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Sign-singing: a Deafhearing musical experience (poster and performance)

Wrexham's Singing Hands

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Sign-singing: a Deafhearing musical experience

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Introduction

Sign-singing, or song-signing, is a musical activity whereby songs are performed in signed languages. This involves either the composition of an original song in a signed language, or else the translation of a (verbal/ (h/H)earing) song into a signed language (Maler, 2013). Translation involves interpreting the meaning of the lyrics in the verbal (h/H)earing language and presenting this in a culturally appropriate way in the signed language.

There are marked differences between the aural-auditory modality h/Hearing languages, and the visual-gestural modality signed languages (Quer & Steinbach, 2015), which can include structure and grammar. Choreographing a performance can therefore be complex and may involve synchronising sections of lyrics, whilst the words remain unmatched; this is so that the sections of lyrics in the signed language will make sense.

In addition to the translation of the written lyrics, performances often also incorporate other musical features such as rhythm, pitch and timbre (Maler, 2013) and also the elongation of notes. Sign-singing has been noted as a traditional form of storytelling in Deaf culture, particularly in American Sign Language (ASL) (Bahan, 2006). Sign-singing was also noted as a popular musical activity amongst respondents in an American-based study of American ASL-users (Darrow, 2006). However sign-singing as a phenomenon has not been explored in much detail within the academic literature, and very little has been written from the UK perspective.

In recent years sign-singing has become a popular activity for h/Hearing and d/Deaf individuals, with Deafhearing (West, 2012) groups being formed and performing together. This has created a space for interaction, communication, learning and teaching. Various media forums, such as youtube have served as platforms for sharing and popularizing the phenomenon (Maler, 2013) . Particular media incidents have also served to raise the profile, for example the signed language interpretation of a Swedish Eurovision finals performance which trended on social media such as Facebook (New Tang DVD Television, 2015).

Research team & methodology

"Wrexham's Singing Hands" are a Deafhearing (West, 2012), UK-based sign-singing group who prepare and perform songs interpreted through British Sign Language (BSL). Their performances take place at various events and locations across North Wales, raising awareness of BSL, with any monies raised going to local charities.

Through a variety of transdisciplinary methodologies, the group aim to explore interesting topics relating to the field of Deaf studies.

Methodologies include: performative social sciences (Jones, 2014), including poetics and ethnodrama (Richardson, 1997); collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013), and duoethnography (Norris, Sawyer, Richard, & Lund, Darren, 2012).

Topics to be explored

- Translanguaging issues in sign-singing, including the translation and performance of "Calon lân" and other Welsh-medium songs through the medium of BSL
- Sign-singing as an informal, accessible medium through which to learn signed languages
- Narratives of sing-singers, including native BSL users
- Handshape error and altered meaning of lyrics in novice BSL users
- History of sign-singing in the UK
- Deafhearing space or the appropriation of Deaf culture by Hearing performers?

For more information on Wrexham Singing Hands' activity, including where and when they are performing and how you can get involved, please visit the Facebook page or email Dr Sara Louise Wheeler: https://www.facebook.com/groups/113499135379542/ s.wheeler@bangor.ac.uk

To remain abreast of Wrexham Singing Hands' scholarly publications, follow Dr Sara Louise Wheeler on ResearchGate, Twitter, Acadmia.edu and Mendeley

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