

Use of Auslan in choirs and music programs

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Abstract

As a response to the ban on singing and playing woodwind and brass instruments, and with the heightened exposure of Auslan interpreters in the media due to COVID reporting, many music teachers considered Auslan choirs to be a safe singing-replacement activity for end-of-year performances. Auslan holds deep cultural significance to the Deaf community who determine how their language is to be used. Auslan has little relationship to English, so interpreting songs correctly is not possible without an experienced user at the centre of this teaching. To protect against misappropriation, understanding the cultural traditions of minority groups requires involving the community directly. Without this, Auslan and Auslan choirs should not be used in schools or the community.

Key words: Auslan choir, Auslan and music, Deaf Culture, Music and the deaf

The end of the 2020 school year saw music teachers in Victoria scrambling. As if the year hadn't already presented enough challenges, suddenly performance options for Christmas concerts, graduation ceremonies and end-of-year festivities were hampered with little warning by the State Government's ban on singing and playing wind and brass instruments. Our ever-resourceful music teachers, already stretched from an unpredictable year of teaching online, were looking for creative and safe ways to involve students in their end-of-year celebrations and musical performances.

Under such circumstances, it was not too big a stretch for many music teachers, especially those teaching in primary schools, to consider using Auslan (Australian Sign Language) in their choirs as a singing-replacement activity for students, while still adhering to governmental COVID-safe plans. There was a significant increase in Auslan's presence both on social media and in the mainstream media during 2020, starting with the horrendous bushfires and then COVID. This increased exposure led to Auslan courses nation-wide having higher than usual enrolments, with many quickly filling to capacity.

Teachers considering using Auslan in their school programs should be aware of the deep cultural significance this language has to the Australian Deaf community and respect the wishes of that community on how they choose to have their language used and shared. Using Auslan outside the Deaf community is not a straight-forward process, with important cultural and linguistic protocols to be addressed before its use is deemed appropriate.

For the past 11 years, I have been working as a music teacher at a Deaf school in Melbourne through a residency program supported by Musica Viva Australia. To do my job effectively, I needed to learn Auslan to communicate with the deaf and hard of hearing students and staff, and it would be more than fair to say I am still learning. However, as the Deaf community is not primarily my cultural community, it would not be appropriate that I speak out on their behalf on this topic. Although this article has been read and accepted by members of the Deaf community as accurately representing their cultural views, I write to my music-teaching community as a music teacher sharing my knowledge and personal experience with Auslan.

What is Auslan?

Auslan is the native sign language of the Deaf community in Australia. Each country has its own sign language, for example BSL (British Sign Language) in the UK and ASL in America. 'Auslan' should not be written using 'all capitals'. As a cultural group, it is appropriate to use a capital 'D' when referring to a Deaf person from the Deaf community. A small 'd' represents the physical condition of being deaf, not the cultural group of people. Those who identify as part of the Deaf community will largely use Auslan as their primary language, or be parents, carers and interpreters of those who rely on Auslan.

Auslan and its grammar and sentence structure differ from English. Facial expression and specific areas of the body are used as part of the language. Auslan signs are primarily defined by Hand shape, Orientation, Location, Movement and Expression (HOLME) — all essential components of the language that require the same immersion to learn as any other language.

What isn't Auslan?

Auslan is not 'English in sign language', although Signed English was used by educators in the 1970s-1990s and borrowed signs from Auslan. Auslan is not 'actions' to words, and in a musical context, it is not 'choralography'. Auslan signs cannot be accurately imposed over English words as there are distinct differences in the grammatical structures of these two languages. The syntax of Auslan is more closely aligned to other non-English languages.

Interpreting songs into Auslan for use in Signing Choirs

Songs cannot be 'translated' straightforwardly from English into Auslan. Each song must firstly be unpacked in order to be interpreted, and every Auslan user or interpreter would come up with their own varied interpretation of the same song. Unpacking a song can take substantial time and the final result needs to be linguistically accurate,

accessible to Deaf and Hard of Hearing audiences, and artistic.

Songs are full of idioms, imagery and metaphors and none of these can be directly translated into Auslan. Instead, interpretations need to represent the intent of the words, as it is the *meaning* of the words that must be conveyed to audiences, not the literal translation of the English words.

Adding Auslan to songs requires other considerations, such as the tempo or pulse of the music and the speed of the sung melody, which may determine how many signs can be used in a phrase. The energy and emotion of the song will also influence the choice of signs. The effect of how each sign flows from one to the next is also important when interpreting a song, as the flow or 'shape' of the signing ideally needs to match the musical phrases. These are all essential factors in the art of interpreting songs for Auslan choir.

If the Auslan interpretation and the message of the song cannot be understood by a Deaf Auslan user then the song should not be used. It is essential that the custodians of Auslan be able to understand art and music presented in their language. It is also important to note that because the English sentence structure and the Auslan signs do not align, one does not sing when they perform in an Auslan choir. More importantly, another reason for not singing when signing in a choir is because Auslan choirs need to be inclusive spaces. The inclusion of singing almost exclusively makes the whole experience inaccessible to the Deaf. Even if there are no Deaf people in the choir, the protocol still is that there is no singing. Choirs can navigate this by using either recorded music or a separate singing choir.

Copying an Auslan song from a video without knowing the signs is fraught with problems. This approach treats the language as 'actions', without understanding what is actually being signed. How would a non-Auslan user know which sign correlates with which word? The use of an Auslan dictionary still cannot provide the structure required to make sense to a native language user. Auslan is also very context dependent and there are also variations within

Auslan accommodating different regional dialects.

At times, it can be appropriate to 'make up' a sign to describe something – a shape, a texture, a movement etc – but this involves a specific process that would include the input and consultation of a few Deaf people or community. By copying a signed song from a video, one could not know if it is a 'true' or descriptive sign being used. To the Deaf community, this is an important issue. On one hand, the ideal would be to have as many Australians as possible literate in Auslan. On the other hand, respect for the language and culture of the community need to be at the forefront of this learning. Copying is neither comprehension nor literacy.

A song I often teach my students has the lyrics *'The call of the birds bring the break of day'*. We sign *Morning, Sunrise, Birds, Sing*. The words do not match the signs as they play out in real time, and to perform the song, we must also incorporate the culturally appropriate features such as pace, facial expression and upper body movement. Later in the song the words are *'Silken webs glow in the morning dew'*. In the interpreting of this line, we removed the words 'silken', as there is not suitable specific Auslan sign, 'morning' as 'morning' had already been established earlier in the verse and 'glow' because webs do not literally 'glow'. Instead we sign a large spiders web and trickle our fingers downwards like rain to represent the dampness of the dew. We use two signs only to represent this phrase, with 'web' being the only 'true' sign. An Auslan user would easily understand the intent of the phrase: 'glistening wet spiders webs'. Again, this process took place with the consultation of members from the Deaf community.

Authentic cultural experiences

Incorporated in the Australian and Victorian curriculum is the requirement to include authentic cultural learning experiences for students. This has been embedded through the Capabilities component 'Intercultural Understanding'. Teaching students about respecting different cultures, customs and traditions is important, and Auslan and Deaf culture should be treated no differently to

any other diverse cultural group and community. As Auslan is at the heart of the culture of the Deaf community, it should be taught by a native user, or, at the very least, a trained and qualified user. For context, we could view this in parallel with the wishes of Indigenous peoples to be able to share their own culture, stories and history. Deaf people, as custodians of their language, have the right to decide how Auslan should be used and to protect it from being misused or appropriated. To use the language of a minority group incorrectly is cultural appropriation, even if the misuse was unintentional.

Is it a problem if I use Auslan with my choir?

Almost certainly. When I started learning Auslan in 2010, my love for the language was immediate. As a musician and conductor, the connections with non-verbal communication and expression was profound. I wanted to use Auslan every day in every way and almost certainly made every mistake regarding its use. I now know much better, and as a society, we are now much more aware about appropriating and misusing the cultural traditions and languages of minority groups. At the request of the Deaf community, we do not use Auslan without proper instruction and direction.

Unless a Deaf Auslan user is involved in teaching a song, bringing the correct cultural and linguistic references, it is unlikely that the language will be used correctly. This is incredibly important to the Deaf community who have fought for the right to use their language* and to have their language used correctly by others.

I have enough Auslan to come up with much of the interpretations for the songs I wish to perform. I take my ideas to a Deaf colleague experienced with Auslan Choirs and we unpack the song together. Very often different signs are required, being more

* Auslan is recognised in Australia as a 'community language' and not an official Australian language. Auslan, like so many sign languages globally, has experienced being banned in educational settings.

accurate in context than my initial selections. We workshop how phrases fit with the music and how many beats we have to sign each phrase and still further consultation is often required, with the 'problem phrase' taken to the staffroom! I inform the musical side of the interpretation and the Deaf staff refine the work to become linguistically cohesive.

Sometimes we need to debate a particular sign if it does not fit well with the music — maybe I can't 'stretch' it out enough, or maybe the phrase takes too long to sign. When I am ready to teach the song, I always have a Deaf Education Assistant or a Deaf teacher with me, who offers language support to both me and the students.

Every time I work on a new song in Auslan, I feel rewarded by the richness and expressiveness of the language. The Deaf staff and, in turn, our students take ownership of their language when they are

involved in interpreting and learning a new song. Auslan choirs provide an authentic way for Deaf culture to inform my music program and not the other way around. There are not so many other opportunities where this can happen. With every song, I learn more about Deaf culture as signs, stories and traditions are shared with me. Having this whole experience is a cultural and artistic gain for all involved. The process of interpreting songs and working with the Deaf community so closely has enhanced my allyship and advocacy for the correct use of Auslan in our school music programs.

Reference

Rhonda Macken. Brother Sun/Sister Moon, *ABC Songbook*, 1997. <https://www.abc.net.au/cm/lb/11152400/data/sing-song-index-data.pdf>

Karen Kyriakou is a music teacher and freelance educator working with arts organisations including Musica Viva, MSO, the Melbourne Recital Centre and ANAM. In 2012 she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to travel to the UK to investigate inclusive ways of bringing authentic educational and musical experiences to Deaf children in schools.

Rachelle Stevens is an experienced classroom and Auslan teacher. She is Deaf herself and meticulously checked this article to make sure the views of her Deaf community were correctly represented.