Creative voices from the deaf community, creative exchanges with the deaf community

Abstract

In this essay I want to identify opportunities for creative collaborations between the d/Deaf community and traditional creative artists, and solutions to the barriers to participation, inclusion, and exchange in Scottish traditional music/song. As a hard of hearing (HoH) musician, and British Sign Language (BSL) user, my aims are to try to foreground the deaf experience and amplify voices of the d/Deaf community.

Exchanges between these cultures are a neglected and untapped opportunity. As a new area of research this will only be a small introduction to the subject but will include occasional references to storytelling and dance as part of the Scottish cultural traditions.

Terminology and definitions

- The term d/Deaf refers to "Deaf (sign language users) and deaf (who are hard of hearing but who have English as their first language and may lipread and/or use hearing aids). D/deaf is often used as a short cut to describe both groups who are similar but not exactly the same when it comes to communication" (University of Greenwich)

- Deaf languages- some people use Sign Supported English (SSE). Some deaf people can speak verbally, some choose not to.

- "Deaf" has many meanings: "Deaf relates to the cultural community, deaf relates to someone who medically identifies with 'hearing loss'. People who use Sign Language, have cochlear implants and wear hearing aids may all identify as D/deaf". (Solar Bear ltd, R. (2017)).

- "Hard of hearing": refers to someone who does not hear well. Maybe because they were born with a 'hearing loss' or have lost some or all of their hearing (Solar Bear ltd, R. (2017)).

- "BSL": is an organic, visual language with its own lexicon, syntax, and regional variations. (Solar Bear ltd, R. (2017).

Research methods

My methods of research include consideration of written research and publications which have focussed on the key concepts of community, voicing of place, identity and authenticity within the arts. This included a range of sources including printed and audio-visual material by both hearing and deaf authors. I engaged with BSL interpreter/performer Catherine King via recorded zoom consultation, to identify appropriate overlapping survey questionnaires for the two communities. I also wanted to have informal discussions (by zoom) with other d/Deaf traditional musicians - Jamie Macdonald and Katie Allen – to identify key issues from their lived experience in a supportive context to facilitate voicing of difficult experiences.

I created three fieldwork surveys on survey monkey: one for the d/Deaf community and two for traditional musicians to achieve both qualitative and quantitative data to capture what is very varied experiences within the d/Deaf community. As some of the community have no hearing experience, I needed to consider and frame my questions using a variety of experiences relating to both music

and the Scottish traditional arts. Further survey description and methodology is in Appendix 2-4. Survey 1 (trad. community) yielded 23 responses, survey 2 (trad. community) yielding 21 and survey 3 (d/Deaf community) yielded 6.

Findings and Discussions

Common misconceptions, barriers, and inequalities

Audism

Deaf people face inequalities caused by implicit cultural notions of inferiority. For example (Harrington, 2002, DeafSpace) when describing' Audism' as "the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or to behave in the manner of one who hears". He also refers to 'the hearing way of dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the deaf community'. Indeed, many deaf people do not aspire to be hearing and celebrate sign language and the culture it sits in as a valid language. This relates to implicit negative terminology demonstrated in: ***survey 1 Q.5: Do you think 'hearing loss' and 'hearing impairment' are helpful terminology?*** Most responses demonstrate no awareness that "loss" and "impairment" are pejorative terms. Indeed, many people in the deaf community find this unhelpful terminology and see it as deaf 'gain', not a 'loss'. Anecdotally some deaf musicians use 'partial hearing loss' but do find themselves going round the houses describing this.

The d/Deaf spectrum

Another common misconception is that Deaf people are all totally deaf rather than the wide spectrum of hearing. Because of this, many people do not see the point in providing them with musical education experiences. However, Montgomery, G. (ed.) (1981) states: "Music education is important. It promotes language, development, social confidence and emotional growth, especially for disabled and deaf children". Additionally, Gulamani, S. (2007)., explains that deaf "students may require greater exposure, [] than normal hearing students in order to meet instructional objectives" although this assumes that aural communication is desired. She further states that sustaining instruments may provide more useful aural feedback to hearing impaired students than percussive instruments and can improve their vocal intonation, both in singing and in speaking by participating in vocal activity. The vocal range of song literature should be taken into consideration.

Existing perspectives within society today are that deaf people are 'disabled', however this term is complicated for those who do not feel disabled. If signing/d/Deaf communities are thought of at all, it is often only in terms of deafness as a medical condition, or that deaf people are hearing people who, usually with age loss their hearing gradually.

Inequality of expectation

Research and personal experience demonstrate that d/Deaf people are strongly encouraged to be among hearing people, rather than vice versa. This is partially to do with comparative population size of 'deaf to hearing' ratio, but not solely. Although currently this is similar for people from ethnic minorities or indigenous mother tongues. In terms of Scotland's own languages there is encouragement, through schools, for visibility and participation in Scots or Gaelic languages that is not extended to BSL.

In answer to ***survey 1 Q.7: Would you consider hiring a BSL interpreter for your gigs if there is a singer?*** the data from my digital surveys shows common themes of cost implication issues, concerns

about wanting an interpreter to have the "wow" factor, and not being sure if the signing would have the" desired effect". It is not clear who the "wow" is desired for and it's not clear what "desired effect" means. The cost implication is certainly a recognisable barrier as quite rightly good interpreters are not cheap. However, this caution may also reflect some concerns of performers as to the strength of their lyrics (when communicated with no music). Perhaps communicating more context/history of the songs through introductions, benefits all audiences.

Interpreters or signing performers can bring many other nuanced elements such as mood, feelings, embodiment and d/Deaf respondents to *survey 3 Q.7: What do you think of signed songs? Do you like the invention?* typically commented that; "So few skilled or appropriate people doing them" and "it depends on the person who is performing it and how well they translate and how well they incorporate the feeling and meaning into that".

Is music relevant to the d/Deaf?

From my own experience, hearing people often make and over focus on 'rhythm' while there are several other ways to engage d/Deaf people with music. Additionally, there is an assumption, within hearing world that hearing aids, cochlear implants and hearing loops improve musical experiences, however many deaf people refuse to use them as they can distort and amplify sound in an uncomfortable and overloading way, an issue all three d/Deaf musicians agreed in my interview with Jamie and Katie.

Understanding how d/Deaf languages work

I am interested in identifying how a lack of awareness can lead to the failure of communication strategies. In answer to *survey 1 Q.8: Would you engage with someone who is profoundly deaf, despite having little or no BSL?* all respondents commented that they were keen to do so but understandably felt some nervousness. However, one particular comment was quite shocking in their lack of understanding about how difficult it is for d/Deaf people to understand speech: "they're 99% of the time going to be able to understand what we are trying to say, and they will be so thankful". Also, survey *1 Q.2: Have you ever interacted with someone who is deaf? How did that go*? identified that hearing people had concerns about being patronising, felt awkward, were shy or embarrassed to use their limited sign language, and the engagement was 'hard work'. Lack of understanding about these issues serves to increase divisions between the hearing and D/deaf communities.

Issues relating to awareness of appropriate languages, incidentally arose again in the exploration of tradition and methods of archiving: *Survey 1 Q.5: How do you think the d/Deaf community archive deaf history?*

Writing things down	Signing	Words?	Don't know	Pictures	Videos
7	1	2	5	8	3

The table shows communication methods suggested by the hearing respondents. The participants are possibly unaware that many deaf people don't write. It is perhaps surprising that more traditional music students did not consider recordings of oral /signed material. Furthermore, the question *survey 1 Q.3: What do you think of the term 'Oral Tradition' and does this leave anyone*

out? yielded some misconceptions. For example, the comment that "'oral tradition' doesn't exclude anyone because it refers to 'oral' rather than 'aural'" which doesn't recognise that one is integral to the other.

Community and voicing of time and place

The voicing of one's own language is fundamental to a person's sense of one's own culture. Although sign languages have existed since the fifth century B.C., signing was stigmatised right up until the 1980s (which is similarly the case for Gaelic and Scots language in formal education.)

There are multiple sign languages across the world, with local/regional signing dialects within Scotland as well. Furthermore, it is sometimes possible to identify which deaf school a signer has attended. For example, Glasgow signs appear to differentiate from sign language in the islands: 'the Glasgow sign for island, intimates a tiny physical area, whereas islanders themselves portray a larger land mass area' (King and McDade, 2014, page 14).

It is understandable that many deaf people who have perhaps left their homes in isolated parts of Scotland to go to cities to learn BSL, find a sense of shared language and community and speak BSL with no real trace of an island accent. This may account for some 'dislocation' from one's geographical culture (95% of deaf children are 'minorities within their own families' which for many of us is a significant part of our identities. Understandably, there has typically been a greater development in sign language in cities and therefore d/Deaf culture in areas like Glasgow.

The sense of belonging that is integral to our identification of our own culture has been made harder as d/Deaf people do not have ready access to their history. It has often been the case that when deaf schools closed, their records have just been thrown away or given to hearing museums and archives.

We can see this is a community that sometimes includes strong family d/Deaf history as survey respondents answered: "being 2nd generation has given me a strong sense and pride of my Deafness" and" I am third gen deaf in my family but that's all I know about the deaf community before me." However, most d/Deaf respondents to ***survey 3 Q.4: Do you feel a strong connection with generations of deaf people and deaf community from hundreds of years ago? If so, what has helped to keep these stories alive?*** reported that they did not feel this connection and that often the reason for this is because: "when I grew up, I wasn't really in the deaf community". A similar but different impact on Gaelic or Highland culture and language is due to population densities and migration.

There is anecdotal evidence from the ***survey 3 Q.4*** that there is more archiving of deaf culture in England than there is in Scotland and that there is a strong appetite to improve this. In addition, it is clear from ***survey 3 Q.4*** that for d/Deaf people "recordings in BSL would be valuable and an essential part of history".

Identity, authenticity, and intention

We can see that people's identity is drawn from overlapping multiple cultures. In Grosjean, F. (1992). argues that "signing-deaf people should be recognised as fundamentally bilingual and bicultural". However, gaps in the communication of tradition exist for many d/Deaf people. In answer to ***survey 3 Q.4*** about connection with their own d/Deaf tradition: "Not really, I feel [more of] a strong

connection exists with Scottish history, the fight for independence, as that makes me most proud to be Scottish."

We have also seen clearly that there is suspicion of translation or fusion of art forms for different audiences and a great desire for clarity around intention and authenticity for each section of an audience. However, I was very surprised by the responses from the hearing student musicians regarding *survey 1 Q.1: What is important to you about music?* This was an open question, and the responses were suggested by the participants.

Responses	No of mentions by hearing respondents
Accessibility	2
Storytelling	3
Making connections to/between people	9
Sense of national identity and place	3
History and tradition	2
Fun/entertainment	3

Interestingly none of the participants mentioned 'sound' as important, whilst easily the most cited aspect was making connections to/between people. This emphasises the potential of music to be a platform for exchange and engagement between cultures, communities, and people. Perhaps it is also surprising that few of these traditional musicians mentioned 'tradition'. Indeed, as Montgomery, G. (ed.) (1981) states: "music has a whole lot more expression and meaning to it, than the perception of noise…all about colours, pictures, stories, direction, and life". It would be great to see a much-needed increase in music tuition, as many deaf children may think music is all about sounds alone.

Through my research I have been struck by the similarities between Gaelic, Scots and BSL languages. Each language tradition has a pride and enthusiasm in the richness of their language and culture, perhaps partly because they have been threatened**.** Further we see that BSL's role in d/Deaf culture is so strong because the 'literal ownership of his or her literature' is unquestionable because 'the text naturally and necessarily lives in the artist's body'. Storytelling is a significant vehicle for the sharing of d/Deaf and Scottish culture as BSL is a huge part of what keeps stories alive.

All three languages are indigenous minority languages of Scotland that have been repressed. As LEITH, JN:2013) says "Anthropologically, the context of education for the deaf community, which has in some ways created a cultural separation, can be similar to isolated minority languages." For example, the cane was commonly used in schools for using Scots and Gaelic, and there are many examples of oppression in the BSL community: "she grew up in the generation where you didn't sign in the street, you didn't sign publicly because it's embarrassing […] – people would mock you… my grandmother kind of going 'don't sign, don't sign', or 'if you're going to sign, don't be too outlandish, try and keep it down low'.

Another similarity between BSL, Gaelic and Scots are individually close-knit communities such as when whole generations of a family are exponents or well – known in traditional music circles.

Similarly, signing-deaf communities are often characterised as tight-knit and 'hard to reach' communities.

As Swinbourne, C. (2013) articulates regarding d/Deaf experience: "the majority culture's spoken language is largely inaccessible, and the degree of English literacy cannot be assured [] There's no doubt that the deaf world is small, but it is still remarkable just how often we act as though other deaf people we know are minor celebrities [] This is why I know the life history of a number of deaf people who I have never met". I recognise this also within the traditional music scene, and the benefit of our "idols" being within reach.

All of the d/Deaf respondents demonstrated a great interest in Gaelic as well as Scots stories and traditions. For example, with comments such as (***survey 3 Q.3***): "Yes! We deserve to know and learn the history of that too not just the overall Scots history. Gaidhlig is a part of Scottish culture and we need to know that" and "the last time I felt really Scottish, way back in secondary school when we did ceilidh dancing. Loved it". Also, in ***survey 3 Q.6***: "Definitely! I think that the division between hearing and deaf is still too wide and deaf people should have access to these stories too, especially if [] given [] the chance to make them theirs. This could be a way to establish a collaboration and bring the two communities more together."

However, from survey respondents' answers to ***survey 3 Q.2: Do you access any Gaelic culture in anyway?*** It is clear that access is limited: to "Through folk music bands and music festivals I attend", "only when we went to hearing school for PE lessons, we did some Ceilidh dancing at Christmas" and even "No, this is actually the first time I read about it! :)"

Arts, entertainment, and innovation

Our traditional music platforms are very hearing dominated. However, this research has identified numerous ways that issues can be addressed. Some useful suggestions from the informal discussion with Katie and Jamie who are d/Deaf musicians include:

- More awareness and visibility for musicians who are deaf/Hard of Hearing
- When asked to repeat something please do so, even if you think it's not important.
- Make space for rehearsals for deaf people to play as loud as they need to (in order to hear themselves), however, group planning is essential to achieve balance for a performance.
- Be open to different positioning and postures.
- Be open to musicians facing who they are playing with on or off stage as eye contact makes a massive difference.
- Experiment with 'in-ears' or monitors.

It is heartening that the mainly hearing trad community suggested (***in survey 1 Q.4***) that researching and educating themselves about issues and stories of deaf musicians is important.

Ways to make performance events better for everyone:

Music, sound, and communication

There is often a debate about the cost of employing interpreters to facilitate performances for D/deaf audiences. However, as discussed on the Ahmed Khalifa podcast episode 14 interview with the band Chasing Deer, if the performance is relevant to the d/Deaf or signing community that is potentially increasing audience size and therefore revenue which can pay for any additional costs thus benefitting everyone. Increased revenue could pay for subtitled or signed pre-recordings projected on a screen.

Other recommendations (including from the organisation DeafSpace) include:

- Ask NHS, Help Musicians for in ears or hearing aids that can be tailored with frequency altering and that bring your 'mids' up like an inner 'EQ'.
- Ask NHS, Help Musicians for free really good ear plugs for HoH musicians.
- Good lighting/sightlines aids lip reading or seeing BSL.

- Set up specific areas where people can get a good view of people speaking /signing, video or visualisations of the music or to take shoes off to feel rhythm and vibrations more directly.

- Provide adequate hearing loops.

- Having a heavy bass frequency

- Providing a colour graphic visual display which is designed to be an analogue of the music, phrase by phrase Montgomery, G. (ed.) (1981)

- Using balloon vibrations at performances or night clubs

Promotion, booking and front of house

Much of the research indicates there is a great need for booking systems which are quick and easy to use. As Crockett (2015) reports, "If I want to go to a concert tomorrow, I just buy a ticket and go. A deaf person has to email the venue, find the right person (they're not easy to find), request services, then request specific interpreters. Most of the time, even after going through this whole process, which takes weeks, the deaf person doesn't end up with the right connection to the artist."

If a performance is d/Deaf friendly, good targeted marketing and information are crucial through deaf networks and there could be designated seats which might suit d/Deaf people better (time released if not filled).

Other actions which could be considered are:

- Friendly, welcoming Front of House staff that have basic BSL (or Deaf Awareness training). If not, then paper and pen just in case

- Pre-order drinks slips included with tickets/e-tickets.

- Have BSL user front of house staff around the venue, merchandise stand, the bar, the welcome area etc.

See appendix 5 for further ways to improve spaces, communications, and safety many of which benefit everyone.

Each of these actions should be considered in a context where institutions, funding bodies, building control, planners, policy writers and educators recognises how the status quo serves as a major barrier to engagement with the arts and culture.

Synthesis and divergence of languages

Before thinking about synthesizing complex cultures and languages, it is important to appreciate how, when and where they diverge. Deaf performances have more experience of being inclusive to a wider audience: "Basically [] you do something whereby people who don't know sign language can access the content. So, it is deaf performances that are for everybody []. Which is really important, because deaf people tend to come from hearing families" LEITH, Ella (AC:2014).

Negative impacts of 'shared' or 'translated' languages.

Many in the d/Deaf community are vocal about the past (and present) prioritising of speech therapy and speech-reading. These fixed expressions, or 'Oralist therapies', function as a recognisable shorthand for the experience of school days whereas LEITH (2016) reports "the deaf children's facial muscles were exercised, but not their brains [] I was busy trying to say 'fish', probably tried 100 times!"

Positive impacts and 'transferable' languages.

We can see that languages which may be primarily for a particular sector, can also speak to other communities. For example, hearing audiences may not have BSL, but the gesture and emotion can communicate volumes to seeing audiences. Indeed, we know that a large proportion of mainstream communication is through 'body language' and this is what I mean by a 'transferable' language. Signing has its own inherent dramaturgy, improvisation and spontaneity that can communicate instantly to broader audiences. An interesting perspective expressed in Ella Leith's paper is using the term 'corporeal tradition' instead of 'oral tradition' as a means to present impactful visual, physical, social and olfactory experiences. These of course are all 'languages' understandable by the d/Deaf community. However, it is also clear that all languages and traditions are evolving very quickly, and every strategy will exclude somebody. Also, there are many people who benefit from subtitles (if they are accurate) including: people with dyslexia; people watching foreign language films; people with autism; ADHD; aural processing difficulties.

Conclusion

How can we connect d/Deaf and Scottish traditional stories and histories through performance and creative collaboration?

Under the Equality Act 2010 and the BSL Act (Scotland) 2015 people in the UK and Scotland have the right to access cultural activities equally. So how are we doing?

Theatre companies such as the National Theatre of Scotland, Solar Bear and Birds of Paradise are all at different stages of improving their d/Deaf accessibility. Similarly, BSL is benefiting from being platformed at the Scottish Storytelling Centre. There are examples of connections on online spaces such as Facebook, while YouTube are increasingly providing virtual DEAFspace for intracommunity storytelling.

In Scotland there are barriers to education, employment, and services due to the limited contexts in which a BSL-user can request the subsidised provision of an interpreter. Moreover, there is a marked shortage of BSL-English interpreters, with the Scottish Council on Deafness estimating a ratio of 1 interpreter to 200 BSL-users. For performance and music there is a debate about the value of interpreters versus collaborators. An interpreter on 2D video does not capture everything about a performance, whereas an in-person signer offers a more immediate and personal experience. So, amongst other reasons there are pragmatic arguments for focussing on collaborations where the needs, cultures, and humour of hearing and d/Deaf audiences are considered right at the beginning of generating a production/performance.

Catherine King's remit to provide collaborative BSL interpretation of theatre work "In My Fathers Words", motivated her to research a number of unknowns. A key concern was that many audience members would be using a variety of communication systems to support their understanding of a "foreign" language, and King hoped to find a way to match this experience for the BSL using audience. She also wanted to match the complexity of what might be understood through the music by the hearing audience. She writes: "It did not feel right to simply offer nothing to the BSL audience whilst others could experience the musicality and lyricism of Gaelic in some of the most moving scenes of the play" (King and McDade, 2014). By creating a text that was noticeably "foreign", but that contained island dialect vocabulary drawn from BSL users, she manages to honour the life of the Gaelic in the piece. The insights shared by the participants in her research, replicate *incomprehension* in the face of the Gaelic and/or an emotional recognition of the text.

Despite such thoughtful collaborations, there are still missed opportunities. For example, in **Survey 1 Q. 7: What ways can we include deaf people in general?** only a small number suggested the hugely important idea of teaching BSL in schools or suggested that they c/should learn sign language as an adult. Despite a significant number of respondents to surveys 1 and 2 being from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, (which also has the largest number of d/Deaf undergraduates in the UK), only small attempts are made by the conservatoire to teach even basic BSL to facilitate some engagement both informally and in collaborative creative works.

However, the responses from both trad. and deaf communities to **survey 3 Q.8** and **survey 1 Q.9: Can you think of any similarities between deaf culture and Gaelic or Scottish culture?** certainly seem to find some overlap in experiences of these minority language communities, which could provide some "meat" around which potential collaborations could be devised. Some of the more interesting themes suggested by survey participants include: "stigma"," lack of support or value ", "tight knit" [communities], "tendency to be elitist", "storytelling", "minority languages are allies for sure", "systematic oppression of culture", "language barriers" "poverty", "pride", "sense of belonging" and "being forgotten".

Lastly, I offer a significant comment signed by one of my survey respondents:

"Both [Gaelic and BSL are] forgotten about…with hearing or deaf, whatever you are, aye, I feel they're really forgotten. I don't know why, like, how have we forgotten? Like why aren't we choosing to notice?" (translated by EW, appendix.4)

Word Count: 4400

References and Bibliography

Film Screening - British Sign Language Film featuring Stanley Robertson and Frankie McLean Aug 22, 2020. Available from:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoW28exg7C8&list=PLvOQbQQP6LAgSSYK4wQ2MpYNZDVu3y0_7&index=2 (accessed 20.12.20)

Introduction and Panel Discussion - What do we mean by Oral Tradition. Aug 22, 2020. Available from:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ueAr17zE0Pg&list=PLvOQbQQP6LAgSSYK4wQ2MpYNZDVu3y0_7&index=1 (accessed 22.12.20)

Art of Living, Sat 16 Dec 2017 15:30. *Listening without Ears*
https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09hrkwg

Hear me out! [CC] Podcast. May 9, 2019 '*Why We Make Our Music & Gigs Deaf-Friendly' with The Chasing Deer*. Available from:
https://open.spotify.com/episode/2gA2KuPwA1mYhU8f1mCVwf?si=twQsehimRk-46Y3uUQp0Jg

Audism & Discrimination – DeafSpace. (Harrington, 2002) Available from: About This Website - DeafSpace (weebly.com)

King, C., and McDade, R. (2014) *Many voices, many communities A study of the interaction between Gaelic and BSL in Scotland: A report. Dundee Rep Theatre*. Many voices, many communities (dundeerep.co.uk) (accessed 9.3.21)

LEITH, Ella (2016) *Moving beyond words in Scotland's corp-oral traditions British Sign Language storytelling meets the 'deaf public voice'* Leith2016.pdf (ed.ac.uk)

Montgomery, G. (ed.) (1981) The Integration and Disintegration of the Deaf in Society. Scottish Workshop Publications.

Grosjean, F. (1992, 1993, 1998). The bilingual and the bicultural person in the hearing and in the deaf world. Sign Language Studies, 1992, 77, 307-320.
https://francoisgrosjean.ch/sign_deaf/5.%20Grosjean.pdf

Swinbourne, C. (2013) 'The 10 incredibly annoying habits of hearing people', The Limping Chicken, 20 May, http://limpingchicken.com/2013/05/20/charlie-swinbourne-the-10- incredibly-annoying-habits-of-hearing-people/

The Strange Musician: investigating the relationship between British Sign Language and Contemporary Classical Composition
file:///C:/Users/User/Documents/4th%20Year/Research%20Project/COMPOSITION%20Investigating%20the%20relationship%20between%20BSL%20and%20contemporary%20composition.pdf

Solar Bear ltd, R. (2017). *Best Practice for Creating Accessible Theatre for D/deaf Audiences.*
https://www.imaginate.org.uk/f/59b65188eba15 (accessed 8.3.21)

Gulamani, S. (2007). *Deafness…no barrier to music? A literature investigation on the challenges deaf musicians are face with in society* www.decibels.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/deafness-no-barrier.pdf (accessed 8.3.21)