, and the Deaf and Dumb," *Gesture*, March 1903, 4–5.

Under Abraham's leadership, the Society influenced Deaf musical practices, if at first by way of exclusion. Though he brought signed hymnody to Australia as the missionaries for the deaf did in the United States, this did not give rise to practices of signed song as it did overseas.¹¹¹ It appears, in fact, that active participation in signed hymnody was largely withheld from the Deaf community; Abraham's campaign to assume what Lane calls "the mask of benevolence" was largely for his own ends.¹¹²

More recently, Deaf arts practices have slipped institutional moorings. As the Society and related groups set their sights on welfare, these arts practices fell into the leadership of the Deaf community itself. This has proven a double-edged sword, as Deaf people gained control but also the increased burden of advocacy. It is understandable, then, that a great deal of Deaf-led performance in the second half of the century continued to create a spectacle for hearing audiences on their terms. Like Deaf performers in other countries, the Deaf community soon realised the power of the performing arts as a means of legitimising their own language and culture to the outside world; strategically, this took precedence over honing a uniquely Deaf craft. Music became an important tool in this process.

Behind closed doors, music also has a long history in Australian Deaf culture through dance. The enduring appeal of these events invites us to challenge our preconceptions of what musical participation should look like and reminds us that passive listening is an audist construct. The innovative visual, kinaesthetic and participatory musical interactions explored at these events inform our understanding of the emerging Deaf arts practices to be explored in Chapter Two.

¹¹¹ Bahan, "Face-to-Face Tradition," 34–35; Maler, "Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers."

¹¹² Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

Chapter Two: I DO WHAT? DEAF A-R-T-S! Deaf-led performance and music

The Melbourne Recital Centre's normally opulent Salon looks more like a house party. Excited twenty-somethings swig from beer cans and chat, switching at will between English and rapid-fire Auslan. A jumbled semicircle of cushions and coffee tables demarcates the performance space, and a single row of chairs sits behind. A temporary stage abuts the far wall, upon which a laptop is perched atop a tower of sound equipment. I select a cushion and sit down, angling my "hearing side" towards the action.

Some minutes later, Siobhan McGinnity, the founder of charity Musicians 4 Hearing, encourages us to turn off any hearing devices and tune into our own sensations. As the music starts, I realise that "hearing" is unnecessary: the sub-bass hum is somehow both inaudibly low and aggressively loud. Spikes in volume pack punches. Three dancers, dressed in white, sign languidly across the floor. They mirror the music's growing urgency as they begin to move towards each other. Powering themselves forward, they approach the edges of the space. Dancer Luke King wedges himself between me and my neighbour, evidently searching for something.

The musical material intensifies; higher pitches join the rumble. Luke rejoins his colleagues in the centre, all three breaking into a vigorous on-the-spot run. I marvel at how they synchronise with the music, their legs marking precise subdivisions of the beat. The music suddenly changes again, and the dancers slow. Moving languidly once more, they strip with abandon and drop, impossibly gradually, to the floor.

The lights come back up, and the dancers hurriedly dress. Sitting in front of the stage, they field McGinnity's questions. Choreographer and dancer Anna Seymour tells us how her personal experiences of Deafness, music and dance manifest themselves in this choreography. But I am especially fascinated with this music that seemed to bypass my ears. How might a Deaf person experience it? Speaking through an Auslan interpreter, King explains. It is not the sound he interacts with, but a physical manifestation of this rhythm, something raw and primal. As he puts it, "I could have really lost myself."¹ He does not dance in time with the music; instead, he signs, "the way we moved, the sound followed us". "Keeping in time", after all, is a hearing construct. Seymour, King and other

¹ *Skin, Earshot* book launch, chor. Anna Seymour, music by Jannah Quill, Melbourne Recital Centre, Melbourne, 7 March 2019. Note that all quotes attributed to Deaf people in this chapter are taken from the English interpretation provided by Auslan interpreters at live events.

Deaf artists reject it and make the music do their bidding. *Skin*, the work described in this account, is one of several created by deaf Melburnians epitomising this attitude to creative practice.

In this chapter, I delve into local Deaf-led performance works that incorporate music to deduce what makes a work distinctively Deaf in the Australian context. Drawing on participant-observation at several Deaf events in Melbourne, I explore how Deaf approaches to performance and musical ritual differ from hearing ones, linguistically, spatially and conceptually. I explain how the creation and performance of such works reflects elements of Australian Deaf culture and history and the Deaf community's relationship to hearing society. First, I describe the specific sonic and technical features of music in local Deaf-led art forms, both live performance and film-based, in an attempt to characterise an overarching genre or aesthetic. Secondly, I examine the interaction between Auslan and music in these works. Several Deaf Australian artists describe Auslan as both the medium and the reason for performing. I ask whether this viewpoint comes to life in a way that connects to music. Next, I consider how Deaf and hearing people collaborate on the creative processes behind these works. Subsequent sections explore the nature of the boundary between performer and audience in Deaf arts and the implications of collaboration, the latter being especially pertinent to Deaf art forms that include music. Finally, I analyse the construction of leadership in Deaf arts, looking to understand who gets to create it and what this means for the future of the movement.

Musical attributes

Seymour's dance works *Skin*, described above, and *SPIN* explored the interaction between Deafness and musical engagement, both thematically and experientially. *Skin* gave its audience a visual representation of Deaf musical experience through Seymour's eyes. *SPIN*, meanwhile, engaged its attendees in a dance party as a Deaf person would experience it.² Both works featured electronic soundtracks, which I discuss later. Musically, the two soundtracks share several attributes, the most prominent being the use of extremely low frequencies. In *SPIN*, the lowest of these frequencies was used as a "heartbeat" underpinning the entire work. Its simplicity encouraged closer listening. At the start of the performance, standing completely still in the almost pitch-black studio space at Northcote

² *SPIN*, dir. Anna Seymour, engagement specialist Bec Reid, sound by DJ Callum Padgham, deaf hosts Luke King and Robbie Burrows, dancers Amanda Lever, Jon Clarke and Benjamin Hoopman, Northcote Town Hall, 22 September 2018.

Town Hall, I noted that I quickly tuned into the subtlest of variations in this heartbeat, picking up the minutest gradations of tempo even with an earplug in place. Although the track grew in complexity from this foundation, its pitch range remained small, and it returned to the “heartbeat” at the end.

This soundtrack, with its heightened focus on vibration, both invited and subverted particular participant behaviours. As well as being introduced to the Deaf practice of accessing vibrations through balloons, we were beckoned to come and touch a platform upon which the DJ stood, obligated to bow down at his feet. Excitedly anticipating the vibrations I expected to feel through this platform, I was surprised and disappointed to find that the carpeted platform deadened all tactile trace of sound. Suddenly, what had seemed like a natural behaviour—bowing down to the DJ—felt quite odd. On reflection, I wonder whether this subversion deliberately commented on sensory deprivation. This encounter notwithstanding, it seemed that by the end of the show, even the hearing people around me were motivated primarily by vibratory stimuli. Even the final applause unfolded naturally from the soundtrack. It was not restrained to the Deaf convention of waving one’s hands in the air; instead, we stomped furiously on the floor and replaced the soundtrack’s vibrations with our own as our footsteps rumbled through the space.³

Whilst *SPIN* encouraged active audience behaviours through its soundtrack, *Skin*’s audio was notable for both its synchronisation with the performers and its profoundly physical effect on the audience. The aforementioned low-bass hum contrasted with the dancers’ light footsteps. As both movement and music intensified, though, the overall effect was violent. A heartbeat again emerged from the bass, with an undertone and then a “thump” over it, like a rapid turn of a volume dial. This and the addition of a steady bass drum beat combined to cause extreme discomfort. However, when the sound abruptly stopped, I felt something missing. It was unsettling to have felt equilibrium with something so violent, and furthermore, to have physically felt music almost without hearing it. For perhaps the first time in my life, being hard of hearing was no disadvantage.

Other Deaf productions which include music place less physically confronting, but still distinct, demands on hearing listeners. Irene Holub’s Fringe show *Invisible Skin* interspersed video sequences—some silent, some with sound effects—with songs. These songs were not vocalised, but instead featured electronically realised rock-styled

³ Per Koren Solvang and Hilde Haualand, “Accessibility and Diversity: Deaf Space in Action,” *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 16, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 7., <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2012.761158>. Hand-waving emerged as a replacement for conventional applause in Deaf communities during the 1980s, and has gradually become the norm.

instrumentals which accompanied lyrics performed in Auslan. Hearing sound artist Gregor Kompar's soundtrack bore traces of minimalism: extended repetition and limited pitch materials. The bass part in the first item oscillated over only two notes; a more complex number moved through D, A and G. Despite the limited material, I struggled to digest the music as my classically trained expectations were thwarted in other ways. Often, textual phrases did not line up with chord progressions; musical phrases would sometimes start in ways I found odd, like one beginning on chord IV. Where tension was more teleologically developed, it obfuscated the narrative. The final song, featuring the text "I accept me. / Me accept. / I know / I know / I know" built rapidly in texture until it came to an abrupt stop.⁴ This drove the audience to a round of Auslan applause. This was premature, as it turned out: a final visual sequence ensued. Like the soundtracks in Seymour's works, Kompar's work pushed audible boundaries, with the guitar part frequently distorted. Without vibration, this distortion was not physically or aurally accessible. This soundtrack, unlike the other works described, was not designed to be accessible; instead, it cultivated a state of bemusement, with which Deaf people are intimately familiar, in its hearing audience.

Some Deaf films also include music that poses challenges to hearing audiences. I viewed five short films made by Deaf artists as part of this research: two at a session of biennial disability film festival The Other Film Festival and three at Flow Festival.⁵ The first, *Silence*, was an Iranian Arabic-language film, whilst the subsequent four were Australian films, either entirely silent or in Auslan. Music featured distinctively in both *Silence* and *I See, You Say*.⁶ The latter is a film by Melbourne Deaf filmmaker and educator Ramas McRae, whose role in the Melbourne Deaf community I return to later. Both films included unbalanced soundtracks with unusually loud sound effects. Whilst *Silence* was dubbed into English for the screening I viewed, I was unable to hear the dialogue over the sound effects and music. Despite the film's title, music featured prominently throughout, with strategic instrumentation choices contributing to the film's ever-increasing tension.

⁴ *Invisible Skin*, Irene Holub, cinematography by Ramas McRae, Auslan performer Marnie Kerridge, music and sound design by Gregor Kompar, Loop Project Space and Bar, Melbourne, 21 September 2019.

⁵ "Who We Are," Flow Festival Australia, accessed June 17, 2020, <https://www.flowfestivalaustralia.com>. The inaugural Flow Festival, held in November 2018 at the Northcote Town Hall, was a three-day festival showcasing Deaf arts by members of the Australian Deaf community. Supported by Arts Access Victoria and Darebin City Council, the event featured visual arts exhibitions, children's entertainment, Auslan storytelling, visual vernacular performances, short film screenings, dance performances and workshops. It was conceived as a biennial festival, but the next event has been postponed to 2021 at the time of writing.

⁶ Maryam Pirband, *Silence* (Iran, 2014), 7 min; Ramas McRae, *I See, You Say...* (Australia, 2018), 10 min; both screened at "Our World Our Shorts", The Other Film Festival, Malthouse Theatre, 23 November 2018.

I See, You Say..., meanwhile, problematises assumptions about what a film score “should” be. The film’s opening sequence features a series of loud, disjointed electronic samples, stopping and starting abruptly. At the end of this sequence, the sound stops entirely. We soon learn that the protagonist is, in fact, an Auslan interpreter arriving at the police station for a last-minute job. This confusion is punctuated by a sudden burst of music, with heavy bass and a growing hum conveying the foreboding the interpreter feels as she approaches the interview room. Despite the difficulties I had listening to it, it was evident that the music in this film was carefully considered. Like the live Deaf productions I have seen, *I See, You Say...* drew its material from electronic sources. However, unlike live events, the music in Deaf film appears to be underpinned by a more conventional, teleological drive.

In general, the films at The Other Film Festival featured music and sound, whilst those at Flow Festival did not.⁷ There are two possible explanations for this clear delineation: audience considerations, and how the filmmakers themselves are positioned within the Deaf community. The first of these is quite straightforward. Though it welcomed hearing attendees, Flow Festival was primarily by Deaf people, for Deaf people. As an Auslan-first festival, sound was quite low on the list of priorities. Conversely, The Other Film Festival had a much larger target audience. Not only did it feature the works of an increasingly diverse (and global) disability community, it also enjoyed some mainstream advertising and attendance. Furthermore, Deaf attendees were notably absent at the session I attended; in catering to a wider audience, it makes sense that organisers would look for works with aural material.

Whilst the examples in this section do not represent a single “Deaf genre” of music, they share several musical attributes. In general, the music which serves these Deaf productions relies on technologically mediated, non-naturalistic techniques of creation, rather than on live or recorded instrumental performance. On first glance, this trend contradicts what is popularly described as good musical practice for including d/Deaf people: seeing, touching and exploring real-life instruments.⁸ Perhaps this is deliberate; a Deaf artist commissioning such confronting music cannot be charged with condoning hearing “deficit” narratives about music and d/Deafness. Instead, Deaf arts uses musical

⁷ Flow Festival, Day 3, Northcote Town Hall, 25 November 2018.

⁸ Simon Leo Brown, “Deaf Students Make Music with Melbourne Symphony Orchestra - ABC News,” July 23, 2015, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-23/deaf-students-play-music-with-melbourne-symphony-orchestra/6642540>. The UK-based charity Music and the Deaf is amongst the biggest proponents of this approach; artistic director Danny Lane visited Melbourne in 2015 to work with the students of the Victorian College of the Deaf.

elements to shift the burdens of physical discomfort and potential for miscommunication from Deaf shoulders onto hearing ones. By removing any hint of the traditional classroom, orchestra and theatre, the musical examples described here subvert audist conceptions of music and expectations of integration, both explored further in Chapter Four.

Furthermore, these musical attributes perhaps better reflect the things that many Deaf—and hearing—people do today: go to raves, music festivals, electronic gigs. The music itself is not used to make Deaf arts “more Deaf”, but, instead, “less hearing.” What other attributes, then, might make a performance “more Deaf”? The first that comes to mind is Auslan, to which I now turn.

Auslan and Deaf arts

Deaf-led art forms, presented primarily in natural sign languages, have long flourished in majority-Deaf contexts. In the United States, these art forms have been characterised as “oral” traditions which predate the linguistic codification of ASL in the 1960s. However, these art forms assumed a new role as they entered mainstream contexts. In the previous chapter, I considered this trend in the works of d/Deaf theatre companies, including the Soviet-era TMZh, the United States’s NTD and the now-defunct Victorian Theatre of the Deaf. Deaf arts became a vehicle through which Deaf people could both advocate for and showcase the expressive properties of their native language. This section considers whether Auslan plays a similar role in Melbourne’s current Deaf arts scene.

Certainly, Deaf arts in Melbourne provides a platform for Auslan advocacy in both Deaf and hearing realms. At The State of Deaf Arts, a panel event held at Arts Centre Melbourne in June 2019 as part of the Kiln series, moderator and organiser Jodee Mundy asked the panel, “How is each of your work influenced by Deaf culture in Australia?”⁹ Interestingly, panellists’ answers were preoccupied with how Deaf arts might educate on Deaf culture, rather than with its influence on their work. Theatre director Jessica Moody, poet Walter Kadiki, dancer Elvin Lam and the aforementioned Seymour all cited Auslan as a key concern, with Kadiki expressing the hope that his work would invite respect for sign language and get Deaf children “signing and proud of their language.”¹⁰ Earlier in the

⁹ The State of Deaf Arts, moderator Jodee Mundy, panel discussion, Arts Centre Melbourne, 19 June 2019. Although quotations here come from my own notes, a recording of the event is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmSTvParuz4>. Mundy is herself a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults) who works as an interdisciplinary artist and creative director and who identifies as a member of the Deaf community.

¹⁰ The State of Deaf Arts.

discussion, dancer and artist Luke King cited language access, rather than any creative attribute, as the major success of his multi-modal exhibition at Collingwood's Bus Projects Gallery in 2018. Meanwhile, Moody's work as artistic director of Deaferrent Theatre has shifted in focus since the company's inception: initially performing Auslan translations of works like *The Vagina Monologues*, the company now presents new works written in Auslan, including *Paris is Fine* at the 2018 Melbourne Fringe Festival. This represents a progression from the theatrical works examined in the previous chapter: no longer looking to equalise Auslan, Deaferrent Theatre capitalises on its potential for originality. From these examples, it is evident that Deaf artists continue to view their works as important tools of Auslan advocacy. But how is Auslan used in performance, especially where music is involved?

Again taking cues from American Deaf culture, I hypothesised at the outset of this project that music and Deaf-led arts would coalesce in Auslan-based signed song, either newly composed or translated. However, this hypothesis was soon challenged. The study of signed song is under-represented in both musicological and Deaf cultural scholarship, even in the United States where signed song practices appear most prevalent. There are several potential reasons for this. Signed song is perhaps the ultimate fusion of Deaf and hearing cultures, influenced by both but fully claimed by neither.¹¹ Furthermore, the gestural and expressive potential of signed languages means that they are difficult to study in musical contexts without crossing over into dance.¹² In Australia, these difficulties take on yet another dimension. There are extraordinarily few Deaf song-signers; sign-language renditions of songs are most common amongst a specialised body of Auslan interpreters, some of whom we will meet in the next chapter. Ultimately, signed song is relatively insignificant amongst Australian Deaf-led art forms.

One exception I encountered to this was *Invisible Skin*, in which Auslan performer Marnie signed lyrics to Gregor Kompar's soundtrack as described in the previous section. Earlier, I distinguished between performances which translate English texts and those with original Auslan scripts. This distinction loomed large in my fieldwork, as I attended various Deaf productions. *Invisible Skin* appeared to fall into the latter category. The captioned song lyric texts often did not follow English grammatical norms, with lines like "I found me free embracing it" and "I accept me. Me accept" having more in common with Auslan than English.¹³ Creator Irene Holub's discovery of Auslan, now her primary language, was the

¹¹ Bahan, "Face-to-Face Tradition," 34; Maler, "Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers."

¹² Maler, "Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers."

¹³ *Invisible Skin*, 21 September 2019; "Auslan," DeafNav, accessed May 15, 2020, <https://deafnav.com.au/understand/communication/auslan>. Although these sentences did not follow the

major theme of the work. From this, I concluded that the work would have been in Auslan from the outset, with captioned translations added later. This conclusion inflected my initial understanding of how language and music interact in this work.

If the above held true, Marnie's sign-singing could be read as a descendant of the Deaf storytelling practices in Bahan's account, one of the few texts tracing the history of signed song. In United States Deaf circles, he writes, certain people became appointed storytellers, tasked with entertaining, educating and preserving history.¹⁴ These chosen few are said to have a level of sign-language prowess that transcends fluency: described as "smooth signers", they can "weave a story so beautifully that even complex utterances appear simple, yet beautiful."¹⁵ Although Bahan's characterisation implies a certain level of artistry, it also presupposes natural, rather than stylised, uses of language. Marnie's performance appeared to match such a description. Whilst my own Auslan skills are limited, my knowledge of key words, movements and expressive qualities gives me a sense for where signs might be modified for rhythm or other musical attributes. In this performance, connections with the music seemed incidental; whilst Marnie's non-manual movements were sometimes heightened, and her use of signing space bigger than it would be in ordinary conversation, it appeared natural and almost effortless. Was Marnie, then, an Australian Deaf "smooth signer"?

Delving deeper, it became evident that the story behind such works cannot be explained by simply transposing the United States Deaf narrative onto the Australian context. In our subsequent correspondence, I asked Marnie about the process of putting this work together. By the time she got to the project, she told me, the "translation", as she called it, and the music were completed.¹⁶ Her job was to follow it: not a straightforward task, as "a certain rhythm had to be found".¹⁷ This work pattern meant that the Auslan was choreographed, its apparent ease only superficial. In Marnie's telling, it became a technical process, involving video rehearsals and cuts made to the soundtrack to align music and language. Although Marnie did use Auslan as a storytelling medium, the language also took on the qualities of an abstract artistic resource as she brought it into line with the musical material.

general time-topic-comment structure prevalent in Auslan, this structure can be flexible. The general absence of indefinite articles and prepositions also suggested Auslan leanings.

¹⁴ Bahan, "Face-to-Face Tradition," 26.

¹⁵ Bahan, "Face-to-Face Tradition," 24.

¹⁶ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

¹⁷ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

This raises a contentious question in Deaf arts, especially where music is involved. When is it appropriate to use sign languages as a visual resource, rather than a means of communication? The cultural appropriation of sign languages is a sensitive issue in Deaf research and arts practice.¹⁸ Globally, this is most prevalent in discourse surrounding signed song. Hearing people, often ASL students, are increasingly making videos of themselves signing songs and uploading them to YouTube. In these videos, ASL signs are sometimes interspersed with artificial sign systems like Signed Exact English (SEE) and other hand gestures; the result is often incomprehensible to a Deaf audience. This attracts frequent criticism from American Deaf viewers who object to the indiscriminate and non-grammatical use of their primary language.¹⁹ Against this background, the following discussion considers how it might be acceptable to use Auslan as a non-linguistic creative resource.

In November 2019, I was invited to the relaunch of Anna Seymour's dance collective The Delta Project, which, though Deaf-led, provides a space for Deaf and hearing dancers to collaborate and explore Deaf experiences of physicality and movement. This launch marked the culmination of a two-week residency at Chunky Move in Southbank. Working with hearing choreographer Stephanie Lake and fellow dancers Amanda Lever and Kyall Shanks, Seymour presented selections from the dance explorations that had taken place during the residency. Seymour had no qualms in expressing that Auslan was, indeed, a physical resource upon which they drew in the development of this new choreography.²⁰ Indeed, the first sequence began with each dancer telling a brief snippet of a story in Auslan, drawn from their initial conversations on the first day of the residency. However, it was clear that even these diverged from linguistic representation: the movements extended beyond the usual signing space and used entire bodies. Though language took a back seat in the items that followed, the linguistic worldview from which the work emerged remained clear throughout. Sometimes, this was apparent only in Lake and Seymour's exegesis; one work was described as a "travelling sentence". Unlike Marnie's work in *Invisible Skin*, these explorations of language bore little visible correlation to the music which accompanied them. Speaking to Seymour after the show, I found out that Lake had selected the music, which often had little thematic, linguistic or stylistic link to the dance sequences.²¹ The absence of a clear link between

¹⁸ Cripps, "Ethnomusicology and Signed Music," 4.

¹⁹ Maler, "Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers."

²⁰ The Delta Project relaunch, dance performance, dancers Anna Seymour, Amanda Lever and Kyall Shanks, chor. Stephanie Lake, Chunky Move, Southbank, 15 November 2019.

²¹ Personal communication, 15 November 2019.

dance and music begs the question: why is co-opting Auslan for dance seemingly more acceptable than doing so in a musical performance?

Predictably, the use of Auslan as a resource came up in conversation during the event's question-and-answer session. When asked about their most useful improvisatory or creative processes, all three dancers agreed that Auslan played a role and elaborated upon Seymour's suggestion that the movement patterns in Auslan could be used in abstraction. To hearing Lever, who has learnt Auslan through her friendship with Seymour, this process releases Auslan "into the wild", whilst Shanks noted that it helped him, as a newcomer, appreciate the three-dimensionality of Auslan as a language.²² This dialogue gave rise to a question on the boundaries of using Auslan in this manner. Seymour described her Deaf status and claim to ownership of Auslan as giving her particular creative licence that would not be granted to a hearing Auslan student.²³ As a custodian of her native language, she can share that licence by leading a collaboration, a principle to which I return later in the chapter.

Whilst Deaf dance receives little attention in the literature, this lack of coverage itself offers another potential explanation for why using sign language as a resource might be more accepted in this medium. Dance, like music, can be used to communicate Deaf epistemologies and challenge audist assumptions.²⁴ Unlike signed song, however, it does not have the responsibility of functioning as a form of sign-language literature.²⁵ In fact, studies of the latter, whilst acknowledging the shared spatial and temporal qualities of dance and sign-language literatures, make a point of distinguishing between the two art forms.²⁶ Future research in this area may benefit from making clearer distinctions between

²² The Delta Project relaunch.

²³ The Delta Project relaunch.

²⁴ Kaite O'Reilly, "What Words Look Like in the Air: The Multivocal Performance of Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 11, no. 3/4 (September 2001): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800108568637>; Rebecca J. Ritzel, "Dancing While Deaf: The Nuances of Moving to Music You Can't Hear," *Dance Magazine* 94, no. 1 (January 2020): 84. The small body of literature on Deaf dance speaks of the desire to do away with conversation.

²⁵ O'Reilly, "What Words Look Like in the Air," 42; Bahan, "Face-to-Face Tradition," 33; Maler, "Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers" Whilst playwright and disability artist Kaite O'Reilly writes of exploring how "words had muscles, a sinewy corporeality" in her work with Common Ground Sign Dance Theatre, she is herself not deaf, and this does not appear to be a view shared within the Deaf community. Meanwhile, Bahan and Maler both describe signed song as forms of sign-language literature.

²⁶ See Heidi M. Rose, "Stylistic Features in American Sign Language Literature," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (April 1, 1994): 145, 153–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462939409366078>; H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose, "Introduction," in *Signing the Body Poetic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 2.

gesture and language, which would in turn allow for more nuanced descriptions of the differences between signed dance and signed music.²⁷

This discussion has depicted Auslan in Deaf arts as both a source of motivation and an abstract creative resource. In Seymour's aforementioned work *SPIN*, however, Auslan is mobilised to imagine a post-linguistic utopia. The dance sequences were punctuated by Auslan conversations between the Deaf hosts, with distorted English voiceovers. Invoking a nightclub, *SPIN* established a scenario in which spoken communication is invariably challenged. In this environment, the Deaf hosts' tales of communication difficulties, like attempting to order drinks without speaking, reframed audism as a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, Auslan was predominantly the medium, rather than the subject, of conversation. At the same time, *SPIN*'s sonic attributes inverted the balance of power; the distorted voiceover was only just comprehensible to me as a hard-of-hearing person, and would even have given the hearing audience pause. Despite not being the main focus, Auslan became the most desirable language for that context. For once, the burden of understanding fell to hearing, rather than deaf, people.

But ultimately, conversation broke down entirely. The dancers made their intentions clear to us with gestures and movements that transcended language, and both Auslan and English became irrelevant. *SPIN* used Auslan not to assert its legitimacy, but instead as a tool in cultivating a heightened sensory experience. By obscuring the English interpretation, the work initially took us *inside* what it might feel like to be deaf, facing potential physical disorientation and the inability to communicate. *SPIN* demonstrated how all languages can erect barriers, and celebrated our ability to communicate in other ways. It also forced us to reconsider the boundaries between performer and audience member, both roles that can be understood differently in Deaf contexts. I now turn to examine that distinction.

Performer and audience: boundaries and hierarchies

SPIN was among the earliest Deaf productions I attended during this project. My experience of this active and immersive event informed several lines of inquiry. One of these involved the nature of the boundary between audience and performer in Deaf

²⁷ Sarah Wilbur, "Gestural Economies and Production Pedagogies in Deaf West's Spring Awakening," *TDR/The Drama Review* 60, no. 2 (June 2016): 146., https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00552. In reviewing Deaf West's revival of the musical *Spring Awakening*, Wilbur explores "layered gestural economies", noting how gestural cues and signs function in different ways.

contexts. In *SPIN*, this boundary was fluid. The event started with the majority-hearing attendees seated on the floor at the back of the room, listening attentively to the aforementioned conversations between the Deaf hosts. We passively observed at some distance from the action. However, our role changed as our hosts beckoned us to the floor to join their dance. My notes from the day reflect that shift: first referring to “audience”, I switch to the term “participants”, and, ultimately, the hierarchy dissolves entirely as I describe all involved as “dancers”.²⁸ The social and spatial interactions between people as they followed Deaf dancers and negotiated paths across the floor were central to the work itself. *SPIN* could not exist without this “audience”, moving at the behest of the Deaf hosts as they led and educated us. Having experienced the immersion of *SPIN* first-hand, I began to wonder if these shifting boundaries and hierarchies had their roots in how Deaf communities interact with their own art forms.

In Chapter One, I noted the proliferation of Deaf social groups within the Society. Although these were established around specific interests, such as sporting codes, their activities were primarily an excuse for Deaf people to gather and socialise. This trend parallels that of Deaf clubs in the United States and elsewhere.²⁹ In part, it stems from the nature of sign-language communication: before text messaging and video calling, most communication between Deaf people took place in person. These opportunities to meet, therefore, were particularly precious. Despite the prevalence of modern technologies, this value remains the same among Deaf community members today; however, Deaf performances have assumed the role that these old Deaf clubs once had in fostering social interaction. This context shapes the roles of performer and audience in the Deaf community.

Flow Festival yielded one such example. Punctual to a fault, I had taken a seat towards the back of the theatre whilst waiting for the last session of the festival to start. A Deaf man sat next to me, and began signing with the people sitting on the other side of him. Shortly after, two women entered and sat a few rows further forward. They caught his eye, and started signing. After some back-and-forth, the man stood and motioned to move past me. Before he did, though, he apologised to me in English: “it’s not that I don’t like you, but I have to sit next to my wife!”³⁰ I laughed and waved him on. This interaction reflected a deeply social mindset. At the time, I could not understand how the man had

²⁸ Quoted from fieldnotes, 22 November 2018.

²⁹ Anna Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs: Intercultural Communication for Sign Language Interpreters* (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 1999), 116.

³⁰ Personal communication, recorded in fieldnotes, 25 November 2018.

intuited my preferred language. He had not seen me interact with anyone, Deaf or hearing. Later, though, I realised that my lack of interaction betrayed me. Being Deaf in this context would have mandated social engagement. As a Deaf man, he evidently felt some social obligation to me, ensuring that I did not feel rejected as a result of him moving seats. I was startled by this degree of concern, and thought his desire to chat untimely, given that the performance was imminent. For me as a hard-of-hearing English speaker, conversation would have been both impolite and impossible. From a Deaf perspective, though, the performance was evidently not his main focus.

Indeed, performances, and therefore performers, took a back seat throughout most of my day at Flow Festival. Several sessions began with no fanfare, but instead with an organiser suggesting to a couple chatting in the doorway that perhaps they should sit down, as the event should have started already. Similarly, the ends of sessions were not clearly demarcated. A hip hop dance session, which was not interpreted, dissolved before my very eyes: I could not see where the performance ended and social chat between performer and audience began. Through the day, I found myself missing that in-between moment of anticipation when the lights go down, and the sensation of coming back to earth as a show concludes. This is certainly not true of all Deaf works; the majority of productions I attended with more mixed audiences framed performances more explicitly. However, it appears that clearer delineations mainly serve to capture the attention of hearing audiences.

The primary reasoning for observing hearing norms in this way, like other attributes noted in this chapter, can be traced to the educational function of Deaf performance. Considering this function gives us another lens through which to examine performer-audience dynamics in Deaf arts. In these contexts, Deaf performers and hearing audiences are perhaps more accurately characterised as teachers and pupils respectively. Without exception, the performances I attended took the experience of Deafness as their subject matter, using this spotlight to convey elements of this experience to hearing and Deaf audiences alike. To educate, Deaf performers actively invite the hearing gaze. One show in which this gaze was particularly apparent was Chelle Destefano's *The Auslan Movement*, a 2019 Melbourne Fringe show which fused Auslan storytelling with the creation of an art installation.³¹ Glancing around the room before the show, I was surprised to notice that I was not the only person with pen and paper in hand: in the row in front was a woman writing in a Melbourne Polytechnic-branded notebook. She was, evidently, attending the show as an assessment requirement for an Auslan certificate or diploma.

³¹ *The Auslan Movement*, Chelle Destefano, Brunswick Mechanics Institute, 14 September 2019.

Overt notetaking can be a sensitive matter in ethnographic research. The presence of our notebooks could invite perceptions that we were treating Deaf people as scientific objects to be scrutinised.³² Furthermore, the act of writing asserts a particular linguistic privilege, demonstrating our access to written language, which has no analogue in Auslan. At this performance, though, it seemed not to matter. Performer Destefano would undoubtedly have seen us scribbling away, and yet, she greeted us individually and unguardedly before other attendees arrived. Simply by being there, we had demonstrated our willingness to learn, and Destefano was keen to teach us.

This climate of open learning extends beyond the confines of the shows themselves, further blurring the boundaries of Deaf performance. Almost without exception, Deaf arts events include a question-and-answer session with the artists after the show; the Deaf performers remain in the spotlight to educate. Such events are not entirely outside the realm of my own performing experience, but they are the exception rather than the norm: special, behind-the-scenes opportunities that are offered to a select few subscribers or other guests. But here, performers make themselves accessible to all. At *The Auslan Movement*, this session became an extension to the performance. Hearing and Deaf people alike asked Destefano about the nature of Auslan, her life story and the creative process underpinning her work. The chat that had left me confused at Flow Festival was presumably one of this nature. Here, though, the audience interaction progressed further. After question time, audience members were invited to contribute to the installation that Destefano had created during the performance. I, amongst others, joined Destefano on the stage. I fingerspelled my name to her, and she repeated the signs whilst holding a wet piece of paper, as she had done at key points in the main performance. The distinctive scrunching patterns dried into sculptures, as seen in Figure 2.1 below. This was a personally significant interaction for me, as I was able to sign directly to Destefano, bypassing the interpreter, under the gaze of the audience. Regardless of the language they occurred in, though, these interactions made visible another major function of Deaf performance: the co-construction of identity. Deaf identities are contingent and malleable; like other labels, they are constructed on the distinction between “us and them”.³³ In expressing her personal identity, Destefano cast hearing audience members as “them”; we were forced to actively reconsider our own social position in joining the performance. The name

³² Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 36.

³³ Irene W. Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195320664.001.0001>.

sculptures represented colliding Deaf and hearing viewpoints. In this work, Deaf and hearing people met in the moment of performance. In Deaf arts which feature music, which I will now examine, this co-creation is a distinctive part of the creative process itself.



Figure 2.1. Sculpture, A-L-E-X signed into wet paper, Chelle Destefano, *The Auslan Movement*. Photograph by author, July 2020.

Collaboration, creation and identity

The distinction between Deaf and hearing cultures is largely arbitrary. Nevertheless, it has become a cornerstone of Deaf identity formation, with Deaf scholars like Tom Humphries arguing that we cannot understand what it means to be Deaf without it.³⁴ Indeed, the distinction provides a shorthand for a worldview shaped by the experiences of physical deafness and sign language use. However, the disjunction inherent in these descriptions of Deaf culture occludes our understanding of the role and function of Deaf arts in Australia. Despite the “Deaf arts” label, the interconnection between Deaf and hearing is fundamental to both identity formation and arts practice.³⁵ The following discussion reveals that in Australian Deaf arts, collaboration takes precedence over both cultural and disciplinary labels.

³⁴ Tom Humphries, “Of Deaf-Mutes, the Strange, and the Modern Deaf Self,” in *Culturally Affirmative Psychotherapy with Deaf Persons*, by Neil S. Glickman and Michael A. Harvey (Florence, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 1996), 105; Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities*, 20–21.

³⁵ Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities*, 21.

At The State of Deaf Arts, the importance of intercultural dialogue was a recurring theme. This dialogue emerges from a certain moral imperative. In fostering cross-cultural collaboration, Deaf artists look to combat the lack of dialogue that they perceive at a systemic level. Holub suggested in her talk that lack of collaboration between hearing and Deaf people is one of the factors restricting educational opportunities for Deaf children, a point explored further in Chapter Four. Meanwhile, Deaifferent Theatre director Moody expressed a desire to collaborate with anybody who found themselves excluded from the mainstream. For Moody, Deaf theatre is the natural home for this intercultural collaboration because the nature of the discipline provides scope for action, not empty discussion: “less talk, more walks”.³⁶ Deaf artists use their work to both advocate for this intercultural dialogue and to model it for mainstream society. Impatiently waiting for change, as moderator Mundy put it, “we’re doing it ourselves”.

This emphasis on self-determination has implications for the terms on which Deaf artists look to collaborate with hearing people. Fearing that they may be exploited or tokenised, Deaf artists question the motivation behind frequent requests to collaborate with hearing performers. Descriptions of sign language as “interesting” or “amazing” act as immediate red flags. But as a fellow attendee at The State of Deaf Arts asked, how can hearing people avoid this tokenism?³⁷ This knowledge is crucial for positive artistic collaborations. King suggested that the most culturally sensitive collaborations see Deaf people taking the lead, and hearing collaborators “listening and being direct and curious”. This conversation reaffirmed my initial delineation between “Deaf-led” and hearing-led arts practices, and has particular implications for the role of music in Deaf arts. As noted earlier in the chapter, Deaf artists appear not to create their own music, so how does their desire for self-determination manifest itself in its use?

The process behind several of Seymour’s major dance works, described earlier in the chapter, is the clearest example of the dynamic desired by Deaf artists. King’s comment about *Skin*, referenced at the start of this chapter—“the music followed us”—was, in fact, a literal one. Beginning with the work *Distraction Society*, first performed at the 2016 Melbourne Fringe Festival, Seymour cultivated a particular workflow for incorporating music and dance. *Distraction Society*, *SPIN* and *Skin* were choreographed in their entirety without the music, a far cry from the use of music as an instructional aid for dance that we saw in Chapter One. At The State of Deaf Arts she described the sonic material

³⁶ Jessica Moody, presentation, The State of Deaf Arts.

³⁷ Question from audience member, noted in fieldnotes, The State of Deaf Arts.

commissioned for her works as a response to her choreography, rather than the other way round. For Seymour, this strategy circumvents “the audio-dominant world” in which we live; in these terms, the motivation itself is Deaf-led, rather than hearing-led.³⁸ Furthermore, *Skin* provides some insight into what genuine motivation for a hearing artist might look like. Sound artist Jannah Quill, who created and performed the electronic soundtrack to *Skin*, explained how after meeting in 2018, she and Seymour discovered the similarities between the dance parties that they organised in their respective cultural spheres, and bonded over their shared fascination for how sound could be manipulated and experienced in different ways.³⁹ Quill’s motivation is attached to creative potential, rather than a specific desire to showcase sign language or to work with Seymour *because* she is Deaf. This is a distinction with potential for further exploration: that Deaf/hearing collaborations should serve the Deaf community or the work itself, rather than the hearing collaborator.

Likewise, I was intrigued by the creative process behind the musical content of Holub’s *Invisible Skin*, which I described earlier in the chapter. As I noted there, Marnie downplayed her role in its creation, initially describing the music as “already completed” by the time she received the material she “had to follow”.⁴⁰ This initial detachment gave way to increased collaboration as the process unfolded. As she learnt the material, it became apparent that she simply could not get some signs to fit in a natural way with some sections of the soundtrack. Kompar, she says, amended the track to suit, “adjusting the length or cutting some of the music”.⁴¹ Kompar, it transpired, was sensitive to the needs of his Deaf collaborators, and engaged with them for the well-integrated, seamless production I saw. It appears that Kompar epitomised the kind of hearing ally that Deaf artists seek out in their works.

As well as fostering collaboration between hearing and Deaf people, Melbourne’s Deaf arts scene supports collaboration across art forms. Although a Deaf artist will describe themselves primarily as a “visual artist” or a “dancer”, in reality, Deaf artists work across a wide range of disciplines, genres and styles. Luke King is perhaps the most obvious example. Although we met King earlier in his role as a dancer in *Skin*, his background is in the visual arts. Having trained as a printmaker, he also experiments with drawing and watercolours, and has only in recent years expanded his practice to include

³⁸ Anna Seymour, *The State of Deaf Arts*.

³⁹ Jannah Quill, comment in Q&A session, *Skin*, *Earshot* launch.

⁴⁰ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

⁴¹ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

collaborations with other visual artists and dancers.⁴² Many of the other artists mentioned in this chapter cross disciplines in similar ways, sometimes within a single work. When talking about their work, therefore, these disciplinary labels become increasingly irrelevant. This in itself is not unique to Deaf arts, of course; many of the performances I attended could be understood as having descended from postmodern trends in performance art. However, looking to Deaf language and culture provides some insight into why this might be the favoured approach amongst Deaf artists.

The promotional video for The State of Deaf Arts used the conventional sign for DEAF. However, instead of using the sign ART—which is most commonly associated with the visual arts—participants fingerspelled the word A-R-T-S.⁴³ This underscored the multiplicity of included art forms. Likewise, as I noted earlier, *Invisible Skin* saw sign-singer Marlie billed not in those terms, but instead as an “Auslan performer”. This specific choice of language removed any specifically musical connotations from the description of her role. Both examples assert the importance of Deaf culture and identity, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from particular constructions of discipline or genre which have roots in mainstream hearing culture.

Looking outwards, Deaf communities around the world share collectivist values, especially the expectation of sharing information and pooling resources.⁴⁴ Despite local Deaf artists’ evident willingness to collaborate with hearing artists, it stands to reason that a Deaf artist might first look to pool resources with one of their own before looking outwards. In the vanishingly small Australian Deaf arts community, these collaborations may cross disciplinary divides out of sheer necessity. Furthermore, collaborations between Auslan users remove some of the logistical and communication difficulties that arise when Deaf people work with hearing artists. The implications of collectivism on the Australian Deaf arts movement are explored further in the next section.

The politics of Deaf arts

Melbourne’s Deaf arts community is described as a microcosm within an already small local Deaf community.⁴⁵ As the examples throughout this chapter illustrate, this “little

⁴² Luke King, The State of Deaf Arts.

⁴³ “The Kiln | The State of Deaf Arts”, Arts Centre Melbourne promotional video, May 9, 2019, <https://youtu.be/u6B0z1NlgYY>.

⁴⁴ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 40.

⁴⁵ Anna Seymour, The State of Deaf Arts.

world” gives a select few Deaf Australians a platform upon which to showcase their craft.⁴⁶ These practitioners appear to be offered particular licence to create works which push the boundaries of the more essentialist paradigms of Deafness upon which Deaf “establishment” is founded.⁴⁷ Yet, they proudly call their works “Deaf arts”, and portray the Deaf community on its behalf to hearing outsiders. In this section, I interrogate how this select few came to obtain these positions of Deaf cultural leadership, and the implications this might have for the future of Deaf-led arts in Australia.

The construction of Deaf leadership and cultural membership in Deaf communities around the world is increasingly contested. In his ethnography of the Thai deaf community, Wrigley problematises how Deaf people appoint leaders and representatives. As he puts it, the only “true” Deaf leaders emerge from multi-generational Deaf families—a phenomenon which is, in fact, vanishingly rare.⁴⁸ Likewise, Mindess comments on the rigidity of the Deaf community’s membership criteria in the United States context, suggesting that one must be born into it.⁴⁹ In her telling, the importance of heredity is not its correlation with sign-language acquisition or fluency, but instead, a particular Deaf orientation of thought. Deaf leaders in Australia and elsewhere emphasise what is known as their “strong Deaf” heritage in establishing their leadership credentials.⁵⁰ Examining the personal backgrounds of Melbourne’s most prominent Deaf arts practitioners, though, we find that many do not fit this mould. The aforementioned Holub, for instance, describes herself as “a product of exclusion and mainstreaming” through her upbringing as an oral deaf member of a hearing family, before learning Auslan and becoming accepted into the Deaf community.⁵¹ This has not precluded her from taking positions of leadership in several areas of the Deaf community, including a two-year term on the board of Deaf Australia, the peak advocacy body for culturally Deaf Australians.⁵² Most pertinently to this study, Holub joined forces with previously mentioned Deaf community members Ramas McRae and Medina Sumovic to establish Flow Festival, the Deaf arts festival described elsewhere in this chapter. Despite not meeting traditional definitions of what is known as “strong Deaf”, she has nevertheless assumed a similarly valued position in the Deaf arts

⁴⁶ “Our Little World” was a regular Society newsletter column documenting travels and friendships within the Victorian Deaf community. See “Our Little World,” *The Victorian Deaf*, September 1928; “Our Little World,” *Victorian Deaf*, November 1929.

⁴⁷ Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities*, 20.

⁴⁸ Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness*, 106.

⁴⁹ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 40.

⁵⁰ One example is the professional biography of Deaf Australia CEO Kyle Miers, “Staff – Deaf Australia,” accessed April 29, 2020, <https://deafaustalia.org.au/about-2/staff/>.

⁵¹ Irene Holub, presentation, The State of Deaf Arts.

⁵² “2018-19 Annual Report” (Blackburn North: Deaf Australia Inc., 2019), 15.

world.⁵³ In fact, her previously marginalised status gives her more clout. Mindess suggests that Deaf people are more readily convinced by personal experiences than by abstract or scholarly evidence; drawing on her lived experience as subject matter therefore adds authority to Holub's work.⁵⁴ Whilst this explains her current reputation, it sheds little light on how she was able to move from the periphery to the centre. In the absence of commonly accepted Deaf credentials, how was she able to gain the acceptance that allowed her to take the lead?

To answer that question, I consider the story of Holub's Flow Festival colleague, McRae. Although he can lay claim to being "strong Deaf", his heritage is not tied to the Australian Deaf community: he was born and raised in Lithuania and undertook extensive tertiary education in the United Kingdom before moving to Australia. Consequently, his status in the local Deaf community cannot be taken for granted. An advertisement for a speaking engagement at the Auslan Teachers Association of Victoria in 2013 acknowledges that at that time, McRae's credentials were yet to be established within the community: "Many of you may not know him as he is new to Melbourne."⁵⁵ In a culture where personal connections reign, this would have initially disadvantaged him. In a relatively short time, though, McRae assumed considerable responsibility in the Victorian and Australian Deaf communities. A prominent advocate for Deaf access, he instigated the campaign to have Auslan interpretation at AFL matches, and is a prominent figure in Deaf education in Melbourne. McRae's clear willingness to use his knowledge and skills for Deaf community benefit aligns with collective conceptions of Deaf culture, where giving back to the group is of utmost importance.⁵⁶ Likewise, because Holub's work draws attention to the historical injustices performed against deaf children, she is seen as using her skills to support the Deaf cause. Any individual achievements afforded them by their creative work are secondary to the benefits they can offer the Deaf collective.

The use of the term "Deaf arts" reveals another collectivist trait of Deaf communities: group identification.⁵⁷ Whilst this chapter has identified certain parallels between the works of local Deaf artists, it also shows that this group identification does not necessarily manifest itself in any agreed-upon aesthetic principles. In fact, several of the

⁵³ Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness*, 110. "Strong deaf" is a term used to denote this purported elite status of Deafness.

⁵⁴ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 66.

⁵⁵ "ATAV: Auslan Teachers Association of Victoria Inc. 5th Annual General Meeting," advertisement, 2013, https://www.mltav.asn.au/macedonian/index.php?option=com_jcalpro&Itemid=100124&extmode=view&extid=540.

⁵⁶ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 40.

⁵⁷ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 40.

practitioners identified in this chapter, including McRae, are notable for creating works which stand out from the crowd. Earlier, I noted the distinctive use of music in McRae's film *I See, You Say*. Like Seymour and her use of Auslan as a visual resource, McRae appears to be offered particular creative freedoms without fear of rejection by the wider Deaf community. I suggest that this freedom amongst particular Deaf artists comes from their already-established leadership credentials. Their work is not valued *because* it pushes boundaries, but because the Deaf community trusts and respects the wider work of those who make it.

The achievements of these Deaf leaders also have longer-term implications. Whilst Deaf artists engage deeply with their own creative practices, they also take on considerable responsibility in consciously acting as Deaf role models. This stems from the shared value that Deaf people should learn from other Deaf people wherever possible.⁵⁸ Whilst Deaf scholarship does not yet appear to have examined the potential function of role modelling within Deaf arts, the general importance of Deaf adult role models for Deaf youth is well understood.⁵⁹ Here in Australia, this role modelling is sometimes performed by didactic means, like dancer Elvin Lam's Auslan ballet lessons for children, but it is also an inherent aim of Deaf arts in general.⁶⁰ The 2018 Flow Festival, for instance, provided a platform for Deaf artists and performers to foster the aspirations of Deaf youth, potentially enlarging the future pool of creative practitioners. Though ostensibly there for their own performances, some of the students from Furlong Park School for Deaf Children took the opportunity to see Deaf film and storytelling in action, and furthermore, had a rare chance to mingle with a larger group of Deaf people. Talking about Flow Festival at The State of Deaf Arts, Holub mentioned her desire to mentor and train future producers. Flow Festival, therefore, represents a Deaf arts community in transition, as current practitioners look to enlarge their base in preparation for a future generation of Deaf artists and leaders.

McRae's and Holub's stories indicate that the restriction of Deaf arts—and, therefore, Deaf music—to a few “chosen” practitioners is not a foregone conclusion. Within the Australian Deaf community, Deaf arts is not politicised by its aesthetic value, but instead by the perceived attitudes of those creating it. Here, parallels with Cynthia

⁵⁸ Peter V. Paul, “What's It Like to Be Deaf? Reflections on Signed Language, Sustainable Development, and Equal Opportunities,” *American Annals of the Deaf* 163, no. 4 (2018): 474, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26529755>. A sentiment shared by the panel at The State of Deaf Arts, it is an increasing theme in Deaf scholarship.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth A. Moore and Donna M. Mertens, “Deaf Culture and Youth Resilience in Diverse American Communities,” in *Youth Resilience and Culture: Commonalities and Complexities*, ed. Linda C. Theron, Linda Liebenberg, and Michael Ungar, Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2015), 148, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9415-2_11.

⁶⁰ Elvin Lam, presentation, The State of Deaf Arts.

Peters's reading of American Deaf theatre appear. Peters suggests that the often-collaborative and creative processes of Deaf theatre are of greater importance than the aesthetic qualities of the work itself.⁶¹ In these contexts, even solo performers are read as Deaf representatives, rather than Deaf individuals.⁶² American Deaf theatre practitioners, she argues, prioritise the "socio-political, communal, and real" over the "aesthetic, the individual, and the ideal" valued in mainstream theatre.⁶³ Whilst these stories expose the machinations of how trust and reputation are established amongst Deaf Australians, they highlight that this status can be achieved from a range of starting points. Mundy closed The State of Deaf Arts with a rallying cry to all present: "Welcome to the movement!"⁶⁴ In doing so, she noted that we had all—d/Deaf and hearing—expressed the prerequisite attitude by attending in the first place, and had thus earned a place in the future of Deaf arts. The small size of Melbourne's creative Deaf community cannot be read as a marker of exclusivity, but instead indicates the number of people who have the motivation and the resources to light the path.

Conclusions

Opening her talk, Mundy asked, "What does that mean: Deaf arts?"⁶⁵ Whilst the movement emerged from a desire amongst Deaf practitioners to create works in Auslan, this chapter reveals that Australian Deaf arts is concerned with far more than making performance accessible to the Deaf community. Instead, Deaf artists use these works to comment on their own life experiences, drawing on resources from both the Deaf and hearing communities for creative effect. Whilst Auslan is one of these resources, it is not always the primary focus. The resulting works become part of the discourse between Deaf and hearing Australians, a conversation which unfolds between creators, performers and audience members alike.

The use of music in these works exemplifies this characterisation of Deaf arts. In the main, Deaf artists call upon hearing musicians to collaborate on interdisciplinary works; the music is manipulated to suit the interests of Deaf collaborators, rather than simply being transplanted onto Deaf contexts, as we saw in Chapter One. Indeed, manipulation is

⁶¹ Cynthia Peters, "Deaf American Theater," in *Signing the Body Poetic*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose, 1st ed., Essays on American Sign Language Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 78–85.

⁶² Peters, "Deaf American Theater," 86.

⁶³ Peters, "Deaf American Theater," 89.

⁶⁴ The State of Deaf Arts.

⁶⁵ Mundy, The State of Deaf Arts.

a particularly pertinent term here; the music itself has little in common with the live instrumental performance that audiences might associate with the word “music”. Again, though, we cannot conflate these interests with the provision of Deaf accessibility. Some musical outputs are accessible to Deaf audiences—like the inherent tactility in Seymour’s work—but others only reference this accessibility, like Kompar’s *Invisible Skin* soundtrack. Music is primarily employed as a strategy for conveying aspects of “the deaf experience”, sensory or social, to hearing audiences.

Despite the “Deaf arts” label, practitioners within this field do not rely on specific labels to delineate their practice. Retaining the “Deaf” label does not exclude, but instead signifies a specific attitude: valuing the leadership and creative potential of culturally Deaf Australians. Under this umbrella, artists collaborate across disciplines and hearing status, rejecting stereotypical labels derived from outdated and audist practices.⁶⁶ Galvanised by a Deaf culture which does not treat the notion of “the work” with the same reverence as hearing people might, Deaf arts looks to subvert traditional boundaries between hearing and Deaf, and between performer and audience. In the next chapter, I examine and challenge these boundaries from a different perspective: that of the arts-specialist Auslan interpreter. But before I do, I propose that the breakdown of these boundaries and hierarchies necessitates a rethink: if Deaf arts rejects labels, is the notion of “Deaf music” even a concept worth defining?

⁶⁶ Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities*, 9.

Chapter Three: Auslan-interpreted music

On a wet and windy October day, Geelong's Courthouse Theatre is abuzz as local band The Rockheads launch into their signature tune, "We're the Rockheads". Performers are packed in like sardines; wheelchairs jostle for space with instruments, microphone stands and cables. The band's loyal fans cheer raucously. The Rockheads, however, are no ordinary band: disabled band members are accompanied by support staff and music therapists who play along. An Auslan interpreter, squeezed into the back corner of the stage, signs the lyrics. Her steady beat is unflinching amidst the chaos; sometimes, she draws a sign out over multiple beats. Between sets, she joins another interpreter on the dance floor, exhorting audience and performers alike to join them. Next, folk duo Zane and Zoe take to the floor for a relaxed, intimate set. This time, the interpreter moves to the centre of the space and stands right beside the two singers, seemingly part of the group. Sometimes, her use of signing space appears to mirror the song's pitch: hands held near shoulder height in the upper registers, all the way down to waist height for lower notes. Throughout the day, I marvel at both her technical skill and the way she moves so effortlessly between professional and social spheres. As I see it, her role exists on an equal footing with that of the Rockheads' support crew, and yet, it seems not to be as readily recognised. How, then, can we better understand the Auslan interpreter's role?

The Diversity Rocks festival, from which this account is drawn, unashamedly prioritised disabled people's access to music. To do this, organisers implemented several accessibility measures, including wheelchair access, accessible toilets, supported activities and quiet spaces. Auslan interpretation was another of these measures with a clearly utilitarian function. In day-to-day life, the utility of this function is increasingly apparent. In 2020, the twin emergencies of bushfires and COVID-19 have seen Auslan interpreters become a regular fixture on Australian televisions. The National Australian Interpreter Booking and Payment Service (NABS), meanwhile, provides interpreters for medical appointments.¹ But what about the social and cultural lives of Deaf people? As an English speaker who generally passes as hearing, I engage freely with the world at large, including the performing arts. Music permeates my life. I listen to music and attend concerts, and enjoy incidental exposure to music through television, radio and ambient music. My musical knowledge gives me social capital; knowing what genres or bands another person likes helps me to situate them in my overall worldview. This privilege is often

¹ "About NABS," National Auslan Interpreter Booking Service, accessed March 29, 2020, <https://www.nabs.org.au/about-nabs.html>.

denied to Auslan users, who depend on sign-language interpreters to access such cultural knowledge. To add insult to injury, on the relatively few occasions that interpreters are made available in the arts, their role is misunderstood in the hearing world.

During my fieldwork, I discussed my research with colleagues and acquaintances. I was excitedly asked, three times in a single day, if I had seen a video of ASL interpreter Amber Galloway Gallego working with Twista, said to be the fastest rapper in the world.² As it turned out, the video had gone viral on social media; it appeared on my Facebook feed that night. Many people marvelled at Gallego's seemingly superhuman skill. But none of them could tell me what language she was using, let alone that it was not the same sign language used in Australia. Almost immediately, my mind wandered back to Ernest Abraham and "The Language of Gesture": here we were, over a century later, and sign language was still considered a spectacle, rather than a means of communication. In her response to the media frenzy surrounding the video, journalist and child of deaf adults (CODA) Lilit Marcus noted, "when you treat other languages like fun, exotic modes of performance instead of like utilities, you are praising people who interpret for the deaf—while ignoring the deaf."³ We would not praise a Swahili interpreter in the same way, she contends, and yet, the misconception of sign language persists among hearing people. Working in close proximity to performers, sign-language interpreters suddenly assume a performer's identity, as far as hearing people can see. Adding to this tension is the manner in which hearing interpreters, rather than Deaf people, become the public face of sign language.⁴ From a Deaf perspective, interpreters exist to assume a purely functional role. The distinction between performance and utility is clarified in this chapter from the unique social and cultural perspective of the Auslan interpreter, one hitherto underrepresented in Deaf scholarship.⁵

In this chapter, I explore how interpreters make performances of live music and musical theatre accessible to the Deaf community in Auslan. First, I introduce the specialist interpreting agency Auslan Stage Left, situating it and its interpreters within Australia's overall interpreting landscape. Subsequent sections focus on the interpreting process, illuminating the many considerations that go into song translation. The first of these highlights that aesthetic considerations in sign-language interpreting are inseparable from utilitarian ones. The second

² Twista (@TWISTAgmg), "She's the Real MVP for Keeping up Wit Me #summer96 #signlanguagequeen," Video, Twitter, August 18, 2019, <https://twitter.com/TWISTAgmg/status/1162819902694182912>.

³ Lilit Marcus, "Twista ASL Interpreter's Viral Moment Misses the Point," CNN, August 23, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/23/opinions/asl-interpreter-twista-video-deaf-culture-marcus/index.html>.

⁴ Pierre Schmitt, "Representations of Sign Language, Deaf People, and Interpreters in the Arts and the Media," trans. Luce Aubry, *Sign Language Studies* 18, no. 1 (2017): 140.

⁵ Dennis Cokely, "Shifting Positionality: A Critical Examination of the Turning Point in the Relationship of Interpreters and the Deaf Community," in *Interpreting and Interpreting Education: Directions for Research and Practice*, ed. Marc Marschark, Rico Peterson, and Elizabeth Winston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

explores one particular sub-genre of musical theatre—the jukebox musical—and how Deaf culture affects the way it is interpreted and understood, before looking at implications for non-native signers. The third examines the role of musical elements in interpreting and how these might be conveyed to Deaf audiences. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to how interpreters conceive of their role in this uniquely performance-adjacent space. It considers their attitudes to their work, their requisite skills and attributes and the language with which they are discussed, and finally, their relationships with casts and audiences.

Sign language interpreting for the stage in Australia: introducing Auslan Stage Left

The major provider of Auslan interpreting in Australian arts contexts is the not-for-profit organisation Auslan Stage Left. Founded in Melbourne in 2012 by veteran Auslan interpreter Susan Emerson and Deaf actress, director and consultant Medina Sumovic, it aims “to provide quality access to the arts for Deaf people.”⁶ Though its primary remit lies in Auslan-interpreted theatre, Auslan Stage Left increasingly provides interpreters for any arts-related event, including musical performances, in Melbourne and across Australia. The organisation also provides theatre interpreting training and Deaf cultural consultancy.⁷ Its very existence demonstrates both practical and conceptual differences between day-to-day and cultural Auslan interpreting.

As described in Chapter One, Auslan-interpreted musical theatre performances emerged in Melbourne in the 1980s. However, as with interpreting in any area not deemed an essential service, resources were scarce, and the work fell largely to volunteers. Although committees and training schemes for arts interpreting were proposed, it appears that very few of these measures gained traction. Training and advocacy for Deaf access to the arts languished, and the few interpreters with the specialised interest and skills for this work were largely left to their own devices.

Essential interpreting, meanwhile, was professionalised in Australia in the late 1980s, following events including the establishment of the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) in 1977 and the publication of the National Policy on Languages, which recognised Auslan as a community language, in 1987.⁸ Sign language interpreting associations emerged around the country, and state deaf societies separated welfare

⁶ Auslan Stage Left, “About Auslan Stage Left,” Auslan Stage Left, accessed October 21, 2019, <http://www.auslanstageleft.com.au/the-team/auslan-stage-left/>.

⁷ “Training,” Auslan Stage Left, accessed March 29, 2020, <http://www.auslanstageleft.com.au/services/training/>; “Consulting,” Auslan Stage Left, accessed March 29, 2020, <http://www.auslanstageleft.com.au/services/consulting/>.

⁸ Jemina Napier, Rachel McKee, and Delia Goswell, *Sign Language Interpreting: Theory and Practice in Australia and New Zealand*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Federation Press, 2010), 8.

and interpreting functions to create dedicated interpreting agencies. However, these agencies still existed to provide services only in essential fields, attending mainly medical and legal appointments.

Today, state-based and national interpreting agencies like Auslan Connections and NABS act primarily as centralised booking services to connect individual Deaf people with interpreters who work independently. For Auslan Stage Left, though, booking individual interpreters for a show is just the beginning: its directors must also source materials for shows and advocate for Deaf community access.⁹ Its interpreters do not work in the same relative isolation as interpreters in other fields; collaboration is at the heart of the process.

Chapter Two emphasised the importance of collaboration between Deaf and hearing people in Deaf arts. This same emphasis is reflected in Auslan Stage Left's working practices. Co-director Susan Emerson describes Auslan Stage Left's Deaf language consultancy as a significant point of difference from other interpreting agencies.¹⁰ Each show for which Auslan Stage Left provides interpreters sees them collaborate with a Deaf consultant, a process detailed elaborate later in the chapter. This Deaf representation is a key part of the interpreting process in this context. However, interpreters are often already personally connected to the Australian Deaf community. Consequently, Auslan Stage Left is not just an external service provider; it forms part of the complex framework of Deaf community interaction in Australia.

We see the depth of these connections as we meet my interlocutors. This chapter takes its insights from interviews with three Auslan interpreters, all of whom couple work for Auslan Stage Left with providing day-to-day interpreting services. Despite being physically hearing, each interpreter is firmly ensconced within the cultural Deaf community. For two of them, this came by accident of birth, being CODAs in multi-generational Deaf families. The third, Sarah, married into a Deaf family, wholeheartedly adopting Deaf culture. Describing her relationship with the Deaf community, she repeated how “lucky” she was to “have the chance” to use Auslan as her primary language at home, and to raise bilingual children.¹¹ By virtue of these familial connections, all of these voices are, to some extent, Deaf voices. To them, Auslan is not a novelty, but the reality of their daily lives. Whilst they undoubtedly cannot speak for the Deaf community as a whole, they provide a valuable snapshot at rather closer range than I could alone.

For the CODAs I spoke to, their careers were the direct result of a Deaf upbringing. Mike and Susan, born into Deaf families, described interpreting as something that they had not

⁹ Susan, phone interview with author, August 27, 2019.

¹⁰ Susan, phone interview with author, August 27, 2019.

¹¹ Sarah, phone interview with author, August 6, 2019.

necessarily aspired to, but instead were encouraged into by their parents. This speaks to the common experience of many CODAs: falling into the role of interpreter for their Deaf families from a young age and proceeding to transfer this skill to a career working with d/Deaf people.¹² Moving into paid Auslan interpreting work allows them to capitalise on their existing skills. As Susan put it, “What? You earn money?”¹³ Imagine her surprise, aged seventeen, upon finding out that what she did every day for free could generate an income. Auslan interpreting, however, is not motivated by prospective financial gain: all three interpreters spoke of the vast gulf between the long hours they put in and the pittance they earn from it. This makes Mike’s and Susan’s willing acceptance of their parents’ aspirations for them all the more telling, and demonstrates the collectivist bent we see in many facets of Deaf culture. Though Mike joked, “my parents pinned me down and forced me into it!”, he also spoke passionately about the Deaf community’s right to access and participate in education, sport and the arts. Giving back to his community is a natural part of his life.¹⁴ Including the stories of these particular interpreters contributes to Deaf scholarship, in music and beyond, by including historically neglected CODA perspectives. My interlocutors are bilingual and bicultural: their lives are the “contact zones” between Deaf and hearing that can, in themselves, reveal a great deal about the underpinnings of Deaf culture.¹⁵

From music to Auslan: texts, mechanics, aesthetic

Although the process of taking a script or set list and producing an Auslan equivalent to accompany a live performance differs between interpreters, it follows a generally standard trajectory, drilling down from structure into word-level matters of text and style. I begin this section by explaining this process, before examining how Deaf audiences receive the results. The collaborative role of the Deaf consultant in this process then becomes a springboard for considering what “the aesthetic” means in an Auslan-interpreted context.

To understand how Auslan interpreters work in the performing arts, it is first necessary to distinguish between translation and interpreting. Whilst the term *translation* refers in general terms to the process of transmitting information from one language to another, in linguistic terms it pertains only to written texts. Definitions of *interpreting*, meanwhile, originally described transmission between oral languages, not accounting for manual modalities. Today, therefore, interpreting is now understood as “the “live”, real-time, spontaneous rendering of a message

¹² Preston, *Mother Father Deaf*, 209. In his ethnography of CODAs in the United States, Preston found that two-thirds of his informants worked in d/Deaf-adjacent roles at some point in their career.

¹³ Susan, phone interview with author, August 27, 2019.

¹⁴ Mike, Skype interview with author, June 25, 2019.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear*, 188.

from one language to another, without the opportunity for review or correction”.¹⁶ Theatre interpreting and sign-singing are best understood as translation-interpretation hybrids.¹⁷ Although lyrics and texts must be translated and rehearsed in advance, the final product unfolds in real time, and is subject to any changes that cast or singers might make in performance. This places unique demands on the interpreter from the outset of the preparation process.

Once Auslan Stage Left is booked to provide interpreters for a musical, its first task is to supply the chosen interpreters with the script and what is called an “archival”: a filmed performance of the show, preferably from the current run. The script alone is not sufficient guidance for preparing a translation, because it is the live performance itself, rather than the script, that needs to be interpreted.¹⁸ The two booked interpreters are initially tasked with reading the script and watching the footage, both to assign roles and to consider any structural or logistical difficulties that arise. With two interpreters covering the dialogue between all cast members, these difficulties are inevitable. The manner in which interpreters solve these difficulties gives an insight into what Auslan interpreting is trying to achieve.

Early in my fieldwork, I attended an interpreted show where I struggled to understand why two minor characters, both soldiers, were assigned the same interpreter. I understood this as logistically necessary, but wondered if a Deaf audience would have trouble distinguishing between the two characters. In a related vein, Sarah explained what happens when two characters normally “played” by the same interpreter engage in dialogue: the “spare” interpreter will temporarily adopt the role of one of the characters.¹⁹ Here, the interpreters’ priority is not continuity of the character itself, but the nature of the interaction taking place. Using both interpreters establishes the presence of dialogue and frees the Auslan user to focus on the meaning of the text instead of having to look back and forth to ascertain which character is speaking at any given moment. These examples are the first of many in this chapter which crystallise the primary aim of Auslan interpretation. It serves to clarify details of, rather than mimic, the performance for Deaf audiences. Therefore, dramaturgical conceptions of character or narrative are not relevant.

Having addressed these logistical matters—a process often enhanced by attending a performance where possible—interpreters start to look at individual songs and spoken passages. For my informants, music and musical theatre interpreting brings complexities not found in other interpreting contexts. Interpreters attribute this complexity not to the musical material, as I

¹⁶ Jemina Napier and Lorraine Leeson, *Sign Language in Action* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 205.

¹⁷ Napier, McKee, and Goswell, *Sign Language Interpreting*, 137.

¹⁸ Napier, McKee, and Goswell, *Sign Language Interpreting*, 137.

¹⁹ Sarah, phone interview with author, August 6, 2019.

had expected, but instead, to the lyrical material of the songs themselves. Often heavily peppered with metaphor and wordplay, they require translation as well as interpretation. My interviews invariably turned to the process of eliciting meaning from these literary devices. This process is different for every interpreter, and interpreters note the manifold end products which result from different approaches. However, all agreed that looking outside the confines of individual songs is vital in the early stages. The plot and dialogue of a musical offer contextual clues to its constituent songs, whilst freestanding songs necessitate background research. The insights gained during this stage sometimes significantly alter the final product. Mike, for instance, mentioned Coldplay's "Yellow", "a lovely song" with ambiguous meaning:

Look at the stars
Look how they shine for you
And everything you do
Yeah they were all yellow²⁰

These seemingly facile lyrics, in isolation, give very little clue as to the intended mood of the song. The extended metaphor contained within them does not lend itself to a direct, literal translation, and further compounds the grammatical and structural issues inherent in translating English to Auslan. To select appropriate signs, Mike ascribed the lyrics to frontman Chris Martin's own experience: "you know, it's cause his mum, his mum was dying, and her favourite colour was yellow."²¹ Though perhaps factually inaccurate, Mike's research illuminates the translation process.²² Drawing on an extramusical subtext, he built a narrative upon which to base his translation. This narrative guided him in selecting language which he thought best captured the song's melancholy feel. In this process, musical material acts as a stimulus for a deeper linguistic exploration.

As the previous example reveals, Auslan song translation is a deeply individual process, with no single correct end product. Potential results are multiplied not only by different interpretations of meaning, but also by differences that emerge in the next stage: the setting of Auslan to the song itself. In their study of Auslan interpreting, Napier, McKee and Goswell state that song translation "needs to incorporate rhythm, and sometimes choreography."²³ In practice, however, the integration of these elements varies considerably between interpreters and their personal styles. According to Mike, there is a clear divide between those who use the beat of the

²⁰ Coldplay, *Yellow* (London, England: Parlophone Records, 2000).

²¹ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

²² Opinions vary widely, and Martin has himself made several conflicting comments. See, for instance, "The World Still Ponders Lyrics To Coldplay's 'Yellow' (in Love or Just a Phonebook?)," Coldplay: Coldplaying Messageboard, accessed October 21, 2019, <https://coldplaying.com/forum/index.php?threads/the-world-still-ponders-lyrics-to-coldplays-yellow-in-love-or-just-a-phonebook.58022/>.

²³ Napier, McKee, and Goswell, *Sign Language Interpreting*, 139.

song as an anchor, and those who focus on preserving the lyrics. He situates himself in the former category: “I go by the beat, work out what signs I can put where, into the song, and then go from there.”²⁴ From this, I surmise, he means taking the most important words from phrases or sections and putting them into place, and working around them, making adjustments for flow, aesthetic appeal and textual accuracy later. Conversely, a more lyric- or meaning-focused interpreter might use their wholly translated text as the starting point, preserving the natural rhythm of the signs themselves. When working with another interpreter in a beat-driven style, Mike explained, “it’s almost a choreographed thing, because we go by the beat.”²⁵ His word choice here is illuminating: technically, *all* pre-prepared signed song is choreographed, no matter the stylistic approach taken, by dint of its highly physical and rehearsed nature. As we discovered in Marnie’s work on *Invisible Skin*, this extends to original Auslan works, too; in fact, interpreters perhaps have *more* freedom than Deaf performers because of the translation process. However, because of its focus on text above rhythmic elements, more lyrical signing styles do superficially resemble storytelling and poetry, rather than choreography or music. Nevertheless, both approaches are equally accepted, although Deaf individuals may have a preference for one of these styles over the other.

One accessible example of how differing ideas of literal meaning, background, subtext and signing style intersect can be found in the multiple Auslan versions of the Australian national anthem available online. The Facebook group “Auslaners - Deaf Community Australia” provides a virtual meeting place for d/Deaf people and their families, Auslan students, interpreters and other Auslan users.²⁶ Here, song signing is often discussed. In August 2019, a group member ran a poll asking members for their preferred version of “Advance Australia Fair”. Although there were four versions in the original poll, and several more suggested in the comments, the ensuing discussion centred on three in particular: Medina Sumovic’s 2016 version, a 2018 recording of the version used by the Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children (RIDBC) and Auslan Stage Left’s 2017 version.²⁷ Although Auslan Stage Left’s was most popular in the poll, closely followed by Sumovic’s, the discussion in the comments diverged from this result. Here,

²⁴ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

²⁵ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

²⁶ The group is closed; prospective members must answer questions on hearing status and attitudes towards Auslan. It can be found at “Auslaners - Deaf Community Australia,” accessed October 21, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/auslaners/>.

²⁷ Ramas McRae, *Australian Anthem in Auslan by Medina Sumovic*, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFcT9ka8liE&fbclid=IwAR2UmZSb7nuU3r2UP8CVxkzxNIuOyUOntLhzWiCuxKaKqD0vBEV641veh_s; Royal Institute for Deaf and Blind Children, *How to Sign the Australian National Anthem in Auslan - Advance Australia Fair*, accessed October 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y_nQYht-pWs&fbclid=IwAR1eTe0T4WcfwuXhQwcYm5Bde7E1rXhS-8d0WD4cbvV1IG2KmHsGOcoQdIc; Auslan Stage Left, *Australian National Anthem - Auslan*, 2017, <https://vimeo.com/248263412>.

RIDBC's version was liked, if a little fast, and Sumovic's favoured, with Auslan Stage Left's attracting criticism for being overtly dramatic and nationalistic. Comparing the three videos reveals how these viewpoints correspond with approaches detailed above. The RIDBC version is the most rhythmic, and contains the most signs which, even to my limited Auslan knowledge, correlate with the English text. Whilst Sumovic's version is less literal to the English text and more flowing in appearance, it preserves several recognisable signs: for instance, "in history's page" is signed HISTORY PAGE at the equivalent point in the song. The Auslan Stage Left version, however, is what Mike would call more meaning-focused. It emphasises a patriotic subtext, rather than the literal text, and preserves that text rather than conveying the song's audible rhythm. This is most evident when you compare its final line with that of Sumovic's version. The latter preserves aspects of English word order and rhythm, with AUSTRALIA in the same position and extended for the same duration as the "Australia" in "Advance Australia Fair". Conversely, the Auslan Stage Left version eschews the literal source text—and, perhaps, even grammatical Auslan—completely at this point, with interpreter Julia Murphy miming waving a flag and then putting her hand on her heart to finish.²⁸ It is easy to see how this approach could be both favoured and derided for its increased distance from the source song. Does moving away from the English source text, and preserving signed over sung rhythms make Murphy's version "more Deaf", as this technique does in the original Deaf theatre described in Chapter Two? Is it, as one critic claimed, Americanised in its patriotism, and therefore "less Australian?" Whilst these questions are outside the scope of this research, such debates are omnipresent, and thus inescapable in Auslan interpreters' work. Interpreters grapple daily with the cultural and political implications of their decisions.

As interpreters attempt to accommodate diverse individual preferences, the importance of the Deaf consultant in the interpreting process becomes clear. As I explained in my introduction to Auslan Stage Left earlier in the chapter, Deaf consultants provide feedback on draft interpretations, evaluating for both textual meaning and aesthetic value. However, defining what the aesthetic means in Auslan interpreting, especially in relation to musical performance, is no easy task. How could a Deaf consultant account for the wide range of preferences within the Deaf community that we saw in the previous examples? In short, that task is outside their remit. Aesthetic appeal as judged by Deaf consultants is inseparable from access and meaning. The visual product is not assessed as an abstract entity, but as an expression of the source text. Talking to Mike about the kind of feedback a Deaf consultant might provide, it became clear

²⁸ A search on Signbank, the online Auslan dictionary, yielded no results for a sign like the one Murphy used. See, for instance, "Flag," Auslan Signbank, accessed October 21, 2019, <http://www.auslan.org.au/dictionary/words/flag-1.html>.

that to a Deaf person, the opposite of “looked good” is not “looked bad” but “didn’t understand”.²⁹ This could not be further from popular reactions to the Twista video, where hearing people lauded Gallego’s work only for its visual appeal and the showmanship of its near-impossible speed. Little, if any, consideration was given to how well a Deaf person might comprehend the language. Deaf consultants take a far more nuanced approach, although with an inevitably visual bent.

Mike gave me an example from his work on *Aladdin*, where the consultant suggested a specific change:

...Aladdin, like, missing life opportunities and stuff and talking about being a delinquent, and I’ve gone, OPPORTUNITY NOTHING...NOTHING, and he’s just gone, I wanted OPPORTUNITY GONE, OPPORTUNITY GONE.”³⁰

This change has both visual and semantic significance. Even from my outside perspective, the new version indeed looked more appealing: with a sweeping left-to-right gesture, GONE uses more signing space than NOTHING, better offsetting the front-to-back movement of OPPORTUNITY.³¹ The revision thus fulfils a general principle that signs should balance each other out in terms of size, shape and direction of movement. Furthermore, the repetition creates rhythmic impetus. The visual perspective alone, though, is meaningless. Mike described his reaction to the change: “And so, like that, I just go, that looks so much better, because of that Deaf eye [...] and, like, a good understanding of what that song’s trying to say.”³² For Mike, it looked better precisely because the translation was more accurate. The sign NOTHING does not correspond with all potential English definitions of the word; it only connotes insignificance or triviality, as in “it was nothing”. Therefore, GONE was a better semantic fit, and hence, more visually pleasing. We see here that accessibility and understanding are the primary aesthetic considerations in Auslan interpretation.

Beyond this, however, it becomes difficult to characterise an Auslan aesthetic that could specifically be associated with music interpreting. In my interviews, I attempted to find out whether the aesthetic considerations described above applied equally to song and script, but interpreters tended not to specify. Sarah described song signing as “more poetic” or “artistic” in general than other uses of Auslan, and felt that Deaf people who seek out opportunities to

²⁹ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

³⁰ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

³¹ The following analysis is derived from Auslan Signbank entries: “Gone,” Auslan Signbank, accessed July 12, 2020, <http://www.auslan.org.au/dictionary/words/gone-1.html>; “Opportunity,” Auslan Signbank, accessed July 12, 2020, <http://www.auslan.org.au/dictionary/words/opportunity-1.html>; “Nothing,” Auslan Signbank, accessed September 3, 2019, <http://www.auslan.org.au/dictionary/words/nothing-1.html>.

³² Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

engage with musical performance appreciate this different style.³³ Like the description of “smooth signing” in the previous chapter, this suggestion is not easily quantified without deep study of Auslan linguistics, which lies outside the scope of this project. Nevertheless, Sarah’s words accord with other descriptions of signed, translated song, which suggest that some characteristics of vocal song can be superimposed onto the signed modality.³⁴ However, song translation is not just a linguistic or aesthetic process. The Deaf cultural underpinnings of Auslan shape how entire genres are understood and translated, as I explain in the section to follow.

Genres in translation

Although musical theatre has long enjoyed popularity among Deaf and hearing Australians alike, the songs in these shows serve contrasting purposes for the two audience groups, a gap interpreters must bridge. The discrepancy becomes most evident in the jukebox musical. Rather than being newly through-composed in response to a libretto, musicals in this sub-genre take a catalogue of songs, normally by a particular artist or group, and develop a narrative which loosely strings the songs together.³⁵ Examples include *Mamma Mia* and *The Boy from Oz*, both shows previously interpreted by people I interviewed. Although derided by music theatre purists for their use of popular music, clichéd plot devices and what is perceived to be a general lack of invention, jukebox musicals remain popular and introduce many newcomers to musical theatre.³⁶ As a result, they feature regularly in the workload of Auslan Stage Left’s interpreters, bringing with them a set of unique challenges.

When translating song texts, as described in the previous section, interpreters look to the song’s context to inform their translation. In musical theatre, the show’s plot offers a foundation. Indeed, it is the ability to contextualise songs that makes musical theatre appealing to Deaf audiences, as I explain further in Chapter Four. However, songs in jukebox musicals do not connect with the plot in the same way; instead, as Millie Taylor puts it, they “leap from it and make connections with other parts of the audience’s lived experience.”³⁷ Composer-lyricist Michael John LaChiusa suggests that the drama, of these songs comes from something *outside* the show: the moment a song is recognised.³⁸ Memories, rather than the songs themselves, are the

³³ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

³⁴ Bahan, “Face-to-Face Tradition,” 34.

³⁵ George Rodosthenous, “Mamma Mia! And the Aesthetics of the Twenty-First-Century Jukebox Musical,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Musical*, ed. Robert Gordon and Olaf Jubin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199988747.013.25>.

³⁶ Rodosthenous, “Mamma Mia!”

³⁷ Millie Taylor, *Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 162.

³⁸ Michael John LaChiusa, “Open Season,” *Opera News*, August 2014, https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2014/8/Features/Open_Season.html.

currency of songs in jukebox musicals. However, many Deaf people, especially first-language signers, do not have lived experience of these songs to draw upon. Therefore, they cannot access their intended function. Instead, some Deaf people will look to connect these songs to the show's plot, and become confused when incongruities arise. To meet the needs of these particular Deaf people, interpreters must recast the songs in a form that does not require prior knowledge to facilitate enjoyment.

Engineering a story is one technique interpreters will use to solve this conundrum. For instance, in *The Boy from Oz*, Peter Allen's mother Marion sings "Don't Cry Out Loud", as Peter struggles—and ultimately, fails—to tell her about his AIDS diagnosis. A female character, "Baby", is the song's protagonist:

Baby cried the day the circus came to town
'Cause she didn't like parades just passing by her.³⁹

However, there is no "Baby" character in the show, and according to Sarah, this would confuse Deaf people.⁴⁰ Hearing audiences can draw parallels between the musical's overarching narrative and the song's theme of putting on a brave face, but this level of abstraction unnecessarily distracts Deaf audience members. In situations like this, Sarah explained, interpreters may actually change details in the lyrics themselves to manufacture coherence with the plot.⁴¹ The solution in "Don't Cry Out Loud" was to change the lyrics so that, in Auslan at least, Marion referred to a plausible character in the show. Like the other creative decisions Auslan interpreters make, the primary aim here is to ensure that Deaf audiences have the fullest possible understanding of the show's story.

To say that *all* Deaf audiences are only looking for a coherent narrative in Auslan, though, would be a gross oversimplification. Not all Deaf Australians are native Auslan users or congenitally deaf. There are people who, despite identifying as Deaf, have previously had auditory access to music in English. This raises yet another conundrum for interpreters. Although Auslan music and theatre interpretations often discard literal text preservation in favour of illuminating the overall meaning, those with prior knowledge of a particular song will know it in English, and therefore expect at least an approximation of English word order. The aforementioned jukebox musicals, which attract fans of a particular artist or genre, force interpreters to juggle the needs of both groups. Susan described the difficulty of catering to Deaf ABBA fans who "want" the English word order and precise rhythm of "Mam-ma Mi-a, here I

³⁹ "Don't Cry Out Loud", Peter Allen et al., *The Boy from Oz: Original Cast Recording* (New York, NY: Decca Broadway, 2003).

⁴⁰ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

⁴¹ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

go a-ga-ain”, despite the fact that signing in that word order would not make sense in Auslan, and simultaneously conveying the song’s meaning to those unfamiliar with ABBA’s work.⁴² Sarah, meanwhile, reflected on an interpreting experience quite different from her regular work, accompanying a friend who became deaf in her teens to a Missy Higgins and John Butler Trio concert. The exact lyrics “would you leave me with a scar” do not make sense in Auslan. The sign LEAVE denotes only the action of going away, not the action of allowing to remain; here, adding “me with” would just create nonsense.⁴³ However, Sarah’s friend was unfussed that the literal translation did not make sense in Auslan. Instead, it “reminded her of the music [...] of a time that she could hear” and allowed her to be involved: “she wanted to sing along with the words again”.⁴⁴ Trading in memory over understanding, Sarah’s interpretation provided Deaf access to the hearing function of music; the product, therefore, was neither a hearing nor a Deaf artefact, but something in between. As both this chapter and the next illustrate, the distinction between access and cultural function is crucial to understanding d/Deaf musical engagement. Here, we are reminded that the experiences of Deaf people are not simply shaped by the practices of a small, homogenous community, but are also influenced by the hearing world around them. As these examples show, Auslan interpreters are tasked with acknowledging and absorbing all these influences and building them into a product which provides maximum access.

Musical elements in translation

The previous sections explored several of the issues that arise when English texts set to music are presented in Auslan, considering the nature of the linguistic texts themselves. Despite their particular specialisation, the interpreters to whom I spoke tended to centre text over musical elements in their discussions. The presence of musical material adds layers of information to these texts and influences the manner in which interpreters choose to convey them, but this information is secondary to linguistic concerns. In other words, the music that the interpreters are working with exists only as a vehicle for the text. This concept has considerable implications for how Deaf Australians experience music through an Auslan interpreter.

As a pianist, I understand music as a collection of elements combined for emotional or sensory effect, even in the absence of lyrical material. This understanding, however, was garnered from years of training based on specific theories of Western classical music. Straus suggests that

⁴² Susan, phone interview with author, 27 August 2019.

⁴³ Peter Wilkin and Trevor Johnston, eds., *Signs of Australia: A New Dictionary of Auslan (The Sign Language of the Australian Deaf Community)*, rev. ed (North Rocks, NSW: North Rocks Press, 1998), ref. no. 3128.

⁴⁴ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

these theories assume a preferred type of listener: “extravagantly gifted”, with “extensive training and vast knowledge of the musical literature”.⁴⁵ Although we cannot all be Schoenberg or Schenker, their “prodigious hearing” forms music scholars’ frame of reference.⁴⁶ Deaf people are excluded from this frame; furthermore, so are the interpreters to whom I spoke. Although all three interpreters expressed a keen interest in various art forms—enjoying listening to music, or taking dance lessons in childhood—none could connect this to a background of rigorous musical or theatrical training. With literature on sign-language interpreter demographics scarce, especially in the arts, this begs the question: how do interpreters think about musical material? In answering this question, I now examine the extent to which interpreters specifically consider musical elements like instrumentation, dynamics, tempo and articulation, and how interpreters convey music without lyrics.

For musical theatre interpreters, musical content serves primarily to inform the linguistic interpretation, and does not hold particular importance in its own right. With that established, I drilled down into what musical information interpreters take on, and how they integrate it into their work. In preparation for one interview, I listened to and briefly deconstructed “Defying Gravity” from *Wicked*, a song familiar to my interlocutors. I noted a distinct difference between the light vocal timbre employed in the opening and the full voice at the song’s climax, as well as changes in dynamics and instrumentation, and wondered how those might be conveyed in Auslan. I then asked Susan about her thought process for that particular song. Where I had first sought to distil the elements that give the song its impact, Susan, like other interpreters, leapt immediately to the nature of the impact itself and how she could portray that through her signing. She characterised the light vocal timbre and sparse texture I spoke of in the opening in general terms: “usually you start off small”. Likewise, as the song built to a climax, she did not speak of a crescendo or a fuller texture, but moved straight to the emotional impact and how this can be conveyed: “When you get to that big moment, then you go big, you lift your head, you lift your body.”⁴⁷ Sarah was more explicit in how her signing techniques align with musical elements: “If someone’s singing loudly, I will sign bigger, as well, and a bit more urgently.”⁴⁸ However, she explained that this is not generally a conscious decision, but one that flows organically from the meaning of the text. She mentioned several different ways that a significant upwards register shift could be communicated in Auslan, through a “rise onto tippy-toes... or... sign a little bit higher”, but explained that she would only use one of these strategies if it advanced the overall

⁴⁵ Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 150–51.

⁴⁶ Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, 150.

⁴⁷ Susan, phone interview with author, 27 August 2019.

⁴⁸ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

narrative or meaning in some way.⁴⁹ In short, “the point isn’t the pitch”, and musical theatre Auslan interpreters are not looking to convey the sound of the music for its own sake.⁵⁰ This mirrors Miriam Ganz Horwitz’s findings on ASL theatre interpreting; though her participants sometimes adopted musical elements like rhythm and accent, textual meaning took precedence.⁵¹

But what happens when there is no narrative to advance? I became particularly interested in how instrumentation is conveyed, as there is so much information embedded in the presence of a single instrument. Early impressions suggested that most of this sonic information fell outside the interpreter’s remit. At the launch of photographer Kate Disher-Quill’s book on Deaf artists, for instance, I trained my gaze on interpreter Kirri Dangerfield as the first song of hearing band No Mono’s set began. As they launched into a solo drum pattern, Dangerfield simply signed something to the effect of “no words”, mimed some drum beats, and then stopped. The subsequent keyboard and guitar entries, as they came in one by one and were looped, were similarly delineated. With extended instrumentals featuring heavily in No Mono’s work, this meant that very little material was interpreted. This appeared to impair Deaf enjoyment. By halfway through the second song, many Deaf audience members were openly signing across the room, visibly disengaged from the events taking place on stage. Although this is normal practice in Deaf circles, as seen in the previous chapter, this was rather more obvious than I had encountered before; the boredom was palpable. It was not clear whether the problem lay in the interpreting, or in the music itself.

Dangerfield’s affiliation with Auslan Stage Left, as well as her reputation in Deaf circles, endorsed the cultural relevance of her interpreting.⁵² From that, I deduced that this style of interpreting—directly and minimally communicating instruments for solely logistical reasons—is, in fact, acceptable to the Deaf community. Perhaps, then, certain styles of music are simply less accessible and attractive to Deaf people in general: No Mono’s music, with little rhythmic impetus, an emphasis on middle and higher frequencies, long instrumentals and poorly articulated vocals, certainly had little to offer me as a hard-of-hearing person. In fact, I mused during the set that I was at a particular loss, being able to understand neither the vocals nor the Auslan interpretation. So, the question remained: could instrumental and electronic music be successfully interpreted, and what would interpreters do to achieve this?

⁴⁹ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

⁵⁰ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

⁵¹ Miriam Ganz Horwitz, “Demands and Strategies of Interpreting a Theatrical Performance into American Sign Language,” *Journal of Interpretation* 23, no. 1 (2014): 9–11, <http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/joi/vol23/iss1/4>.

⁵² As well as being a highly active arts interpreter, Dangerfield regularly runs professional development sessions for other interpreters and engages in interpreting research.

With the No Mono experience fresh in my mind, I asked Mike about how he dealt with the unique challenges offered by electronic or non-vocal music. I wondered whether the potential for repetition, extended instrumentals and the lack of visible, live instruments on stage in electronic music posed any particular challenges for audience engagement. Mike's attitude towards this music stood poles apart from Dangerfield's hands-off approach:

It's more... the electronic music is still, there's still, like, *nods and beats rhythmically*, the doof-doof, der-der der, and if it's like a, like spacey stuff—*shakes head from side to side*—I'll just... space it, if that makes sense? *Alex nods*. It's really hard to explain. Um, and bas—And what I'll do as well, when I'm up, I'll see what the other people are do, I'll do what the hearing people are doing, I'll be like, if they're dancing, I'm just going to copy their dancing.⁵³

Although Mike could not find the exact words to describe what he does (even in Auslan, his first language), his sentiment was clear. Even without lyrics or visible instruments, he takes inspiration from the performers and the space to engage Deaf people more fully in the atmosphere of the event, instead of just communicating the onstage action. For Mike, there is simply too much happening to be articulated in words. Here, spatial elements take the place of narrative ones in informing Mike's interpretations.

The contrasting approaches we see in these examples confirm that there is no set rule for how instrumental material should be conveyed. It depends entirely on the interpreter and on the performance context. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these interpretations may be attributed to external factors, including the perceived appeal or value of the musical material itself. However, the question remains as to whether particular musical genres are preferred by Deaf Australians in general; I return to this topic in Chapter Four. Whatever the context, we have seen here that for Auslan interpreters—and, by extension, for their Deaf audiences—music never exists in isolation. Although their interpretations are informed by musical material, music forms part of a bigger picture. This picture might be a narrative one, or something less tangible, capturing a general atmosphere. But where do interpreters situate themselves within this frame? The following section examines how interpreters characterise their roles in performance contexts.

The interpreter's role

At this point, I return to the question posed at the opening of the chapter, seeking to determine what separates day-to-day Auslan interpreting from that required in musical or performance-based contexts, and furthermore, why the latter is such a niche field among Auslan interpreters. Whilst the previous sections in this chapter have outlined some of the technical differences,

⁵³ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

these do not tell the whole story. Some might dismiss this distinction as a figment of the hearing imagination, fuelled by the tendency of hearing people to misinterpret the inherent physicality and requisite facial expression of sign-language interpreting as creative performance in its own right. However, such delineations also permeated the conversations I had with interpreters, themselves intimately connected with the Australian Deaf community. Although they all rejected the idea of their work being a performance, they frequently described their own practice in this realm in language commonly associated with performance. In this section, I scrutinise interpreters' own conceptions of this specific role. I first examine their attitudes to the role and its requirements, before analysing what is meant by recurring performance-based language. Finally, I consider interpreters' on-stage relationships as a means of clarifying the difference between interpreter and performer.

Arts interpreting occupies a unique berth in the Auslan interpreting landscape. My informants agreed that being a qualified and accredited interpreter is not enough to ensure success as a music or theatre interpreter. Inclination is the first additional hurdle; many interpreters self-select out of this area. Sarah cited her Auslan interpreter wife's vehement rejection: "Hell no!"⁵⁴ Speaking to Sarah, I thought that this rejection might stem from performance anxiety, which has been documented to affect individuals in fields including music performance, sport and public speaking.⁵⁵ In musical contexts, Salmon defined performance anxiety as "the experience of persisting, distressful apprehension and/or actual impairment of performance skills in a public context" inconsistent with one's skill set and level of preparation.⁵⁶ Steptoe later explained that this manifests itself in four components: feeling, cognition, behaviour and physiological reaction.⁵⁷ It makes sense that the prospect of Auslan interpreting in general would induce such a reaction, but it is more difficult to understand why interpreting for performance elicits a particularly negative response when other interpreting, equally visible and scrutinised, does not. The attitudes of my informants to their own work provide valuable insight into why this might be.

Mike gave a vivid account of his feelings immediately before interpreting a show: "...it doesn't matter how many shows I've done now, always beforehand, I'm gonna be ill, I'm gonna be completely and utterly just be violently, violently ill, because I'm so nervous."⁵⁸ This accords

⁵⁴ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

⁵⁵ Dianna T. Kenny, "Defining Music Performance Anxiety," in *The Psychology of Music Performance Anxiety* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), <http://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199586141.001.0001>.

⁵⁶ Paul Salmon, "A Psychological Perspective on Musical Performance Anxiety: A Review of the Literature," *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 5, no. 1 (1990): 3.

⁵⁷ Andrew Steptoe, "Negative Emotions in Music Making: The Problem of Performance Anxiety," in *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research*, ed. Patrik Juslin and John Sloboda (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 295.

⁵⁸ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

with Salmon's and Steptoe's definitions above. But why might this be the case for a show, and not his day-to-day work? I asked Mike why he thought he might be so nervous. Like anyone in the field, he is motivated to produce work of the highest order, and that expectation drives his nerves. Kenny suggests that performance anxiety is more likely under conditions of evaluation, such as concerts; interpreters are not immune to evaluation by Deaf audiences.⁵⁹ However, his nerves do not necessarily stem from a desire for positive evaluation. Instead, they emerge from a sense of service to the Deaf community born of his Deaf upbringing. Whilst Mike's mindset can be attributed to the collectivist ideals described in Chapter Two, it is also influenced by financial and socioeconomic factors; he wants to give a paying Deaf audience "the show that they deserve".⁶⁰

As Mike is acutely aware, access to interpreted performance is currently a luxury for many Deaf Australians, for several reasons. Firstly, demand outstrips supply for Auslan interpreters, a situation worsening each year, with interpreting agencies sometimes unable to fulfil bookings for essential services.⁶¹ Secondly, on the rare occasions an interpreter is arranged, logistical concerns, such as sight lines, mean that premium tickets are required: as Mike put it, "they can't just sit up in the nosebleed section".⁶² However, the cost of these tickets is often prohibitive for many Deaf people, who report lower literacy and greater unemployment levels than the majority of the Australian population. Based on data from the 2006 Australian census, Willoughby found that the number of sign-language users earning over \$800 per week was at least 11% lower than the general population, that those aged 25-44 had a year 12 completion rate twelve percentage points lower, and that sign-language users were overrepresented in lower-level vocational courses and blue-collar jobs.⁶³ More recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggests a 13% decrease in employment amongst deaf men and 9% amongst deaf women.⁶⁴ Under these conditions, musical performances and theatre shows become rare treats

⁵⁹ Kenny, "Defining Music Performance Anxiety."

⁶⁰ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

⁶¹ ASLIA Victoria, "Access for Deaf People in Victoria: Why Auslan Interpreting Matters" (East Melbourne: ASLIA Victoria, 2011), 16; The Deaf Society, "Auslan Language Services and the NDIS: Ensuring Quality in an Environment of Workplace Shortage," Submission to the National Disability Insurance Agency (Sydney: The Deaf Society, September 2015), 14–15, https://deafsociety.org.au/media/page/our_submissions; Nastasia Campanella, "Concerns Raised about National Shortage of Sign Language Interpreters," ABC The World Today, January 4, 2017, <http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2016/s4599933.htm>.

⁶² Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

⁶³ Louisa Willoughby, "Sign Language Users' Education and Employment Levels: Keeping Pace with Changes in the General Australian Population?," *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 16, no. 3 (July 1, 2011): 407, 409–10, <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/enq067>.

⁶⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, 2015" (Canberra: Commonwealth Government, 2015); Deloitte Access Economics, "The Social and Economic Cost of Hearing Loss in Australia," Report for the Hearing Care Industry Association (Canberra: Deloitte Access Economics, June 2017), 43. "Hearing loss" in these reports refers to both congenital and acquired deafness, regardless of language status.

for the Deaf community, and therefore, interpreters feel pressured to make the Deaf experience of the show a success. With the stakes being so high, it is unsurprising that Auslan interpreting for music and theatre remains the work of a dedicated few.

Susan takes a different approach to these high stakes. To her, “it’s a job”; her dispassionate demeanour clashed with the way she has devoted so much of her life to arts interpreting.⁶⁵ When I asked her to clarify what she meant by this, she described leaving her shy everyday persona behind and adopting a “switched on” persona when interpreting performances. Susan is not alone in this mindset; sign-language interpreters across all fields look to maintain professional boundaries in their roles.⁶⁶ For her, although the performance aspects are an undeniable facet of her work, language skills are the primary focus, as “the performance is actually there on stage” already, and does not require the interpreters to add to it.⁶⁷ Viewed through this lens, Auslan interpreting for music and stage is a specific *craft* with its own skill set, but certainly not a creative art form. This emphasis on skill is important in Deaf circles. Cokely suggests that even prior to the advent of interpreting as a skilled profession, volunteer interpreters within Deaf communities were selected primarily for their overall fluency in sign language, rather than for other necessary interpersonal attributes.⁶⁸ Language proficiency or skill remains the primary concern of Deaf clients today. It follows that any professional interpreter who does not feel that they have skills in that particular context might steer clear of this work.

If many highly skilled and accredited interpreters avoid this particular work, then who takes it on? Some Auslan interpreters, Susan suggested, come to this area through personal backgrounds in the performing arts rather than relationships with the Deaf community, regimented Auslan study or interpreter training.⁶⁹ In doing so, they assume that their arts knowledge will compensate for any shortcomings in language proficiency. The disparity between this profile and that of my interlocutors is palpable. Susan’s experience suggests that this is no accident: in her experience, arts backgrounds hinder as much as help, because they do not address the technical elements of interpretation. In the absence of higher-level Auslan skills, interpreters with this profile, she suggested, resort to too much “acting”, which is not what Deaf audiences normally want to see.

Here, we need to establish the physical boundary between acting and interpreting. Although opinions in the Deaf community are divided on exactly where the line should be drawn, we can be guided by Auslan itself. Expression, or non-manual movement, is one of the

⁶⁵ Susan, phone interview with author, 27 August 2019.

⁶⁶ Napier, McKee, and Goswell, *Sign Language Interpreting*, 60.

⁶⁷ Susan, phone interview with author, 27 August 2019.

⁶⁸ Cokely, “Shifting Positionality,” 4.

⁶⁹ Susan, phone interview with author, 27 August 2019.

key structural parameters of Auslan signs; the term includes variations in facial expressions, mouth movements, lip patterns and other bodily movements.⁷⁰ Many signs are incomplete without these elements; for example, in the sign TIRED, facial expression, shoulder position and sometimes sighing act adverbially to convey the difference between mere tiredness and sheer exhaustion.⁷¹ However, the issue arises when people add non-manual movements or expressions that are not essential aspects of the signs being used. These do not contribute linguistic meaning and therefore, do not advance an Auslan user's understanding. Mike recounted his attempt in the show *Ghost* to portray a drug user by sniffing at intervals throughout the show. Because it was not connected to the dialogue, the Deaf audience did not associate it with the character at all; after the show, they asked *him* what was wrong with his nose.⁷² Yet again, we are reminded that interpreters are not *playing* characters as we would understand them, but simply conveying otherwise inaccessible linguistic information.

Extraneous non-manual movement also affects how interpreters are perceived by Deaf audiences. For many CODAs, like those I spoke to, interpreting is understood as a way of giving back to the collectivist Deaf community. However, professional interpreters work for financial benefit as well as reciprocity. This is a potential source of tension between interpreters and their Deaf clients, who are often wary of anyone who could be perceived to be appropriating their language for their own personal gain. In this changing landscape, studies of Deaf consumer perspectives have shown that Deaf people value a sense of humility in their interpreters.⁷³ In performance contexts, excessive “acting” defies this value, and could be seen as a selfish attempt by an interpreter to put themselves in the limelight. Sarah voiced this sentiment as she felt a Deaf community member might: “you’re not a Deafie, you’re up there for us, calm down a little bit.”⁷⁴ Although Deaf people value social connection with their interpreters when they are off duty, as in this chapter’s opening vignette, they expect the hierarchy between service provider and paying client to be preserved during the performance. The interpreter’s own physicality embodies this hierarchy.

All the interpreters to whom I spoke described *characterisation* as an essential part of their work. It was this term which initiated my exploration of performance concepts in Auslan interpreting. If Mike’s abortive portrayal in *Ghost* was not appropriate in an Auslan-interpreted context, then what should characterisation in this sense look like? Probing deeper, I found that characterisation in this context is not about portrayal or performance, but simply another

⁷⁰ Johnston and Schembri, *Australian Sign Language*, 81.

⁷¹ Sally, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

⁷² Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

⁷³ Napier, McKee, and Goswell, *Sign Language Interpreting*, 60.

⁷⁴ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

solution to a logistical challenge. Interpreter characters give Deaf audiences a visual shorthand through which they can deduce who is speaking or singing at any one time. Knowing who is speaking is critical for Deaf viewers in helping them to direct their gaze at the right person or part of the onstage action, and therefore, characterisation determines Deaf reception.

Interpreters do not seek to mimic the actions of the cast, though the shorthand they develop may be informed by the interpreter's understanding of who a character is and what they do.

Each interpreter has their own approach to distinguishing between characters. Susan described one basic approach: "we started out as one character, so we stood in place, but then when we became another character, I took a step forward, to show that it was someone else."⁷⁵ This strategy is limited in its utility when interpreters stand at some distance from the onstage action, as is often the case. Because Deaf audiences are forced to divide their visual attention between performers and interpreters, it would be easy to miss a split-second sideways step. Depending on the situation, this is not necessarily a problem, as differences between the characters can also become apparent in the signing itself. Specific sign choices for individual characters reflect different accents, inflections and manners of speech which can be heard in spoken voices.

A further challenge arises for interpreters tasked with representing a group of characters who all speak—and, therefore, are signed—in a similar way. Location and signing style contribute little to understanding in this scenario, and so scenes like this run the risk of being "tennis-matchy", as Mike put it.⁷⁶ He recounted facing this exact problem working on *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* and having to differentiate between the characters of Tick and Felicia. With the signing style of the two characters being similar, he had to draw on more nebulous aspects of their characters: "Like, Tick's a bit more manly than Felicia, so with Felicia it was all a bit more feminine, legs closed, a bit more dramatic, without doing what he was doing."⁷⁷ Although he did not add specific non-manual movements to the signs themselves, he adopted these specific stances to reflect, rather than mimic, the persona created by the actor. This distinction between reflection and mimicry is just one of the many complex negotiations an interpreter must undertake.

As I spoke to interpreters about their work, I became increasingly interested in their onstage relationships with the cast members whose speech they are relaying, and how these frame conceptions of the interpreter role. These relationships are largely left unaddressed in existing literature on sign-language interpreting, which instead focuses on the nature of the relationship between interpreters and Deaf community members. Napier, McKee and Goswell

⁷⁵ Susan, phone interview with author, 27 August 2019.

⁷⁶ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

⁷⁷ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

describe this relationship as a symbiotic one in which access to communication is exchanged for professional gain. To access the benefits of such a relationship, though, both parties must give something up: Deaf people relinquish privacy and autonomy, whilst interpreters temporarily sacrifice various avenues of self-expression such as dress.⁷⁸ Taking into account the sensitivities that come with this particular power dynamic, this exchange initially appears inconsequential to interpreters. On the stage, though, behaviour that is not self-expression takes on a more complicated meaning.

In terms of musical theatre, all three interpreters spoke of a desire to avoid copying the casts they represent and “stealing the thunder”, or making sure that they are “not being too much”, as Sarah put it.⁷⁹ This particular phrasing struck me. For all interpreters’ efforts to characterise on-stage interpretation as a set of specific techniques and behaviours distinct from their own personalities, the utility they offer is inseparable from their own physicality. As such, a degree of self-expression is unavoidable, but it is up to the interpreter to keep it under control. This delicate balance is made all the more tenuous by the very nature of the interpretive act. Despite all the independent preparation and translation that interpreters do in advance of a show, the interpreters are ultimately at the mercy of what happens in the moment, and wholly dependent on the cast. In that moment, Mike told me: “I watch, and I watch, and I watch, because I want to react the way they react, I want to look where they’re looking...”⁸⁰ There is an inherent tension between the degree of self-control required by the interpreter and the often unruly live performance context. The interpreter simultaneously juggles two complex relationships—the symbiotic and the dependent—in the moment of performance.

Live music also sees interpreters engage in these two types of relationship, but the dynamics of each shift considerably. Interpreters remain dependent on the musicians who provide their source material, but the spectre of the performer casts less of a shadow over their actions. The need for characterisation disappears; interpreters do not speak of any need to specifically convey a singer’s unique voice or personality in the same way that they would a theatrical character’s. As Mike put it, “I basically just feel that music, and just put it out there.”⁸¹ The fear of upstaging a cast is gone, replaced with an utter lack of self-consciousness. Meanwhile, the relationship between interpreter and audience becomes a more interactive one, with Mike taking cues from the audience as described earlier in the chapter. In this scenario, interpreters do not just convey language: they model relevant social behaviours to the Deaf

⁷⁸ Napier, McKee, and Goswell, *Sign Language Interpreting*, 9–10.

⁷⁹ Sarah, phone interview with author, 6 August 2019.

⁸⁰ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

⁸¹ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

audience. By viewing interpreters' onstage actions as embodied relationships with audiences and cast members, we move one step closer to understanding the hitherto shadowy distinction between performer and interpreter.

Conclusions

The availability of Auslan interpreting in the arts has long lagged behind mainstream interpreting provision in Australia, where demand outstrips supply even for urgent and essential needs. Auslan Stage Left, established to address this deficiency, has cemented itself as the major provider of arts interpreting in Australia. Unlike some more generalist interpreting agencies, its work revolves around communication and collaboration between Deaf and hearing community members.

Despite performing the same utilitarian function as Auslan interpreting in other fields, musical Auslan interpreting is often understood in different terms. Some of this difference stems from hearing misconceptions of signed languages, but an exploration of the hybrid translation-interpretation process in music and theatre interpreting reveals that it does, in fact, require a specific set of skills. Interpreters must negotiate complex linguistic issues, drawing on subtext and background knowledge and combining these with their own personal signing style. Contrary to hearing belief, the aesthetic and the accessible are inextricable in Auslan interpreting.

Interpreters face the challenge of catering to Deaf people with diverse backgrounds that may or may not include prior familiarity with music. An Auslan interpretation of a song might diverge from the source text in order to better clarify a narrative, or it might preserve English word order to support a non-native signer. The importance of this distinction comes to the fore in the next chapter. Whatever the context, Auslan interpretations are not consciously informed by technical knowledge of music on the part of the interpreter, but rather, by overall "feel"; even in the absence of a lyric or narrative, interpreters draw on extramusical stimuli to include Deaf people in the experience. Understanding these techniques does not just give an insight into the interpreting process; it also allows us to consider how d/Deaf music cognition differs conceptually as well as sensorially. Without a hearing frame of reference (or, indeed, a d/Deaf frame) this has the potential to otherwise go unknown.⁸²

⁸² Brueggemann, "On (Almost) Passing," 649. I am influenced here by Brueggemann's account of her teen years; she recounted finding out that she "read" a film differently to her peers, with her reliance on visual cues dramatically altering her interpretation. These often-delayed realisations, in my experience, are an intriguing part of living "between" deaf and hearing worlds, and invite further exploration.

Although hearing people may view Auslan interpreters as actors or performers, specialist arts interpreters simply connect Deaf community members with the performing arts. A well-executed song translation may look no different to an original signed song by an Auslan performer, but to Deaf audiences, the difference in framing is crucial as Deaf people look to be custodians of their own language.⁸³ The distinction between the two becomes apparent with an understanding of the basic principles of Auslan. That is not to downplay their work; arts interpreters understand themselves to occupy a particular niche in Auslan interpreting. The relative novelty and expense of their work raises the stakes in their relationship with their clients; meanwhile, they must balance a tightrope between extreme self-control and complete dependence on the cast whose performance they are interpreting. As the following chapter articulates further, these specialist interpreters play an important social and cultural role in the lives of Deaf Australians.

⁸³ Schmitt, "Representations of Sign Language," 140.

Chapter Four: Finding the Aussie d/Deaf music lover

HAMISH. But with the Oils, it's almost like having a religious experience. It's like a spaceship, coming down... you, and the audience together, taking off, and the fact that most of the audience crowd, know at least twelve of their most well-known songs, and sing it, and sing it together. That's just an incredible experience.

ALEX. Do you try and sing along?

HAMISH. Yes I do!... Mind you, though, not as good as, um, most of my hearing friends, but I do do it.¹

Until Hamish trailed off to temper his assertion of his singing ability, a casual reader could not make any assumptions about the audiological status of either party in this conversation. Beaming rapturously as he sat opposite me in his Midnight Oil tour T-shirt, Hamish resembled any run-of-the-mill Aussie rocker. Waiting for our meeting room to become vacant, though, we had conspiratorially reminisced about childhood audiology appointments and laughed at ourselves for accidentally talking too loudly in sensitive situations. Hamish has an enduring love for music of all genres; among his many other attributes, he happens to be deaf.

As Hamish articulated what he likes so much about his favourite band, his enjoyment of the live experience bubbled to the surface: the feeling of being surrounded by like-minded people, united by their love for the performers. But Hamish and I both tacitly acknowledged that his deafness sets him apart. He hurriedly downplayed his singing ability, the thing that separates him most obviously from the crowd. At other points in the interview, he distanced himself similarly from other deaf people: “I can hear a lot better than most deaf people.”² My phrase “try and sing along”, meanwhile, automatically situated his actions outside norms of musical behaviour. In musical interactions like these, d/Deaf people are doubly “alone in the mainstream” as they straddle Deaf and hearing worlds, sharing a hearing experience through a deaf sensory lens.³

Previous chapters have characterised Australian d/Deaf musical practices within a silo of Deaf culture. Chapter Two examined the nature of Deaf performance, whilst Chapter Three considered how Auslan interpreting makes mainstream musical forms relevant to Deaf audiences. They addressed the creation of Deaf-led art forms, and the translation of music from the mainstream. However, most d/Deaf Australian lives—musical or otherwise—are not confined to this silo. In fact, the practices detailed thus far are not available to the majority. My

¹ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

² Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

³ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 96.

fieldwork and casual conversations suggested that a group of d/Deaf Victorians might access and value music in other ways. Mike's recount of translating songs at the pub with his mates, the countless deaf music-loving friends-of-friends mentioned in passing, and several references to the rich friendships established in Auslan choirs all presented leads that quickly petered out. How, then, might the everyday d/Deaf person, one of several thousand in Victoria, appreciate music in their daily lives?

This chapter attempts to capture this "everyday d/Deaf music lover", drawing primarily on interviews with two self-professed music lovers with varying ties to Melbourne's Deaf community, as well as on my fieldnotes and memoirs written by d/Deaf Australians. The first section articulates why conventional distinctions between Deaf and hearing identities and communities are increasingly problematic in Australia today, and explains the implications of such distinctions on my research. I then examine the early lives of my participants to explain how d/Deaf Australians acquire musical knowledge, before exploring the nature of musical participation amongst d/Deaf Melburnians. Subsequent sections discuss musical preferences and the role of Auslan for those "between worlds", before considering the intersection of music and Deaf identity in the Australian context.

Deaf in a hearing world

Throughout this thesis, the use of Auslan has figured heavily in my working definition of capital-D Deafness. As such, my research sought to prioritise works presented in Auslan and people for whom Auslan is their preferred language. Whilst fieldwork granted me access to the former, my analyses were limited by my own lack of Auslan proficiency and coloured by my aural biases.⁴ I felt that this limitation made it all the more imperative that I interview first-language Auslan users. And yet, my first attempts to recruit them through videos posted in Deaf Facebook groups "Auslaners - Deaf Community Australia" and "Auslan Matters" fell flat. The few responses I received, most of which did not lead to interviews, came mainly from music fans who I saw as lowercase-d deaf. Although the limited response was not unexpected, it contradicted the anecdotal evidence I had gathered throughout the project. Upon reflection, the question emerged: what if the problem actually lay in how I was categorising Deafness? Was Auslan really the be-all and end-all? To adopt Brueggemann's provocation of betweenity, "What

⁴ Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness*, 14.

if we don't 'draw the line' on, around, through, or under where someone is (and isn't) 'culturally deaf' or not?"⁵

To answer that question, I return to Australian Deaf history. Chapter One charted the development of a Deaf community in Melbourne. Although it was not a fully segregated or self-contained one, it was nevertheless tied to specific locations in which sign language, as promoted by Abraham, was the order of the day. However, the use of sign language in Melbourne's Deaf circles predated Abraham. As schools for the deaf did in other locations, the school then known as the Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution became a hotbed of signed communication. Branson and Miller suggest that the school, like its Sydney counterpart, predominantly encouraged speech, but had "no antagonism to the use of sign".⁶ With graduates from what was then the sole deaf education facility in Victoria gathering at Flinders Street, Blackburn Lake and, later, Jolimont Square, a single, sign-language based "Deaf community" seems a largely uncontroversial characterisation of early-twentieth-century Deaf Melbourne.

However, this did not remain so after World War II. Influential United Kingdom oralists Irene and Alexander Ewing visited Australia in 1950, expressing their dissatisfaction with Australian educational provision for deaf children.⁷ In the wake of the Ewings' report to the Commonwealth, the death knell for sign-medium education in Australia was sounded at the fifth Triennial Conference of The Australian Association of Teachers of the Deaf in Sydney in 1953, where the Association resolved that all deaf schools provide a solely oral education.⁸ New oral deaf schools opened in Australia to cater for the increase in deaf children born to hearing parents as a result of the 1940s rubella epidemic.⁹ Melbourne's Princess Elizabeth Junior School (PEJS) was one such facility, funded by public donation off the back of an advertising campaign which promoted the value of oralist education to otherwise uninformed hearing people.¹⁰ PEJS and its senior counterpart Glendonald School both funnelled students away from the now Victorian College of the Deaf.¹¹ PEJS only accepted deaf children from hearing families, so that they did not acquire sign from natively signing peers and thus "retard their educational potential", as professionals feared.¹² Newspaper articles about these schools described sign

⁵ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 15.

⁶ Branson and Miller, "Sign Language, the Deaf and the Epistemic Violence of Mainstreaming," 31.

⁷ Jan Branson and Don Miller, *Damned for Their Difference: The Cultural Construction of Deaf People as Disabled: A Sociological History* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002), 205; Linda Komesaroff, *Disabling Pedagogy: Power, Politics, and Deaf Education* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2007), 12–13.

⁸ Branson and Miller, "Sign Language, the Deaf and the Epistemic Violence of Mainstreaming," 31; Komesaroff, *Disabling Pedagogy*, 13.

⁹ Branson and Miller, "Sign Language, the Deaf and the Epistemic Violence of Mainstreaming," 31.

¹⁰ *Damned for Their Difference*, 230. According to Branson and Miller, "the high point of the advertisements was a deaf child saying the word "mummy" for the first time."

¹¹ Branson and Miller, *Damned for Their Difference*, 207.

¹² Branson and Miller, *Damned for Their Difference*, 207.

language as a “last resort”, a hardship which pupils should not have “forced” upon them.¹³ This marked the beginning of an era in which parents and educational authorities embraced mainstream education for deaf children, isolating them from deaf peers and disrupting opportunities for sign language acquisition.¹⁴ According to Johnston, this change was most pronounced from the mid-1950s until the end of the 1970s; by the turn of the twenty-first century, Australia had a mainstreaming rate amongst the highest in the world.¹⁵ These educational decisions had implications for deaf musical acquisition, described in this chapter, and more importantly, for the future of Australian Deaf communities. Generations of deaf people grew up in an oral culture in which they were perpetually at a deficit, without access to Auslan. Consequently, Auslan became the symbol of a culture long denied to many. Learning Auslan later in life is popularly portrayed in Australian Deaf culture as a form of homecoming, a reversal of the colonising mainstream narrative.¹⁶ Both Chelle Destefano’s *The Auslan Movement* and Irene Holub’s *Invisible Skin*, two of the Fringe shows described in Chapter Two, told the artists’ personal stories through this lens, using Auslan as a marker of entry to the Deaf community. I suggest that this phenomenon is perhaps magnified in the Australian context by the relative newness of Australian Deaf communities. Where narratives of United States Deaf culture have built a body of folklore upon a “Golden Age” of Deaf history prior to the advent of oralism, Australian Deaf culture was not well established in this “pre-Milan” era, and consequently, does not have a similar well of stories from which to draw.¹⁷

However, these narratives of Deafness demonstrate how the distinction between cultural and physical deafness excludes as well as empowers. Wrigley suggests that enforcing the d/D distinction acts to alienate those who “failed to select the politically correct coping strategy”.¹⁸ In Australia, the most relevant strategy is the use of Auslan as a primary language. Dominant narratives of Auslan acquisition exclude other deaf Australians, who do not have the same unashamedly positive relationship with the language. These tensions even entered the walls of Jolimont Square; Flynn notes the short-lived Victorian Adult Deaf Oral Group, which

¹³ “Woman’s Parade,” *Argus*, December 17, 1953; “Eyes ‘Hear,’” *Argus*, December 13, 1951.

¹⁴ Johnston, “W(h)ither the Deaf Community?,” 150.

¹⁵ Johnston, “W(h)ither the Deaf Community?,” 150; Des Power and Merv Hyde, “The Characteristics and Extent of Participation of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students in Regular Classes in Australian Schools,” *Journal of Deaf Studies & Deaf Education* 7, no. 4 (October 2002): 302, <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/7.4.302>.

¹⁶ Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear*, 182.

¹⁷ Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan, *A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD*, 58–62, 371; Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 58. Accounts of United States Deaf history, like Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan’s, describe this “golden age” of residential schooling in the 1850s before sign language was “banished” at a meeting of Italian, French and United States teachers of the deaf at the Milan Congress in 1880: “The congress of Milan has become emblematic of evil in the culture of the DEAF-WORLD in the US, as in that of many European nations.” Whilst Mindess questions the accuracy with which this history is taught, she acknowledges its folkloric power in the “past-oriented” US Deaf community.

¹⁸ Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness*, 108.

challenged the hegemony of signing Deaf establishment.¹⁹ With Auslan so heavily politicised in this way, it was problematic for me as an outsider to use it as a yardstick of Deafness. Instead, I needed to make room for the silent majority, first-language English users for whom the line between deaf and hearing worlds has been blurred. Their diverse individual relationships with Auslan have particular impact on how music is understood, as we see throughout this chapter. It follows, then, whilst that respect for Auslan is a core *value* within local Deaf communities, its use should not be a definitive membership criterion. Revisiting my interview recruitment, I thus cast away my preconceptions of what a Deaf person had to be, adopting Brueggemann's concept of "betweenity"—described in my literature review—as a lens. I set out to explore how, for a d/Deaf person, music could be influenced by both deaf and hearing ways of thinking.

Within a day of reposting the video, I had recruited my final two participants for the study: Hamish, who we met at the outset of the chapter, and Marnie. I knew of Marnie before she responded to my callout; we have a mutual acquaintance, and I had seen her perform in Auslan earlier in my fieldwork. First and foremost, she is a music theatre aficionado. A Teacher of the Deaf by day, she is also a Deaf consultant for theatre interpreting, and an actor and performer in her own right. Where Hamish distanced himself to a degree from other Deaf people in our conversation, Marnie is a passionate Deaf advocate in all facets of her professional life. Though she, like Hamish, is a first-language English user, she is now bilingual and bicultural, having learnt Auslan in her late teens.²⁰ Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to meet in person; our interview was conducted by email.²¹

Both Marnie and Hamish were products of the turn towards oralism and mainstreaming described above, born into hearing families during the aforementioned period of rapid growth. As first-language English speakers, both participants declined Auslan interpreters. This particular linguistic and cultural orientation is one of the factors I explore in this chapter, examining its influence on their musical interests.

Acquiring musical knowledge

In her Fringe show *The Auslan Movement*, Chelle Destefano recounted a childhood story of using her music class time to plot a practical joke to be played during the cooking class to follow.²²

¹⁹ Flynn, *No Longer by Gaslight*, 137.

²⁰ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

²¹ I acknowledge that Marnie's story is somewhat underdeveloped compared to Hamish's in this chapter; this is an unavoidable consequence of the difference in interview methods, which resulted in a larger body of data on Hamish. I have endeavoured to highlight the connections between the two stories.

²² *The Auslan Movement*, Chelle Destefano, Brunswick Mechanics Institute, Melbourne, 14 September 2019.

This tale implied that music class had nothing to offer her and wasted her time. I have heard many variations of this deaf narrative over the years. And yet, it is by no means universal. Within minutes of meeting Hamish, for instance, I was startled by his wide-ranging musical knowledge. I came unprepared for the diversity of artists, genres and even technical terminology in our conversation, which was not restricted to his preferred rock bands. He waxed lyrical about Freddie Mercury's four-octave range, admired Elton John's ability to perform from his extensive back catalogue and lamented not having the opportunity to see jazz trumpeter James Morrison in the flesh. How did Hamish come to develop this comprehensive body of knowledge? Delving into both Hamish and Marnie's personal backgrounds, we see how family, education and social interactions shape the potential ways that a Deaf Australian might learn about music.

Like the majority of deaf people around the world, my participants were born into hearing families.²³ As Marnie put it, "it was a kind of lonely experience—no deaf role models, an acute sense of being different..."²⁴ In this context, music was a portal to family rituals and connections. This was certainly the case in Hamish's musical household, with his mother, father, sister and cousins all playing and listening to music. He described his painstaking listening journey through his father's extensive record collection and the family conversations it inspired, augmented by his sister's forays into learning instruments.²⁵ Marnie, meanwhile, credited fifteen years of calisthenics with giving her a sense of rhythm, but attributed her love of music to Christmas carols: "smart Mum gave me a carols songbook which I learnt off by heart. All suffered my hearty bellowing every Christmas."²⁶ This sparked an interest in classical music: "the fall of notes really hit a chord with me".²⁷ Both accounts depict deeply personal and individual musical explorations which stemmed from the desire to connect with their supportive families.

For d/Deaf children, the safety of the family unit has long been the mainstay of musical acquisition in the absence of other educational opportunities. For d/Deaf Australians raised in an era of near-universal oralist education, it appears that any musical understanding or enjoyment arose in spite of any formal educational influence. At a deaf school, Hamish recounted a weekly, as he quipped, "not so much music class" in which guest musicians would come and play and the dozen-or-so deaf children would sit and "listen".²⁸ He also remembered being asked to sing in class with some amusement: "Apparently, I was one of the better ones!"²⁹ Hamish's anecdotes

²³ Jan Branson and Don Miller, 'Sign Language, the Deaf and the Epistemic Violence of Mainstreaming', *Language and Education* 7, no. 1 (1 January 1993): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500789309541346>.

²⁴ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

²⁵ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

²⁶ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

²⁷ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

²⁸ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

²⁹ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

reflect the historically dominant approach to music education for deaf children in Australia and elsewhere, where music was primarily a tool to enhance listening skills and support language acquisition. Furthermore, they depict a very passive experience of music, removed from any form of social engagement.

Meanwhile, music has assumed a different role for d/Deaf children in mainstream education contexts. Australian educational policymakers have long understood the mainstreaming of deaf students as a method of ensuring an inclusive education.³⁰ Inclusion as an educational goal strives for both academic integration and social integration amongst a diverse student population.³¹ However, the Australian mainstreaming model risks prioritising academic success over social engagement.³² Musical knowledge can mitigate social exclusion, becoming a valuable social currency for deaf students. This was the case for Marnie, who explained how her relationship with music changed during the teenage years. Temporarily jettisoning her personal preferences, she began to engage with music which allowed her to “remain socially acceptable to a point”.³³ Classical music was replaced by bands like New Kids on the Block; the song lyrics published in *Smash Hits* magazine became a key resource in her calculated study. Marnie highlighted the challenges she faced in attempting to keep up with her peers, noting a lack of accessible pop culture. The long-running ABC TV music video television show *Rage*, for instance, is not captioned to this day.³⁴ This difficulty means that attempts to use music to “fit in” may be limited in their utility, and in fact run the risk of contributing to further isolation and resentment amongst deaf youth.

However, the landscape of deaf education in Victoria is gradually changing in ways that may affect how deaf children encounter both language and music. In 2018, the Victorian Minister for Education requested a review of the Victorian College of the Deaf. The report recommended that the school adopt a fully bilingual and bicultural approach to deaf education; towards which the school is progressing.³⁵ Indeed, Auslan education is becoming more commonplace in Victorian schools. Furthermore, the Furlong Park School for Deaf Children, a

³⁰ Merv Hyde, Stein Erik Ohna, and Oddvar Hjulstadt, “Education of the Deaf in Australia and Norway : A Comparative Study of the Interpretations and Applications of Inclusion,” *American Annals of the Deaf* 150, no. 5 (2005): 417.

³¹ Michael Stinson and Shirin Antia, “Considerations in Educating Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students in Inclusive Settings,” *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 4, no. 3 (1999): 163.

³² Merv Hyde and Des Power, “Inclusion of Deaf Students: An Examination of Definitions of Inclusion in Relation to Findings of a Recent Australian Study of Deaf Students in Regular Classes,” *Deafness & Education International* 6, no. 2 (June 2004): 94.

³³ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

³⁴ See Australian Broadcasting Corporation, ‘Programs A-Z’, <https://iview.abc.net.au/shows/cc> for a list of captioned shows on the network. *Rage*—though still broadcast—is not included on this list.

³⁵ Veronica Pardo, “Victorian College for the Deaf Review Summary Report” (State of Victoria, Department of Education and Training, April 4, 2019), <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/departments/Pages/vcd.aspx>.

dedicated deaf primary school in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine, has since 2010 offered a music program facilitated by Musica Viva's Musician in the Classroom scheme.³⁶ With increasing access to both Auslan and music education, future generations of deaf Victorian children may leave school with positive musical experiences denied to previous generations.

Participation and carving new paths

At the outset of this project, I aimed to uncover any uniquely Deaf approaches to musical activity in Australia. In doing so, however, I assumed that performance is the pre-eminent form of participation in musical activity. As Nettl observed of "Heartland U", my years of university music education had reinscribed definitions of music practice that centre performance.³⁷

Although my archival research tempered these expectations, my initial Auslan recruitment video inadvertently perpetuated that worldview. The original script included specific examples of non-performing avenues for Deaf musical experience, like sign-singing and dancing. However, I omitted these for brevity, tacitly removing them from the scope of musical experience. Once I restored them to the video, clarifying their legitimacy, I opened the door to accounts of musical participation that extend beyond performance.

In fact, d/Deaf accounts characterise music performance amongst the *least* participatory forms of musical engagement. Amongst other aspects of growing up deaf in the 1960s and 1970s, deaf author Michael Uniacke's memoir *Deafness Down* recounts a turbulent history of music-making at a mainstream Melbourne Catholic boys' school. Though Uniacke's affinity with music is evident from early in the book, where he describes hymns "accompanied by a majestic organ that quivered the air in heavy notes", performing it was beset with difficulties.³⁸ Uniacke's account of his first school concert performance describes a disempowering experience. Fearing a dressing-down for not understanding the words, he recounts his coping strategy in rehearsals: "Brother Egbert didn't write down the words, so I sang very softly and made the same sort of sounds that the other kids were making, in the same sort of tune. So it looked as if I was singing, but of course I wasn't."³⁹ This fear snowballed until the night of the performance, where Uniacke juxtaposes his physical proximity with his sensory isolation: "I heard the piano start,

³⁶ Karen Kyriakou, "Inclusive Music for Deaf Children," Final report of 2012 Churchill Fellow (Melbourne: The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia, July 25, 2013), 3, <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellows/>; Tim Corcoran, "Music Education in Specialist Schools: An Evaluation of Musica Viva's Musician in the Classroom Program" (Victoria Institute, April 2016).

³⁷ Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 56–57.

³⁸ Michael Uniacke, *Deafness Down* (Castlemaine, Victoria: TUQ Publications, 2015), 21.

³⁹ Uniacke, *Deafness Down*, 55.

tinny, distant and confused, and I missed the cue on the opening bars.”⁴⁰ Depending on his peers to access any part of the charade, he “risked a glance sideways to Danny to get a sense of the words he was singing.”⁴¹ Uniacke’s tale provides a glimpse of the challenges many deaf people faced in this era, and do to this day, as they attempt to assimilate into a hearing world. The act of being on that stage was a performance of betweenity in its own right: not a rendition of the musical material, but an attempt to pass and an imitation of the act of participatory music-making.

With Uniacke’s experience illuminating the challenges of vocal performance for prospective deaf musicians, we now consider instrumental performance. Examining the meagre references to music-making amongst deaf Australians, a certain stereotype emerges: if deaf people play at all, they are most likely to play drums or bass guitar. Despite his inauspicious introduction to music, Uniacke today describes himself on his own website as a musician, albeit self-deprecatingly: “He plays the drums, not very well, and is even worse on bass guitar.”⁴² Hamish, meanwhile, mentioned an aborted attempt to play the drums: “I only ever did about three drum lessons at Allans Music back in the day, so that was about as far as I went.”⁴³ These illustrations reinforce my earlier finding that deafness alone does not preclude musical instruments. However, this does not necessarily translate into formal or independent instrumental training. The reasons for this are unclear, though Uniacke’s anecdotes in the previous paragraph provide potential insight. During my participants’ youth, sensitive accommodations for deaf students were few and far between; the climate was inhospitable for music learning unless a trusted and suitable teacher could be found. In contrast, my own musical experiences in these formative years were largely positive. I attribute this to my childhood piano teacher, disabled herself. Accommodation was normalised by example as we juggled our sometimes-competing physical needs. As Brueggemann describes it, disability is unfixed, defined by relationships between people and spaces; I was not disabled in that environment, as there was no problem we could not solve between us.⁴⁴ Looking back, I only now realise that this was not a conventional musical education. For both Uniacke and Hamish, however, their deafness was a disability in their musical training. Whilst the sample size of this project is too small to be conclusive, these examples suggest that musical training was out of reach for many deaf children, even where it was wanted.

⁴⁰ Uniacke, *Deafness Down*, 56.

⁴¹ Uniacke, *Deafness Down*, 57.

⁴² Michael Uniacke, “Is There an Art to Being Deaf?,” *The Unguarded Quarter* (blog), December 2, 2018, <http://www.tuq.pub/blog/art-to-being-deaf/>.

⁴³ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, “On (Always) Passing,” 341.

Where deaf Australians describe positive experiences of performing music, the success of these experiences can be connected to elements other than instrumental proficiency or the musical attributes of the performances themselves. Like Hamish and Marnie's listening practices, music performance provides opportunities for people to relate to the world around them. Returning to *Deafness Down*, Uniacke illustrates this transformative potential in narrating his time in the school's drum squad. Adopting an active and conspicuous role in the school's Commonwealth Day celebration, where "the drums were the foundation", playing in the squad gave Uniacke both ritual and social purpose.⁴⁵ As he put it, "if you were playing the drums you were noticed."⁴⁶ Drumming provided a social outlet, both at school and in performance: "The drummers around me become my brothers, because we work together."⁴⁷ His musical proficiency is a lesser concern in this account. This mirrors Loeser and Crowley's study on how playing bass guitar allowed one young deaf South Australian to perform and assert his masculinity.⁴⁸ The authors suggested that "Shane's" musical practice allowed him to subvert the subordinate position he assumed in day-to-day life, constructed by assumptions surrounding deafness.⁴⁹ Playing the bass allowed Shane to be "admired" and sought out for advice.⁵⁰ From these two examples, a successful music performance can be understood as one which confers social status, real or perceived, upon the deaf person which would otherwise be difficult to obtain. The most important end product of deaf music-making is thus a social rather than a musical one.

As the above examples illustrate, music has the potential to enhance social participation for deaf Australians. This potential extends outside the realm of music performance; through this lens, even attending a show as an audience member becomes a participatory act. An emphasis on the social is well documented *within* Deaf communities around the world, as described in Chapter Two. However, deaf-accessible forms of music also foster inter-community social opportunities.⁵¹ Interpreted music and theatre, as described in Chapter Three, support the social standing of Deaf people in majority-hearing contexts. Interpreter Mike highlighted the power of Auslan accessibility in describing a scenario he sees again and again: the Deaf husband, in perhaps his thirties or forties, begrudgingly dragged along to his first show by an enthusiastic wife or family member. Surprised to find themselves enjoying the experience, they actively seek

⁴⁵ Uniacke, *Deafness Down*, 109–10.

⁴⁶ Uniacke, *Deafness Down*, 110.

⁴⁷ Uniacke, *Deafness Down*, 113.

⁴⁸ Cassandra Loeser and Vicki Crowley, "A Natural Ear for Music? Hearing (Dis) Abled Masculinities," *Popular Music* 28, no. 3 (2009): 411–423.

⁴⁹ Loeser and Crowley, "A Natural Ear," 417.

⁵⁰ Loeser and Crowley, "A Natural Ear," 417.

⁵¹ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 116.

future opportunities. As Mike put it, “But now, these guys, they’re always the first ones to buy tickets and stuff”.⁵² Auslan interpretation facilitates more than access to the show itself: it provides opportunities for deaf people to engage in a shared experience that extends long after the final curtain. Mike explained how Deaf people become “a part of it”, armed with the ability to discuss a show with their families and participate on their own terms. In fact, accessible theatre empowers Deaf members of hearing families to invert established dynamics: “Deaf people are bringing their hearing families along... rather than a Deaf person going along and just sitting there.” These social interactions, not the musical events themselves, are the real locus of musical and social inclusion for Deaf Australians.

Some d/Deaf people strike out on their own, finding still more ways to engage with music. Melbourne’s vibrant live music scene has long been fertile ground, not only launching countless musical careers, but also offering other avenues for deaf people to participate in music. Outside the confines of formal schooling, both Marnie and Hamish went on to carve out music-related niches for themselves. Having discovered a love of musical theatre, Marnie went on to become a cultural consultant for Auslan Stage Left, whilst Hamish recounted his initial forays into music management. Proudly, he told me that he was “the first deaf manager of a music group anywhere in Melbourne”, taking responsibility for his cousin’s band.⁵³ This management role became central to his university experience, organising gigs as part of RMIT’s Activities Collective. The skills and networks he acquired during these years provided a window into the machinations of live music, and he went on to volunteer as a roadie for several Australian bands. He told stories of working for Hunters & Collectors, Midnight Oil, Weddings Parties Anything and Painters and Dockers.⁵⁴ This was all unpaid work in monetary terms, but for Hamish, the chance to get up close and personal with all his favourite local rock bands was invaluable. Whilst he was pleased with the leftover sandwiches or the odd six-pack of beer, experiences and relationships were the real reward. Meeting so many musicians after concerts, he quickly discovered a network of friends, relatives and acquaintances, identifying many mutual friends and bandmates along the way. These interactions are inseparable from Hamish’s understanding of the music itself: for instance, he attributes his knowledge of brass music to his personal interactions with Jack Howard, of the band Hunters & Collectors.⁵⁵ In short, this inside access became an accessibility measure in and of itself.

⁵² This paragraph is drawn from my Skype interview with Mike, 25 June 2019.

⁵³ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

⁵⁴ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

⁵⁵ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

Through Hamish's account, parallels between Melbourne's live music community and Deaf culture become apparent. In both contexts, time spent engaging in face-to-face conversation after an event assumes almost equal importance to the event itself. It is a running joke in Deaf communities that Deaf people will always be the last to leave a restaurant or social event as they eke out every minute of precious face-to-face time.⁵⁶ Moreover, the importance that Hamish places on social networks can be understood through a Deaf lens. Whilst an important part of meeting a new person in Western hearing cultures is establishing what they *do*, Deaf introductions focus on *who* both parties *know*, with the aim of establishing common ground.⁵⁷ Deaf people are less concerned with occupation or financial status and more interested in where you went to school and who taught you sign language.⁵⁸ Similarly, who tells a story is considered more important than its content.⁵⁹ Social connections established act as invisible references.⁶⁰ These parallels explain how Australian live music culture has the potential to be a hospitable "between" space for d/Deaf people. They also compel us to expand conceptualisations of deaf accessibility. Where Chapter Three portrayed Auslan interpreting as a utility connected with Deaf culture, these examples recast access as a principle rather than a series of measures by demonstrating how music fosters social accessibility, and in turn, how social engagement enhances musical accessibility. The following discussion explores how access mediates musical preferences.

Musical preferences: genre, style, access

Amongst the research questions for this study, I sought to discover whether d/Deaf musical engagement in Australia was tied to particular genres or styles. Taking my cue from the prevalence of hip hop in the United States, I hypothesised that particular—and, perhaps, unique—preferences might have made themselves felt in Melbourne. Having established in Chapter Two that a conception of genre in Deaf arts creation is nebulous at best, this section examines whether this is also the case for music reception amongst d/Deaf Australians.

Taking Marnie and Hamish as examples, their respective musical preferences reflect apparent trends in Australian d/Deaf musical interests. As the previous chapter demonstrated, musical theatre, so beloved by Marnie, is the most accessible form of music for many deaf people. Some of this accessibility can be attributed to the fact that it is the most frequently

⁵⁶ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 53.

⁵⁷ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 100.

⁵⁸ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 100.

⁵⁹ Brueggemann, "On (Almost) Passing," 651.

⁶⁰ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 103.

interpreted musical form. A survey of upcoming shows listed in Auslan Stage Left newsletters from 2013 to 2018 located mentions of twenty-four musical theatre performances versus fourteen live music shows, eleven of which were community Christmas carol events.⁶¹ However, inherent features of the genre itself also contribute to its appeal. The extramusical elements of these shows contextualise the music for d/Deaf audiences. In Marnie's words, such productions "connect to a story, to emotions, to experiences and characters".⁶² For Marnie, being able to anchor the music and lyrics to characters and narrative aids her understanding. This supports the rationale for some of the interpreting strategies we saw in Chapter Three.

Meanwhile, as live music interpreting continues to gain traction, Hamish's preferences appear to be shared by other d/Deaf people. Interpreted or not, performances by rock musicians, and particularly drummers, are more readily embraced. Hamish noted: "I've got one of my deaf friends to see all the great drummers. From Neil Peart to Rob Hirst, to Keith Moon..."⁶³ He suggested that rhythmic elements, as well as the visual input of a live rock show, appeal to d/Deaf audiences. The United States band Beethoven's Nightmare immediately comes to mind; its deaf members met at Deaf liberal arts institution Gallaudet University and bonded over their shared love of rock music, performing for d/Deaf and hearing audiences alike.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, the Highway to Hell music festival, a tribute to AC/DC held in Perth in early March 2020, saw members of the Perth Deaf community request that Auslan Stage Left organise a particular interpreter, to great acclaim.⁶⁵ This suggests that though very few d/Deaf people share Hamish's "inside" experience, there is nevertheless a subset of the Deaf community which engages with rock music as a genre.

Despite the stylistic chasm between Marnie and Hamish's preferences, we see that both are strongly influenced by their accessibility needs and the physicality of being deaf. These influences also drive a preference for familiarity. Hamish and Marnie highlighted the difficulties they face when hearing new music for the first time. Hearing aids, though they allow some access to musical material, do not fix an unescapable truth for many deaf people: song lyrics are unintelligible on first listen.⁶⁶ I am all too familiar with this—my mondegreens, or misheard lyrics, are legend in my family—but I had never considered it in terms of my deafness. For Marnie, this detracts from her ability to enjoy live music, which I will explain further in the

⁶¹ Newsletters downloaded from Auslan Stage Left, "Media," Auslan Stage Left, accessed April 17, 2020, <http://www.auslanstageleft.com.au/media/>.

⁶² Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

⁶³ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

⁶⁴ Jones, "Imagined Hearing."

⁶⁵ ABC Perth, "Auslan interpreters rock out to AC/DC", video, 5 March 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2369978963293765>

⁶⁶ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020; Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

section to follow. This phenomenon moulds Hamish and Marnie's individual listening practices as well as their musical preferences. Marnie mentioned a Spotify playlist of favourite songs, whilst Hamish told me that, over the upcoming six months, he planned to go through his catalogues and rediscover his old favourites.⁶⁷ In Hamish's case, this is a catalogue drawn from many sources. Not only is it derived from his childhood record-listening and gig attendance, but in recent years, he has also spent hours online reading about bands and watching music videos.⁶⁸ Even across disparate genres, d/Deaf music lovers are thus highly resourceful, drawing on everything at their disposal to piece together an understanding of their preferred music. Like their earliest musical experiences, these accessible pursuits are often solitary, driven by physiological need rather than collectivist, cultural traits.

The role of Auslan

With Auslan being the primary language of the Australian Deaf community, it seemed to me at the outset of this project that it would dominate Australian d/Deaf musical practice and reception. However, Auslan sits on the periphery of Hamish and Marnie's individual musical practices, which is unsurprising given their oral upbringing. Auslan, nevertheless, loomed large in our conversations as an important figure in social practices. As this section reveals, the established conditions of Auslan interpreting and discourse predispose deaf and Deaf people alike to distinct patterns of musical engagement.

Marnie amalgamates Auslan and musical performance in her theatre consulting work. However, the two do not meet in the same way in her personal engagement with music. Her childhood love of singing and engaging with music in its English form endures to this day. In fact, English captioning is her preferred access measure, though in my experience it is not readily available.⁶⁹ As a fluent Auslan user, she is certainly capable of accessing music through an interpreter, and is often forced to in order to access lyrical material. Her experience at the 2019 Ability Fest, an annual one-day festival founded by decorated athlete and disability activist Dylan Alcott "that aims to use music as an inclusive platform to normalise disability" is a case in point:⁷⁰

I had no way of knowing the lyrics and was totally dependent on the interpreters. There is a level of disconnect for me as I am very English and I want to interpret lyrics my way, Still,

⁶⁷ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020; Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

⁶⁸ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

⁶⁹ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

⁷⁰ "Ability Fest 2019," accessed October 21, 2019, <https://untitledgroup.com.au/events/ability-fest-2019/>.

some songs were interpreted so brilliantly there was a level of enjoyment there. I had to learn to give myself over to the experience.⁷¹

For Marnie, despite her intimate knowledge of the interpreting process, an interpreter represents an intrusion into her individual musical experience. Chapter Three detailed some of the nuances of song translation, with the potential for myriad interpretations. Being locked into the interpreter's final, chosen version is less appealing for bilingual Marnie, though she clearly appreciates and enjoys the skill in its own right. Whilst Auslan interpreting provides Marnie with necessary linguistic input, it simultaneously forces her to relinquish control of her own experience. Here, we see another manifestation of the way in which both interpreter and client give something up in the interpreting experience. Although first-language Auslan users may not feel this same intrusion, we see here how Auslan interpretation does not automatically make music accessible to d/Deaf audiences. In Western cultures, sign-language interpreting is often viewed as entirely synonymous with d/Deaf access, providing an "institutionally normative, often unquestioned, solution".⁷² By offering interpreting as the only option, without captioning, events like Ability Fest inadvertently exclude oral and "between" deaf, the very people who most engage with music.

Like Marnie, Hamish's appreciation of music is situated within an English-speaking framework. For the majority of his life, Hamish's musical interactions have taken place almost entirely within the hearing world, without the services of an interpreter: "Now, I can go to any concert, um, whether it's jazz, blues, rock... um, and understand it, and hear it quite well." He was quick to differentiate between the breadth and depth of concerts availed to him and the small number of Auslan-interpreted concerts. Nevertheless, Auslan interpretation has proved a boon for Hamish's social experiences of music:

HAMISH: Yeah, well, I've got what's called "good pub Auslan"...Which means I can hold a conversation with the Deaf community and so forth. And speaking of Auslan, I recently went with ten Deaf people to a U2 concert.

ALEX: Oh wow!

HAMISH: And have a guess why? Because for the first time in a major Australian rock-and-roll show, there was an Auslan interpreter provided at the U2 concert.⁷³

Although Auslan is not central to Hamish's own musical experience, he opts to attend interpreted shows and select designated deaf seats wherever possible. Hamish's preferences demonstrate how Deaf social and cultural practices are influenced by the machinations of Auslan

⁷¹ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

⁷² Maartje De Meulder and Hilde Hauland, "Sign Language Interpreting Services: A Quick Fix for Inclusion?," *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, September 6, 2019, 13, <https://doi.org/10.1075/tis.18008.dem>.

⁷³ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

provision. Historically, Deaf Australians have had little choice over when to attend a show. As I confirmed with interpreters, many major touring shows only have one Auslan-interpreted performance per city, per run. Consequently, the entire interested Deaf community in a given location must attend the show as a single group. This necessity reinscribes the Deaf tendency to treat performances as social occasions that we saw in Chapter Two. Interestingly, this pattern of behaviour persists even when Deaf audiences have a choice over which show to attend. For example, the show *Queen Kong*, marketed to Deaf audiences and fully interpreted at every performance, was conspicuous in its lack of Deaf attendees on closing night. With access freely available, I had expected a smattering of Deaf people at each show, and was thus surprised at their absence. Having experienced several well-attended Deaf-accessible arts events, I surmised that any Deaf people who chose to attend the show did so in a larger group of their own volition. Hamish's own choice can be understood within this framework, and within broader collectivist conceptions of Deaf culture. Despite not needing to use Auslan to access music himself, he understands that Auslan interpretation allows his friends to engage with the experience in real time and to share in it *with* him. We saw earlier in the chapter that social connections are central to Hamish's enjoyment of live music: he seeks out these same connections with his friends in the Deaf community. Furthermore, he uses his particular interests and skills to benefit the Deaf people around them. He is a staunch advocate for Auslan-interpreted music, orienting himself with the collective cause: "So over the next few years, *we're* going to expand the opportunity for Auslan interpreters in musical events."⁷⁴

For potential Deaf audience members, the current state of Auslan shapes musical understanding in another way: the absence of musical terminology. Music teacher Karen explained her reticence to use technical terms when working with deaf children: even seemingly innocuous terms like "high" and "low" contain potential for confusion.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, Hamish felt that he was limited in his ability to discuss music with his Deaf friends, because the language required to have that conversation simply does not exist. This does not render Auslan inferior; Johnston and Schembri instead suggest that the comparatively small vocabulary of Auslan, like that of any language, simply reflects the contexts in which it has been used.⁷⁶ More provocatively, Deaf people have not had cause to use musical terminology because they have not had access to music. I suggest that Auslan musical vocabulary might emerge as Deaf access to music increases. In this context, the importance of Auslan-interpreted live music becomes ever clearer. Without an adequate method of describing it in the abstract, first-hand experience becomes the only way

⁷⁴ Emphasis (in italics) mine. Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

⁷⁵ Karen, interview with author, 4 June 2019.

⁷⁶ Johnston and Schembri, *Australian Sign Language*, 17.

to reliably convey any sense of music to a first-language Auslan user, and therefore, to create situations in which relevant language might develop. Linguistic and sensory attributes combine to create a situation in which music is better understood live, for reasons of both physical and social accessibility.

It is evident that for many Deaf Australians, this first-hand experience has not been forthcoming. With interpreted shows becoming more frequent, how can Deaf people be encouraged to attend? Together, a limited Auslan musical discourse and the one-off nature of interpreted shows contribute to another roadblock: reviews and recommendations cannot function in Deaf communities as they do amongst hearing music fans. With accessibility the number-one concern for prospective Deaf audiences, it is often impossible for Deaf people to solicit relevant recommendations—either via word of mouth or via published reviews—to events which other members of the Deaf community have not yet attended. Instead, the job of promotion falls to bodies like Auslan Stage Left, often in a limited time frame. For example, the band Peking Duk announced that their Melbourne show in May 2019 would be Auslan interpreted just four days out from the show itself, sharing a short promotional video from Auslan Stage Left on their Facebook page. The English-translated captions read, “you’d better get ready to party! ... If you like Auslan access at live events, then join the scores of people flocking to Melbourne Arena!”⁷⁷ The video emphasises Auslan access and hints at what the overall atmosphere might be like, but otherwise provides solely logistical information. Whilst interpreter Mike reported a small but enthusiastic Deaf crowd at the event, in his words, it was “not as many as we would have wanted, because...[it happened at] really short notice.”⁷⁸ In this instance, then, the video had quite limited utility.

In Deaf circles, the word of mouth *after* the event is the more powerful form of advertising, as it builds interest for future events. We see this in the case of Ability Fest, introduced above. Mike, who has worked on the festival since its inception, reported a crowd of “maybe twenty or thirty deafies” in 2018, and double that in 2019.⁷⁹ In his telling, the inaugural festival attracted mainly locals intrigued by the novelty of such an accessible event. His own enthusiasm about the festival was palpable in our conversation. Evidently, that first Deaf audience was similarly captivated; word got out, to the extent that “next year, they’re already talking about people coming from interstate to watch these gigs.”⁸⁰ Once the appeal of an event is sufficiently communicated, Deaf audiences jump on board with gusto. In planning for Deaf

⁷⁷ Peking Duk, “Auslan @ Melbourne Show Special Announcement!,” video, 6 May 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=278903502855859>.

⁷⁸ Mike, interview with author, 25 June 2019.

⁷⁹ Mike, interview with author, 25 June 2019.

⁸⁰ Mike, interview with author, 25 June 2019.

accessibility, music promoters should be sensitive to this phenomenon, and how linguistic barriers contribute to audience development. Though fundamental to Deaf access, providing an Auslan interpreter is only the first step. First-language Auslan users value different aspects of the musical experience; disseminating information about these events is a longer-term strategy.

Although not every d/Deaf music lover in Australia actively uses Auslan to access music, the language plays a significant role in how music functions within the Deaf community. The above examples warn of a vicious cycle: a lack of access leads to a lack of experience, which means that the conditions for language, dialogue and further interest are not set. In these circumstances, it is easy to see how music remains a personal and often solitary interest for people like Marnie and Hamish. In the next section, I examine how this interest can be reconciled with a Deaf identity.

Music and Deaf identity in Australia

This chapter has told the stories of Melburnians who are both deaf and passionate about music. Marnie's and Hamish's experiences indicate how this passion might be moulded by the sensory and social experiences of deafness. But can it be understood within a Deaf paradigm? Here, I examine how my informants reconcile their interest in music with their own Deaf identities. In doing so, I raise some common areas of debate within Deaf communities, highlighting how music might feed into those debates, and indeed, into what it means to be Deaf in Australia.

As noted elsewhere in this thesis, popular misconceptions of Deafness posit that music and deafness are fundamentally incompatible. These misconceptions are shared even by those closest to the Deaf community, as I found during the recruitment process. To suggest that a Deaf person might be "missing out" on music is to break a taboo in United States Deaf culture; it follows that the same might be true in Australia.⁸¹ However, as this and previous chapters have articulated, music itself is not necessarily taboo. Both Hamish and Marnie readily acknowledged that their views on music are not shared by a large contingent of the Australian Deaf community, but neither of them described the Deaf community as actively rejecting music. Marnie joked that ambivalence appears to be the status quo: "they're used to it, heheh".⁸² She went on to characterise any disagreements as a matter of differing tastes: "Or they love music, but I don't love their style of music".⁸³ For her, interest in music is a particularly individual passion anyway, quite separate from her Deaf identity. As such, the two attributes are not inherently

⁸¹ Mindess, *Reading Between the Signs*, 123.

⁸² Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

⁸³ Marnie, email message to author, 23 February 2020.

incompatible. But do they always merely coexist, or can one be understood in terms of the other?

In hearing-world contexts, an openly deaf identity has the potential to shape musical and social interactions. Earlier in the chapter, Uniacke's account of singing and dancing while deaf depicted the struggle of passing as hearing at all costs. It is a sentiment I recognise from my own musical experiences, especially as a performer. Without a deaf identity, the person whose hearing exists outside the norm does not have a frame of reference; instead, they are left to keep up with everyone else. However, it appears that pride in being openly deaf in these circles acts as a source of freedom, easing pressure to pass. Hamish fondly remembered going to nightclubs in his youth, boasting that he danced with such abandon at nightclubs that men around him asked their girlfriends to leave for fear of being upstaged by a "deaf slightly overweight bloke".⁸⁴ The inevitable and somewhat demeaning comparison with hearing people notwithstanding, Hamish was evidently proud to stand out. Instead of fighting his difference, he revelled in it; being deaf—though not immediately relevant to the situation—liberated him from the confines of conformity. In his telling, Hamish also used his deafness to his advantage when socialising with curious musicians in his roadie days. Fielding questions about what music he could hear and whether he could sign, he said, "used to take up half the night!" In Melbourne's live music scene, he became a representative of the deaf community by default. As he put it, being frank about his deafness endeared him to many hearing people in a way that would not have been available to him had he had "normal" hearing.⁸⁵

For an oral deaf person like Hamish, musical and d/Deaf identities pose challenges within the Deaf community itself. Hamish's breezy, positive account of his relationship with the Deaf community belied his acute awareness of its internal policing mechanisms. His Deaf identity is, in his words, "a very unusual one". He notes that some Deaf people "get a little bit annoyed that other deaf people don't learn Auslan well enough", but he has learnt "enough" to gain acceptance. Hamish was quick to assert, though, that he is not fluent, describing his ability as "good pub Auslan". His self-perceived language status clouds his Deaf identity; during our conversation, he was reticent to play up his standing in the Deaf community. Without this marker of his identity he doubts his authority in Deaf circles. To me, this contradicted his Deaf social orientation, passion for Deaf advocacy and his evident passion for sharing musical knowledge, all attributes of what I considered a Deaf leader. Music and language muddy the

⁸⁴ All quotes in this and the following paragraph are from my interview with Hamish, 12 February 2020.

⁸⁵ This resonates with Swain and French's suggestion that the "social death" of impairment frees disabled people from non-disabled norms and facilitates positive self-identity, as well as McRuer's concept of "severe disability" functioning along the lines of "fabulous" in queer theory. Swain and French, "Towards an Affirmation Model", 576; McRuer, *Crip Theory*, 31.

waters. Hamish is reluctant to talk about music amongst Deaf people: “I don’t want to come out as... as this smartarse deaf person who knows more about music than you.” The ghost of music as Deaf taboo lingers, however faintly.

As it stands, then, musical interests and Deaf identity often do not cross over in Deaf social and cultural contexts. However, as suggested earlier in the chapter, arbitrary separations of Australian Deaf and hearing culture are largely fictional. Melbourne’s Deaf community of today has dispersed from the segregated groups we saw earlier in the twentieth century. Although proponents of Deaf culture eschew medical interventions, their increasing prevalence has shifted the goalposts for the next generation of Deaf people, and how music might factor into their lives. An anecdote from Hamish provides an insight into what this might look like.

Unprompted, Hamish launched into an account of a social night at the 2016 Australian Deaf Games. Like the sports carnival described in Chapter One, the Games is a “major social and cultural festival for the whole Deaf community”.⁸⁶ Music features in these events, and Hamish was particularly impressed by a feat of musicality he saw that night:

HAMISH: A whole lot of young deaf people in their early twenties, all of them had cochlear implants, but they could actually sing the words too.

ALEX: Wow.

HAMISH: And that’s from background music. That’s something even I can’t do.⁸⁷

This anecdote illustrates Hamish’s own personal values around music, but his description of these young people also calls into question long-held assumptions about Deaf culture and community. Cochlear implants are the source of much controversy in Deaf communities.⁸⁸ In an early policy statement on cochlear implants, the Australian Association of the Deaf (now known as Deaf Australia) expressed considerable concern, positioning them within a pathological conception of deafness at odds with the language-based, socio-cultural model.⁸⁹ Furthermore, they highlighted the ethical issue of parents consenting to major surgery on behalf of their children, having been “led to see their children as pathologically deficient” and “given a false impression that the implant will “cure” their child”.⁹⁰ Anecdotes abound of deaf people who use

⁸⁶ “About The Games,” Australian Deaf Games, accessed April 3, 2020, <http://www.austdeafgames.org.au/about-the-games>. Organised by Deaf Sports Australia, these games have their origins in the carnivals described in Chapter One. They are now held at between two- and four-year intervals.

⁸⁷ Hamish, interview with author, 12 February 2020.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Paddy Ladd, “Oralism’s ‘Final Solution,’” *British Deaf News*, Autumn 1985, 5–6.

⁸⁹ Deaf Australia, “Deaf Australia Inc. Home Page,” accessed April 17, 2020, <https://deafaustralia.org.au/>. This organisation describes itself as “the national peak advocacy and information organisation in Australia for Deaf people who are bilingual – using both English and Auslan.”

⁹⁰ Australian Association of the Deaf, “Policy on the Cochlear Implant,” in *Cochlear Implants*, by Anthony R. Lea, Australian Institute of Health Care Technology Series 6 (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991), 48–50.

implants or other technological aids and communicate orally being excluded from Deaf events and groups. However, there is little, if any, of this exclusion amongst d/Deaf Australians themselves documented in the literature. Could community views be changing? Official views on implantation indeed appear to be softening: for instance, Deaf Australia no longer has a published policy on cochlear implants, instead advocating for a bilingual and bicultural model of deaf education, whilst noting that the implants alone do not cure deafness.⁹¹ Furthermore, deaf Victorian youth have long engaged with oral and aural culture more readily than their older counterparts. The Oral Group at Jolimont Square was reinvented as a Youth Group, holding many of the discos described in Chapter One. An account of a night held by the tennis club, meanwhile, describes how the “younger folk had a grand time jazzing it to popular music.”⁹² The presence of these young people, openly engaging with music in an “oral” way in a Deaf space, reflects this change of heart. Hamish’s admiration tacitly acknowledges the difficulty, even with technology, that deaf people face in accessing music. But instead of dwelling on the discourse around the implications of cochlear implants, Hamish focuses solely on what cochlear implants allow people to do. This example brings to life another space in which Brueggemann theorises betweenity: the “Deaf cyborg space.”⁹³ Here, she recasts assistive hearing devices within the wider world of advancing technology, suggesting that calling certain technologies assistive or adaptive is arbitrary because *all* technology assists and adapts in some way.⁹⁴ When we remove the stigma from these devices, we see, as Hamish’s account demonstrates, that they do not pose a threat to Deaf culture or identity.⁹⁵ Improving technology, combined with the aforementioned shift towards bilingual Deaf education, might continue to blur the lines between implantation and cultural Deafness, and these young people who enjoy music may become the norm in Deaf circles.

Conclusions

The second half of the twentieth century was a time of considerable change in the Australian educational and cultural landscape. It was characterised by a renewed focus on oral education and an increased expectation that deaf people assimilate into hearing society. As a result of these changes, generations of physically deaf children grew up without access to a signed language.

⁹¹ Deaf Australia, “Policy: Provision of Early Intervention for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children in Australia,” October 14, 2016, <https://deafaustralia.org.au/about-2/about-deaf-australia/>.

⁹² “Adult Deaf Tennis Club,” *Deaf Talkabout*, October 1963, 6.

⁹³ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 16.

⁹⁴ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 17.

⁹⁵ Brueggemann, *Deaf Subjects*, 16.

Whilst this is also true of deaf communities in other countries, it has particular implications for how we understand Australian Deaf culture and the role of Auslan within it. The use of Auslan reflects a particular attitude, rather than a measure of Deafness; this distinction is essential if we are to include all deaf Australians, including those who speak English and thus “think-between”, in the narrative.

“Between” is the home of the sometimes-elusive Aussie d/Deaf music lover. The experience of growing up in the mainstream has given rise to a series of musical preferences and behaviours that, whilst not inherently “culturally Deaf”, are tied to the lived experience of deafness. This lived experience is shaped by physical and sensory attributes, but also by the ways in which hearing people mediate d/Deaf access to the world. People like Hamish and Marnie seek out musical knowledge for themselves and carve out unique identities through their love of music. Preferences for particular styles and genres are rooted in the need for accessibility, with interpreted musical theatre and rock music holding particular appeal for an increasing number of d/Deaf Australians. These early experiences and preferences may begin to change as technology and increased awareness of Auslan converge.

Narratives of deaf engagement with music force us to redefine the limits of musical participation. In both majority-hearing and Deaf contexts, music also has the potential to become a powerful tool of social currency. When it is accessible, it provides deaf people with valuable opportunities for face-to-face communication with hearing and deaf people alike. Although “betweeners” might broach the subject with trepidation amongst Deaf peers, music is far from taboo for the “everyday Deaf” Australian; access provision must now catch up.

Conclusion

In August 2016, Ramas McRae took his fight to have an Auslan interpreter at the AFL Grand Final to the Australian Human Rights Commission.¹ Although his aim was to have all the game's formalities accessible to Auslan users, public discourse zeroed in on the national anthem. During an interview on radio station 3AW's breakfast program, Expression Australia's Director of Language, Partnerships and Innovation Brent Phillips lamented: "I have been to the AFL Grand Final many times and I've never had the opportunity to enjoy our national anthem in my first language."² McRae's fight was ultimately successful, with the AFL agreeing to the presence of interpreters from 2017 onwards. At the 2019 Grand Final, "Advance Australia Fair" was performed simultaneously in Auslan by students from the deaf facility at St Albans East Primary School and in English by Conrad Sewell.

In the introduction to this thesis, I alluded to this as evidence of an interest in musical engagement amongst Deaf Victorians. However, I did not consider such acts culturally significant in their own right. In fact, I saw this form of accessibility, to quote interpreter Mike, as a token "bollocks" symbol of potential practice.³ What, Mike asked during our interview, about player interviews, commentary or, more prosaically, safety information? These were the pieces of information that would really enhance the experience for Deaf attendees at sporting matches. And yet, in both my experience and Mike's, these were not interpreted.⁴ The reasoning we saw in the "physical culture displays" in Chapter One persists: the national anthem in Auslan provides a novel spectacle for hearing audiences whilst placating the layperson's desire to "assist" Deaf audiences. I thought that music in these contexts could not function to support the Deaf community unless it was performed by Deaf people. Instead, I hypothesised that the provision of Auslan-interpreted music was the canary in the coal mine, a sign that something more "authentically Deaf" could flourish in these conditions.

This thesis has discounted my initial hypothesis, using studies of institutions for the deaf and Deaf Arts to underscore the power of the symbolism inherent in such seemingly superficial

¹ Lauder, "AFL Denies Request for Sign Language Interpreters at 2016 Grand Final"; Perkins, "Deaf Footy Fan Claims AFL Discrimination"; Ramas McRae, "Sign the Petition: Auslan Interpreter for the Australian Anthem on AFL Grand Final Day," Change.org, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://www.change.org/p/afl-in-general-auslan-interpreter-for-the-australian-anthem-on-afl-grand-final-day>.

² Brent Phillips, interview with Ross Stevenson and John Burns, interpreted by Daniel Hatley, 3AW, 2016, transcript available from <https://www.expression.com.au/news.asp?aid=1007&t=afhandstocommunicate&cid=1>

³ Mike, Skype interview with author, 25 June 2019.

⁴ Australian Football League match, Collingwood Magpies vs. Port Adelaide Power, Melbourne Cricket Ground, 18 August 2018.

musical acts. Covering novel historical ground, Chapter One revealed that in Australia, music and d/Deafness were initially set in opposition to reinforce audist stereotypes and enhance the reputation of people like Abraham. As Deaf Australians gained autonomy over their social and creative practices, music became fertile ground upon which they could stake a claim for equality. Although it was not as widely disseminated *within* the Australian Deaf community as it was elsewhere, signed song joined other art forms to become a strategy for showcasing and legitimising Auslan in a medium accepted by hearing audiences, whether Deaf-led (Chapters One and Two) or interpreted (Chapter Three). Furthermore, my analysis of music in Deaf arts in Chapter Two illuminated the significance of collaboration for Deaf people, identifying the important role played by both hearing musical collaborators and Auslan interpreters in developing a shared creative discourse.

Later in the aforementioned radio interview, Phillips referred to “Advance Australia Fair” as “our beautiful song”. If he had never been able to access it, how did he measure its beauty? Value judgments aside, this thesis has offered a two-pronged answer to this question. First, Chapters Two, Three and Four illustrate the fragility of the notion of “the work” in Deaf arts. Within this subset of the Deaf community, music is never performed in isolation; furthermore, performers and works are assessed not on the basis of aesthetic quality, but instead on the basis of their service to the Deaf community as a whole. Second, I have demonstrated—particularly in Chapter Four—how music acts as a form of social currency for d/Deaf people across both Deaf and hearing social spheres. The value of this currency is intertwined with the degree of accessibility; this outweighs any personal or stylistic preference for particular music. For Phillips, then, the perceived “beauty” of “Advance Australia Fair” could be located not in the work itself but in the implications of having it accessible. A visible interpreter at the match would enable him to join in with the ritual on equal terms with his peers: standing and perceiving each word in real time. The case studies offered in this thesis have elucidated how Auslan-accessible music contributes to the project of Deaf social inclusion in Australia.

By including voices from the peripheries of Deaf scholarship in Chapters Three and Four—CODAs who work as interpreters and oral d/Deaf people—this thesis has argued that the study of d/Deaf musical practice needs to take a more holistic approach in order to avoid essentialist constructions. It focuses not on how deaf people overcome deafness to engage with music, but instead on how the confluence of factors in a deaf life might shape musical engagement. This has particular benefit in clarifying hearing misconceptions about sign-language interpretation and musical interest amongst d/Deaf people, and therefore, legitimising d/Deaf musical scholarship in mainstream contexts. Chapter Three’s close analyses of musical Auslan

interpretations in music, whilst not linguistically significant to Auslan scholars, have offered insight into how d/Deaf people experience and understand music, and have exemplified different needs in musical interpreting. In doing so, they have reframed Auslan interpreting as the accessibility issue it is. These analyses would not have been possible without the intermediary perspective of my interlocutors.

The Australian Deaf community's relatively short history, unencumbered by the collective memory of a long-past "Golden Age" of Deaf culture, makes it a compelling test case for applying Brueggemann's concept of "betweenity" to the study of music amongst d/Deaf people.⁵ Population size, technological advances and oralist educational policies have given rise to a particularly "between" deaf population, making this a pertinent approach to this particular project. Influenced by these factors, Australian Deaf culture appears more future-oriented than other Deaf communities, particularly those in the United States; the musical techniques explored in this thesis embody this perspective. Furthermore, I argue that whether newly composed, translated or interpreted, *all* music accessible to d/Deaf people is in some way "between", and therefore, it cannot be understood entirely within a Deaf or hearing paradigm. Music, in its best-understood form, is inescapably rooted in an aural modality. Certainly, it should not be considered in *solely* aural terms, but even in this thesis, *all* musical examples have had sonic elements. On this basis, "between" models are necessary to conceptualise d/Deaf musical experience.

Some Deaf community members may reject this argument, accusing me of forcing hearing values and attitudes upon the community. On the contrary, I suggest that treating music by and for the d/Deaf as fundamentally "in-between" and recognising its underpinnings in hearing culture could act as a protective strategy to ringfence Deaf culture without superimposing aural—or, indeed, audist—values directly upon it. Betweenity in d/Deaf music scholarship might seek to understand d/Deaf musical practices not in terms of cultural Deafness, but instead in terms of the circumstances, individual or collective, of being d/Deaf. In doing so, it would actually *strengthen* the case for celebratory narratives of Deaf Gain. By examining what both d/Deafness and hearing might *give* to musical experience, betweenity counters the inevitable negative assumptions and comparisons emerging from deficit narratives, or those that focus on what d/Deafness takes away from music. The resultant discourse, couched in terms of liminality, would be less concerned with a canon or body of "Deaf music", and more concerned with how d/Deaf people negotiate musical interactions. In this way,

⁵ In calling this history "short", I am referring to the Deaf signing community which emerged from British colonisation.

betweenity offers a space within which stories like my own might be told, whilst continuing to respect the cultural sensitivities of the Deaf community. Such a space could empower other deaf musicians, who have historically struggled to “pass” as hearing, to be open about their own experiences, and in doing so, offer deeper critique of musical accessibility. Further research could provide the impetus for mainstream music scholars to reconsider their assumptions of what it means to perform, to participate and to listen.

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