

# Embodied Music: Interpreting Songs and Sounds through Irish Sign Language

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‘Deafness means the end of music.’  
Carolyn Abbate (1996)<sup>1</sup>

There is an overwhelming assumption that music and hearing are co-constituted, where it is often thought that music is an exclusively phonocentric experience, or simply ‘an art of listening.’<sup>2</sup> In musicology, opinions such as those by Carolyn Abbate cited at the top of this article could be considered representative of much scholarship that tended to privilege the auditory experience above all, relegating the rest of the body as somewhat of an afterthought in music. Studies of music as a multisensory phenomenon – in particular those which consider its tactile-kinaesthetic, visual, or gestural character – have shown that these forms of perception can hold significance far beyond Deaf communities, since musical experience in general involves sensory input from multiple

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My sincere appreciation to Amanda Coogan for her generosity in multiple conversations on music, sound, interpretation over the past years. Additional thanks to Anika Babel, Derek Foott, Annie Hanlon, Niamh White, and Bryan Whitelaw, as well the editors of this special issue, Patrick Devine, and Nicole Grimes, for insightful conversations, assistance, and feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

- <sup>1</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 131. Preceding this, Abbate asserts that ‘deafness is the deepest possible antithesis to music, the one thing that a deaf person can never possess, a form of discourse unthinkable and unattainable. The deaf ... can never experience music’ (130).
- <sup>2</sup> Taru Leppänen, ‘Unfolding Non-Audist Methodologies in Music Research: Signing Hip Hop Artist Signmark and Becoming Deaf with Music’, in ed. Pirkko Moisala, Taru Leppänen, Milla Tienen and Hanna Väätäinen (eds), *Musical Encounters with Deleuze and Guattari* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 33–50.

sources.<sup>3</sup> This article considers the interaction between music and d/Deaf<sup>4</sup> culture by focusing on the practice of interpreting music and song signing – the act of translating and interpreting songs through signed language – that has been an important aspect of Deaf culture around the world for at least two centuries (and likely, for much longer).<sup>5</sup> Yet music scholarship that references hearing loss and deafness has only gathered a critical mass in the past two decades through the work of scholars including Katelyn Best, Jody Cripps, Jessica Holmes, Georgina Hughes, Jeannette Jones, Taru Leppänen, Ely Lyonblum, Anabel Maler, and others.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some examples of such work include Rolf Ingøy Godøy and Marc Lehman, *Musical Gestures: Sound, Movement, and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2010), and Tejaswinee Kelkar and Alexander Refsum Jensenius, 'Analyzing Free-Hand Sound-Tracings of Melodic Phrases,' *Applied Sciences* 8/1 (2018): 135.

<sup>4</sup> Although I accept that the definitions of d/Deaf are anthropologically and politically contested, in this article I adhere to the widely-used term 'Deaf' with a capital D to designate those who claim Deaf identity and specificities, including but not limited to linguistic, cultural, sensorial, and social, while 'deaf' refers to the medical condition of deafness. Not all deaf people identify as belonging to Deaf culture. Some may or may not use sign language as their primary language. In referring to both groups, I use 'd/Deaf', and I use the term 'hard of hearing' (HH) to describe people (like me) with hearing loss from birth or acquired later in life. Like some HH with moderate to severe hearing loss, mine is genetic, and I have used a combination of hearing aids and lip-reading since childhood. The primary source of this article, Amanda Coogan, and I are connected through our familial hearing difference – our mothers are first cousins. And so our multilingual family gatherings included a mixture of spoken and signed communication, where gesture, body-language and keeping clear sight lines for lip-reading were crucial.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note here that the Women's Music movement (established in 1973) were true pioneers of disability accessibility by including live American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation at their concerts, actively supporting Deaf audiences to come to their events, and creating one of the earliest communities of ASL music interpreters such as Susan Freundlich, Doralynn Folse, Ramona Galindez, and Sherry Hicks. Their example of inclusivity through ASL interpretation set the groundwork for making access a part of public life more broadly. See Johanna Halbeisen and Susan Freundlich, 'Thinking About Our Disabled Sisters,' *Paid My Dues: Journal of Women and Music*, Volume III, 3 (July–September 1979), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Some recent examples of literature include Anabel Maler, 'Music and Deafness in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. Imagination,' *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 16/2 (2022), 184–205; Katelyn E. Best, 'Expanding Musical Inclusivity: Representing and Re-presenting Music and Deaf Culture through Deaf Hip Hop Performance' in Marko Kölbl and Fritz Trümpi (eds) *Music and Democracy: Participatory Approaches* (Vienna: mdwPress, 2021), 235–265; Jeannette DiBernardo Jones, 'Imagined Hearing: Music-Making in Deaf Culture,' in Blake Howe et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 54–72; Jody H. Cripps and Ely Lyonblum, 'Understanding Signed Music,' *Society for American Sign Language Journal*, 1/1 (2017), 78–95; Jessica A. Holmes, 'Expert Listening Beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness,' *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 70/1 (2017), 171–220; Georgina Hughes, *Creativity, Collaboration and Diversification:*

Following in the footsteps of scholars who advocate for a more expansive musical inclusivity, I demonstrate the ways in which the Irish Deaf community participates in contemporary musical experiences to reveal the richness of a non-phonocentric perspective of music. The article draws from recent musical developments between Irish Deaf communities, Irish Sign Language (ISL) and sign language interpreters who provide live ISL interpretations of musical works for deaf audiences. I document recent innovations in this field to demonstrate how these valuable interpretative practices serve not only to bring musical experiences to Deaf communities, but moreover they allow hearing audiences to experience a more embodied engagement with music's inherent multimodality. It behooves us, as music scholars, to adopt a critical study of hearing that is inclusive of the heterogeneous and intersectional reality of hearing difference that exists in society. To do so opens new and exciting pathways for communication, expression, and meaning.

Since literature on the relationship between the Irish Deaf community, ISL and music is almost non-existent – with the notable exception of George Higgs' PhD dissertation (2018) on music as a multisensory experience for deaf and hearing from his perspective as a composer<sup>7</sup> – in what follows I first provide a brief overview of the history of interpreting music into sign languages with particular attention to how these manifest in an Irish context. I then move to trace recent practices in interpreting music into ISL, drawing from a diverse repertoire of music that spans the gamut from chart-topping pop songs, Disney musicals, Irish folk-rock troubadours, and the Western classical canon. This article is informed firstly by close readings of select musical performances that feature ISL that were broadcasted on RTÉ, appeared in major theatres and galleries, as well as on social media platforms in the past decade. Questions and issues arising from these readings were supplemented by interviews with ISL interpreter and performance artist Amanda Coogan, and further bolstered through support and shared knowledge from colleagues within the Deaf community. I present some insights into the unique qualities and considerations of interpreting music into ISL

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*Dame Evelyn Glennie and the Evolution of Solo Percussion Performance*, (PhD dissertation, University College Dublin, 2021); Taru Leppänen, 'Non-Audist Methodologies'.

<sup>7</sup> To the best of my knowledge, Higgs' research constitutes the only in-depth, published scholarship on the relationship between ISL and music, based on his extensive experience as a composer-in-residence at St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls for three years, and several subsequent years composing for and performing with the multisensory musical group The Sense Ensemble, which included deaf students from St. Mary's and hearing musicians. Higgs' PhD research was funded by the Irish Research Council and, perhaps interestingly, undertaken not at a music department but at the Department of Electronic and Electrical Engineering at Trinity College Dublin (TCD). See George Higgs, *The Sense Ensemble: An Approach to Music Composition for Deaf and Hearing Alike*, (PhD dissertation, Trinity College Dublin, 2018).

supported by four distinct musical case studies that illustrate some of the ways in which music and ISL have come together in various contemporary venues and popular platforms. However, in order to examine the relationship between Deaf culture, ISL and music, it is necessary first to define exactly what are meant by Ireland's Deaf community and ISL.

### **Ireland's Deaf Community and Irish Sign Language**

Irish Sign Language is the indigenous language of the members of Ireland's Deaf community, who see themselves as an Irish linguistic and cultural minority group that are proud of their language, culture, and heritage.<sup>8</sup> It is the first language and/or preferred language for around 5,000 Irish d/Deaf people and approximately 40,000 people who communicate in ISL (including family, friends, colleagues, and educators). A separate language from English and Irish, ISL has its own complex linguistic structure; it is a visual and spatial language that uses hand shapes, direction and motion of the hands, along with body language and facial expressions. Each sign in ISL is composed of three basic parameters: handshape, location, and movement. ISL is primarily used in the Republic of Ireland and in parts of Northern Ireland (alongside British Sign Language (BSL), which is an entirely different language). Given the fact that a high number of deaf children are born to hearing families, ISL operates differently to other shared languages since it cannot be passed through generations, and as such it operates instead as a non-territorial linguistic minority in Ireland. ISL is particularly unique among sign languages of the world because it has different gendered versions, due to the specific history of Irish deaf education where men and women were educated in separate, gender-segregated residential schools for deaf children.<sup>9</sup>

The origins of ISL as a formal language can be traced to the establishment of the first schools for children in the early nineteenth century. Yet there is evidence that it has

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<sup>8</sup> The Irish Deaf Society uses the term 'Deaf' to include all people with deafness, regardless of the degree of hearing they have. Statistics from 2016 showed that 103,676 (or 2.2% of the population) identified as experiencing deafness or severe hearing loss: however, not all communicate in ISL as their first language (Central Statistics Office, Ireland, 2016). See 'Irish Sign Language' Irish Deaf Society website (2023) <https://www.irishdeafsociety.ie/irish-sign-language/>

<sup>9</sup> The two main schools for deaf children in Ireland were, until relatively recently, 'The Cabra Schools': St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls and St. Joseph's School for Deaf Boys in Dublin, which despite their relatively close geographical proximity led to ISL having two distinct dialects and vocabularies depending on the gender of the signer. For further reading on the uniquely gendered history of ISL, see anthropologist Barbara LeMaster, 'Reappropriation of Gendered Irish Sign Language in One Family', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 15/2 (2000), 1–15 and LeMaster 'Language Contraction, Revitalization and Irish Women,' *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 16/2 (2006), 211–228.

existed even before the eighteenth century, and as a natural language it can be considered to have been in existence in one form or another wherever Deaf communities were living.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, ISL, and, by extension, Irish Deaf communities – were not explicitly safeguarded under Irish legislation until 2017. Members of the Irish Deaf Society and Deaf activists campaigned for decades for ISL to be officially recognized as an official language of Ireland, and it was only after the Irish Sign Language Act, which was signed into law on 24 December 2017 and officially commenced on 23 December 2020, that public services must be made available through ISL. Prior to this law taking effect, deaf people in Ireland had no automatic right to have an ISL interpreter for fundamental public amenities.<sup>11</sup>

While Irish Deaf communities still face many social, economic, and cultural barriers to full participation in Irish society, in the past few years ISL has been gradually gaining more visibility and acceptance in Irish society than ever before. The passing of the ISL Act has broadened the scope for ISL awareness and education in Irish society, where more schools are choosing to teach basic ISL courses, and the Act has had the very visible effect of increasing the presence of ISL interpreters on public television broadcasts (especially news, current affairs, and children’s programmes), and the inclusion of Deaf individuals in other media forms including film, theatre, and music. Such measures, though significant, are but the first steps necessary to achieve true equality, and to help redress centuries of discrimination, trauma, and isolation experienced by some members of the Deaf community in Ireland.

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<sup>10</sup> Heath Rose and John Bosco Conama, ‘Linguistic imperialism: still a valid construct in relation to language policy for Irish Sign Language,’ *Language Policy*, 17 (2018), 386–390.

<sup>11</sup> The only exception to this was in cases of criminal court proceedings where, if necessary, an ISL interpreter was provided by the state. In all other instances, including essential healthcare settings, deaf people’s rights to communication were not enshrined. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to note that it is only post-2020 that Deaf individuals in Ireland have a legal right to request ISL interpretation in essential public services including education, healthcare, banking, and media.

## Music and Irish Deaf culture

Ireland has a small but renowned community of professional musicians and composers who are d/Deaf, such as flautist Elizabeth Petcu,<sup>12</sup> pianist Orla O’Sullivan,<sup>13</sup> and composer Ailís Ní Ríain.<sup>14</sup> While music has been taught and practised in Irish Deaf education for at least the last century, including St. Mary’s School for Deaf Girls having a composer-in-residence – George Higgs – from 2010 to 2013,<sup>15</sup> since the rise in use of online video-sharing platforms like YouTube there has been a notable increase in the mediation of signed-songs in particular.<sup>16</sup> This ‘YouTube effect’ has led to increased visibility for the practice of signed-songs, and the popularity of song-signing more generally has led to a large increase in both the number of Deaf community choirs as well as public performances of these ensembles including Cork Deaf Community Choir,

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<sup>12</sup> Petcu was Principal Flautist with the RTÉ Concert Orchestra for over 25 years. Her experience of navigating hearing difference is featured in the RTÉ radio documentary *Beethoven and Me* (3 December 2009) <https://www.rte.ie/radio/doconone/646292-beethoven-and-me-radio-documentary> and in the documentary film *Hearing Silence* (2015) <https://aeon.co/videos/what-does-a-classical-musician-do-when-she-starts-losing-her-hearing>.

<sup>13</sup> O’Sullivan is an award-winning musician and activist for disability rights. She teaches piano from her studio in Cork, with specialism in teaching Deaf students. She is the subject of the RTÉ documentary film *Good Vibrations* (2017). Christine Thornton, ‘Orla O’Sullivan’s Good Vibrations: An Inspiring True Tale,’ RTÉ Culture (5 June 2017) <https://www.rte.ie/culture/2017/0605/877856-good-vibrations/>.

<sup>14</sup> Ní Ríain’s compositions include concert music, installations and music-theatre, with commissions from Dame Evelyn Glennie and the New London Chamber Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, London Sinfonietta, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra, RTÉ ConTempo String Quartet, and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. Her work has been supported by the Irish Arts Council, the PRS Foundation, Unlimited, Arts Council England, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the RVW Trust and the Hinrichsen Foundation. For more details of her extensive body of award-winning work, visit: [www.ailis.info/](http://www.ailis.info/).

<sup>15</sup> George Higgs noted that the Dominican nuns in St. Mary’s School for Deaf Girls taught students to play wind instruments (such as blow organs and melodicas) to promote the stable breathing needed for speech acquisition. A deeply unfortunate consequence of this long history of musical education in Irish Deaf schools is that it has associations with oralism in Deaf education that came at the expense of the suppression of ISL (Higgs 2018), 40. For more literature on changing geographies of deaf education in Ireland see Elizabeth Mathews, *Mainstreaming of Deaf Education in the Republic of Ireland: Language, Power, Resistance* (PhD dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> See videos like the three students from Trinity College Dublin perform an ISL cover of ‘Santa Claus is Coming to Town’ (30 November 2016) <https://youtu.be/UfOOqkk5jPU> and YouTube channels such as <https://www.youtube.com/@ISLSongs> for videos of ISL interpretations of popular songs by Snow Patrol and Christina Perri. Some examples of scholarship on the rise of signed-songs more broadly include Maler, ‘Songs for Hands’; Cripps and Lyonblum, ‘Understanding Signed Music’; and Áine Mangaoang, ‘“I See Music”: Beyoncé, YouTube, & the Question of Signed-Songs’ in M. Iddon & M. Marshall (eds), *Beyoncé: At Work, On Screen, & Online* (Indiana University Press, 2020), 189–225.

the Dublin Deaf Choir, the Holy Family Deaf Choir in Dublin,<sup>17</sup> Limerick's Hands in Harmony Deaf Community Choir,<sup>18</sup> Derry's Deaf Voices choir,<sup>19</sup> and the mixed Deaf-hearing choir, the DeafTones.<sup>20</sup> Various social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok have afforded different artistic expression among Deaf musicians and song-signers, where they can share their individual translations with audiences and benefit from near instant feedback. See, for example, Deaf ISL interpreter Sarah-Jane O'Regan's recent performance of Sinéad O'Connor's 'Nothing Compares 2 U.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Holy Family Deaf Choir was formerly known as St. Mary's School Deaf Choir, founded by teacher and conductor Shirley Higgins in 2008. Today the secondary students perform regularly across Ireland and internationally. For an example of their impressive signed-song performances, see their multilingual music video 'Sneachta Ag Titim (Snow Falling)', a collaboration with the Irish secondary school Coláiste Mhuire produced during the Covid-19 lockdown of 2020: <https://youtu.be/aJ6KleqB7zk>.

<sup>18</sup> Hands in Harmony Deaf Community Choir (established in 2014) partnered with Opera Workshop Limerick in a shared performance project and film *Signing Not Miming* (2020) which can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/L14ysrEDfcA>.

<sup>19</sup> Deaf Voices choir was founded by Michelle Grogan, a volunteer with Foyle Deaf Association, in 2017. The choir has received financial support from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Snow Patrol front-man Gary Lightbody through his charity The Lightbody Foundation.

<sup>20</sup> The DeafTones is a mixed Deaf-hearing choir that grew from St. Mary's School Deaf Choir and is also conducted by Shirley Higgins: see its performance on the TV show *Ireland's Got Talent* (22 February 2018) <https://youtu.be/3JDab6imFLI>

<sup>21</sup> The artist Sinéad O'Connor adopted the name Shuhada' Sadaqat following her conversion to Islam in 2018, while she continued to perform and record as Sinéad O'Connor until her untimely death on 26 July 2023. I refer to her by her birth name hereafter. See O'Regan's impromptu music video on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/reel/1261327941381672>

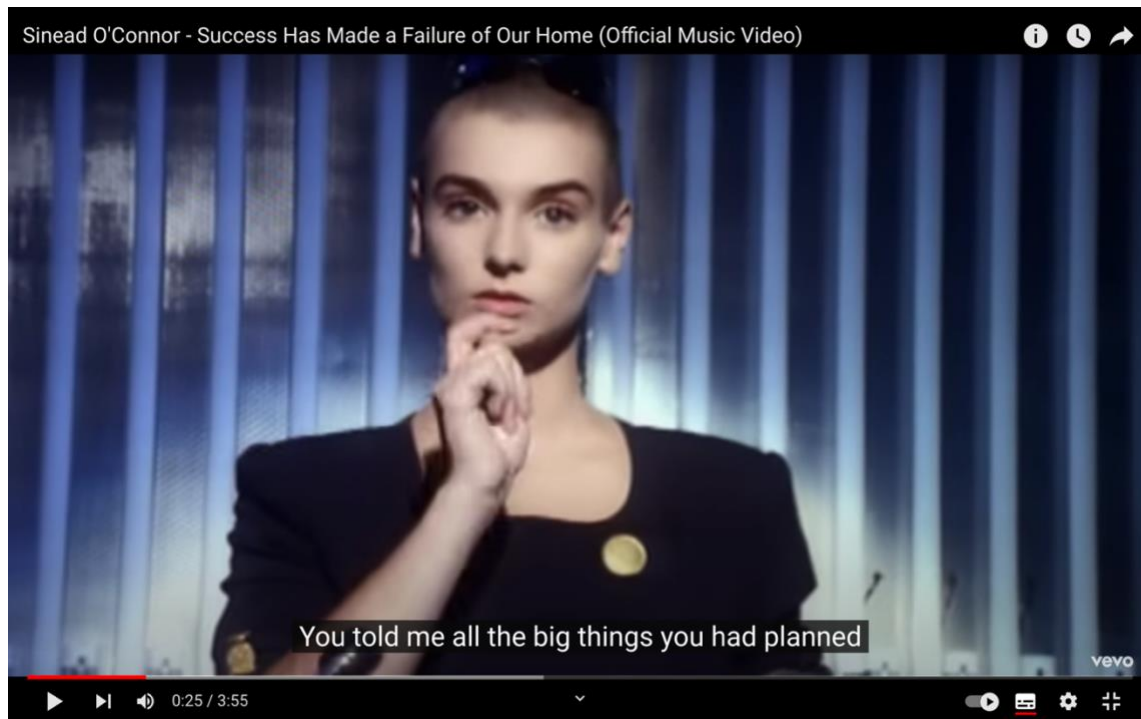


Figure 1. Screenshot from Sinéad O'Connor's official music video for 'Success Has Made a Failure of Our Home' (1992), depicting her delivering the lyrics in Irish Sign Language. In this still, O'Connor is seen making a hooked index finger pointed outwards from her chin, which can be interpreted as the ISL sign for 'tell' or 'told' (Source: YouTube).

Indeed, Irish artist Sinéad O'Connor's music videos prove to be a pivotal moment in the intersection between Deaf culture, sign language and Irish popular music history. O'Connor is notable for being ahead of her time in many respects, but few appear to have noted her truly trailblazing work in supporting Deaf communities at a time when Deaf rights and media visibility were fundamentally overlooked. O'Connor's decision to prominently feature sign languages in two of her early 1990s music videos was groundbreaking. In her video for 'Success Has Made a Failure of Our Home' (1992), O'Connor takes the song's original lyrics, written by Johnny Mullins and sung by Loretta Lynn in her song 'Success' (1962), and conveys them standing centre-stage in ISL, while on either side of her stand two other sign language interpreters – Raymond Hollywood (originally from Belfast) signing in International Sign to her left, and Catherine White (originally from Co. Kerry) signing in BSL to her right, with the goal of



communicating the song to a wider audience (*Figure 1*).<sup>22</sup> At the time this single was released, O'Connor was at the top of her career following her global #1 with her cover of Prince's song 'Nothing Compares 2 U' (1990).<sup>23</sup> As the lead single from O'Connor's third studio album *Am I Not Your Girl?* this song and accompanying music video received considerable media attention in the form of airplay and reviews. To O'Connor's credentials, therefore, we can add that she was most likely the first popular artist in history to incorporate ISL in her official music video.<sup>24</sup>

But O'Connor didn't stop there and continued to see the potential power in sign language to convey her message to a wider audience. In 'Famine',<sup>25</sup> the second single from O'Connor's fourth album *Universal Mother* (1994), she delivers a powerful critique on the British colonization of Ireland, the lasting effect on Irish people, and the resulting subjugation and loss of the Irish language under colonial rule. In the song's music video (1995), O'Connor is flanked by two interpreters signing in BSL – clearly making a pointed choice to share the politically-charged message of this music with the British Deaf community. Her music video for 'Famine' was nominated for the 1996 Grammy Award for Best Short Form Music Video, ultimately losing out to Michael Jackson's and Janet Jackson's 'Scream'.<sup>26</sup> O'Connor's resolution to support Deaf culture by including three different sign languages in two of her music videos is perhaps just one other way in which she practised real solidarity with those on the margins of society by showcasing sign language on the most mainstream of '90s pop culture platforms – MTV.

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<sup>22</sup> For this music video, O'Connor was taught the basics in ISL by the then-London-based qualified interpreters Hollywood and White. See Sinéad O'Connor's 'Success Has Made a Failure of Our Home' (1992) <https://youtu.be/4fQJgNW-lfE>

<sup>23</sup> O'Connor's 1990 version of 'Nothing Compares 2 U' was a worldwide #1 hit in so many countries that *Billboard* awarded O'Connor the 1990 '#1 World Single' at the inaugural *Billboard* Music Awards. By the time 'Success Has Made a Failure of Our Home' was released in 1992, O'Connor was an international superstar.

<sup>24</sup> It is hard to say with absolute certainty that O'Connor's is the first example of ISL inclusion in a mainstream music video, but it is the earliest example I can locate. Earlier examples of signed song on film do exist in other sign languages; for example, there is a film of an unknown woman signing an American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation of the 'Star Spangled Banner' in 1902 (Gallaudet University Video Library) <http://videocatalog.gallaudet.edu/?video=17493>

<sup>25</sup> Sinéad O'Connor's 'Famine' (1994) <https://youtu.be/EZIB6MslCAo>

<sup>26</sup> The Jackson siblings' 'Scream' video, set in a specially-constructed spaceship, is listed in the *Guinness World Records* as the most expensive music video ever made, at a purported cost of \$7 million (although this is contested by director Mark Romanek). The fact that O'Connor's comparatively low-key, lower-budget music video was nominated in the same category as 'Scream' says something about the reception and international recognition given to 'Famine', and by extension to sign language, at a time when it was not at all commonplace to showcase or support Deaf culture in pop music.

### **Amanda Coogan: Insights into interpreting music and ISL**

One of the primary sources that helped inform this article was a series of in-depth conversations with Amanda Coogan. Coogan (born in 1971) is known in Ireland today for her dual identities both as a critically acclaimed artist — working in live art, photography, video and sound — and as a professional ISL interpreter. The author and Coogan have enjoyed multiple exchanges over the past decade-plus over a shared interest, family history and lived experience in Deaf culture and sound, about the challenges of interpreting instrumental work in ISL, and about embodying music and hearing difference. Coogan grew up in the Dublin suburbs with her two younger siblings and parents Larry and Anne Coogan – both activists within the Irish Deaf community – and her first language was ISL, the indigenous language of the Irish Deaf community. As a hearing child of deaf parents (CODA)<sup>27</sup> and with a rich experience growing up in Dublin’s active deaf community, Coogan and her hearing siblings learned the power of multimodal forms of expression as well as the value of different modes of communication from the outset, where conversations with their parents meant picking up their hands. Coogan’s career as a sign language interpreter began in the 1990s, initially out of necessity when members of the Deaf community would ask her to interpret at meetings or appointments as needed, as there were no qualified sign language interpreters working in Ireland at that time. Through studying ISL formally at Trinity College Dublin, Coogan became one of the first qualified ISL interpreters, while simultaneously establishing herself as a multidisciplinary artist. In the early days of her interpreting career, it was rare that she would be approached to interpret theatrical work, and even rarer to interpret a live music event. However, the first live music interpreting gig she did was the ‘Spiceworld Tour,’ where the Spice Girls kicked off their first global concert tour at Dublin’s old Point Depot in February 1998.<sup>28</sup>

Today, when she is not on tour, Coogan is based in Belfast. During the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, and with all her performance work suddenly halted, Coogan found herself thrust into action as an ISL interpreter at Stormont, translating the daily COVID briefings by Northern Ireland’s First Minister Arlene Foster alongside her BSL interpreter colleague Kristina Sinclair. Together they rapidly devised

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<sup>27</sup> In the Deaf community, CODA is an acronym for ‘Child(ren) of Deaf Adult(s).’ The term refers to hearing and deaf children of d/Deaf parents; however, it is usually understood to mean hearing children of d/Deaf parents.

<sup>28</sup> The Dublin dates of the Spiceworld tour are noteworthy for fans of the girl band, not only since the tour began in Dublin but also because they feature all five Spice Girls, as Geri Halliwell left the band before the European part of the tour had ended.

ways to translate the brand-new pandemic lexicon as it emerged, finding novel ways to interpret crucial concepts like ‘lockdown,’ ‘social distancing,’ and ‘R rate’ in ways that Northern Ireland’s Deaf community would understand. In both her careers, Coogan’s work is dynamic, intense, and visually captivating as she communicates ideas, concepts, and sounds through her body to audiences around the world. Her formal art education included a degree in sculpture from the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, a Master’s degree at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HBK) in Braunschweig, Germany where she trained under the direction of renowned performance artist Marina Abramović, and a doctorate in Performance Art from the Ulster University. As an artist who often incorporates ISL gestures into her live performances, Coogan has presented her work internationally, including at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the Manchester International Festival, PS1 in New York, The Niemeyer in Aviles, The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Contemporary Irish Art Centre LA in Los Angeles, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Jacksonville, the Venice Biennale and Liverpool Biennial. In 2013, her work ‘The Fall’ (2009) was selected to appear in An Post’s ‘Art on a Stamp’ series celebrating eight of Ireland’s most iconic and outstanding artists, and it remains available in every post office in Ireland today as one of An Post’s ‘everyday stamps.’<sup>29</sup> Coogan was elected to Aosdána,<sup>30</sup> one of the most eminent affiliations of creative artists in Ireland, in 2021.

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<sup>29</sup> An Post Tenth Definitive ‘Art on a Stamp’ Series (2022)

[https://www.anpost.com/Shop/Products/Tenth-Definitive-Issue-\(Art-on-a-Stamp\)-\(1\)](https://www.anpost.com/Shop/Products/Tenth-Definitive-Issue-(Art-on-a-Stamp)-(1))

<sup>30</sup> Supported by the Arts Council of Ireland, Aosdána (from the Irish language ‘*aos dána*’, meaning people of the arts) was established in 1981 to honour and support outstanding Irish artists and their art practice. The group enjoys a certain elevated and exclusive status, since membership is by peer nomination and for life, with an upper limit of 250 members nationally, across multiple artforms.



Figure 2. Amanda Coogan at the unveiling of An Post's Tenth Definitive 'Art on a Stamp' series, 2022. (Source: *Irish Independent*)<sup>31</sup>

In order to reflect on several different issues surrounding music and translation, ownership, reception studies, and postcolonialism in an Irish context, I offer a discussion of four musical case studies. At times it includes direct quotations from interviews with Coogan, and where possible includes links to video excerpts from the Zoom recordings<sup>32</sup> in an attempt to capture some of the multimodal conversation between Coogan and the author in March 2023.

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<sup>31</sup> Source: <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/an-post-celebrates-100-years-of-art-on-a-stamp-with-new-collection/41935445.html>

<sup>32</sup> While the interviews were audio- and video-recorded by the author, it should be noted that these were originally intended for research use only and not for public dissemination. In writing up this article, however, I realized that it was necessary to include direct audiovisual references to the interview text as well as to the ISL signs discussed, in order to help provide further necessary multimodal understanding for the reader. The author is grateful to Amanda Coogan for granting permission to share these video excerpts from our informal conversation, which far exceeds the initial request.

## Four Case Studies

### **‘A National Treasure’: Translating songs and raves into ISL on The Late Late Toy Show**

The *Late Late Show* is a long-running Irish chat show (first broadcast in 1962) on Ireland’s national television station RTÉ One, broadcast at prime-time on Friday nights. The *Late Late Toy Show* (known colloquially as the *Toy Show*) is a live, gift-focused annual special edition that airs around four weeks before Christmas. Since it was first broadcast in 1975, it has become an institution in Irish culture – highly-anticipated by Irish children, and often the most-watched programme on Irish television. As something of a cultural institution in Ireland since the 1970s, the *Toy Show* heralds the beginning of the Christmas season for many, and it enjoys a sizeable viewership outside of Ireland that enables the Irish diaspora to connect with the ‘homeland’ for one night only.<sup>33</sup> Running for two and a half hours, the show keeps to a familiar format each year, the main features of which include children of all ages showcasing the most popular toys of that year while being interviewed by the host. This is interspersed with around six solo or group musical performances by children, and at times celebrity guests, and always including a musical finale featuring the entire company. Since the 2010s, each *Toy Show* reveals a specific theme loosely borrowed from musical theatre or film, such as *The Wizard of Oz* (in 2009 and 2022), *Mary Poppins* (2013) and *The Little Mermaid* (2017).<sup>34</sup> 2019 marked a particularly important year for children and families in the Deaf community, when for

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<sup>33</sup> The 2022 *Toy Show*, as a recent example, boasted over 1.6 million viewers (from a national population of just over 5 million), and with over 300,000 streams on the RTÉ Player (the national broadcaster’s on-demand video service) enabling people from 139 countries to tune into the show. The *Toy Show* is one of the RTÉ Player shows made freely available for international audiences to stream (unlike other RTÉ productions that are geo-blocked). See RTÉ Entertainment ‘Late Late Toy Show was most watched show of the year’ (28 November 2022). <https://www.rte.ie/entertainment/2022/1128/1338849-late-late-toy-show-was-most-watched-show-of-the-year/>

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the show is so heavily rooted in musical numbers that in December 2022 RTÉ staged its first musical based entirely on *The Late Late Toy Show* itself at Dublin’s Convention Centre. *Toy Show The Musical* ran from 10 to 31 December 2022. At the time of writing following the RTÉ secret payment scandal that broke in July 2023, it seems unlikely that the stage musical will be performed again after it seems the show’s production team grossly underestimated the commercial viability of this theatrical endeavour. Public documents given to the Oireachtas Committee of Media showed that losses from producing *Toy Show the Musical* reached €2.2 million, as for 27 live shows with a combined venue capacity of 53,865 only 11,044 tickets were sold. See Sinead Spain, ‘Just 11,044 tickets sold for *Toy Show The Musical*’, *RTÉ News* (5 July 2023), <https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2023/0705/1392900-toy-show-the-musical/>.

the first time in the show's 44-year history, it was simulcast with Irish Sign Language interpretation by ISL interpreters Amanda Coogan and Daniel Crean. When Coogan was first approached by RTÉ about the simulcast, she immediately knew the reach that this accessibility would have for the Irish Deaf community. Coogan explained:

I was a CODA who used to watch the *Late Late Toy Show* occasionally as a child, but my parents couldn't share it with me. So it wasn't a family thing. It was me and my sister and sometimes my baby brother watching it by the fire, having a laugh, mum walking in and out and going 'What are they doing now? Oh very good' and going back to the kitchen. But *we* would have to tell her what was happening. So, I kind of knew really from a very personal perspective how important the gig would be. And how absolutely mad it would be! I had been watching it with my son in the recent years, so I knew the kind of madness that was going on!

The 'madness' Coogan refers to is the relatively short preparation time available to the interpreters who are given the titles of the various musical numbers—whether they have decided to create a medley with two popular songs, or a mashup with different tracks in different genres – to be included in the show about a fortnight beforehand, and maybe three days before they get the actual recording, that is, the specific mix that RTÉ are doing with the children – to hone their translations to fit the specific numbers. Coogan also alludes to the 'madness' of the wholly unscripted nature of a show that is centred on children discussing particular toys with the presenter, how some children can come alive in front of the television cameras and live studio audience, while others completely close down and are overawed by the experience. There is an element of complete and utter chaos trying to interpret in such a fast-paced environment when things are happening so quickly in real time.

To help prepare for the intensity of this job, Coogan has developed the strategy of clearing her schedule for three to four weeks beforehand to allow herself and her co-interpreters to get into *Toy Show* mode. She describes this period of preparation:

you're literally listening, trying to feel everything that's going on – anything topical, anything that's going on, so you're really – yeah, I kind of close down completely so that I have the *energy for it!*

Most recently the body of *Toy Show* interpreters has grown to become a Deaf-hearing interpreting team of three – one deaf interpreter and two hearing who all take turns at

being on-screen.<sup>35</sup> When the deaf interpreter is on screen, one of the other hearing interpreters takes turn to be the ‘feed interpreter.’ The feed interpreter interprets from the spoken language happening live in the studio, acting as a relay interpreter so the Deaf interpreter can further translate this for the audience behind the television cameras. In order for this process to run as smoothly and as efficiently as possible, the trio must do a lot of preparatory work together to build the sense of teamwork. In one example Coogan mentions, the team found out just a few days beforehand that the upcoming *Toy Show* theme was going to be *The Lion King* (2021). The team got together to examine the songs that might be included, like the ‘Circle of Life’ which opens with the Zulu lyrics:

Nants ingonyama bagithi Baba. Sithi uhm ingonyama.  
(*Here comes a lion, father. Oh yes it's a lion*)<sup>36</sup>

The trio of interpreters then study the film, listen closely to the lyrics to capture the ‘feeling of it as well’, before going to Google Translate to try and establish what the lyrics mean in English. Discussions ensue, and then the team members do a work around where they can come up with a way to perform the song’s meaning in ISL. The process is then repeated through the musical’s other well-known numbers like ‘Hakuna Matata’, a phrase from the East African language of Swahili that means ‘no problems’ or ‘no worries’.<sup>37</sup> In this song, Coogan reveals their process for finding signs for phrases that go beyond the ISL lexicon and how these phrases could be adapted to become musical idioms that allowed for ‘signing-along’ in ISL:

### Video 1

Loads of discussions about ‘Hakuna Matata!’ What does ‘hakuna matata’ mean? Where are we — and you know, each person has a different understanding of what that means; kind of a nice fuzzy feeling. And so we did a lot of work between the three of us to thinking what *we* think it means; what might be an appropriate symbol for that in sign language; what we think our kids would

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<sup>35</sup> The 2022 *Toy Show* interpreting team included Coogan, Jason Maguire, and Ciara Grant. Blind and Vision Impaired audiences could also experience the show through Audio Description provided by Clara Murray and Kevin Sherwin. For more information, see ‘The Toy Show is for everyone with ISL and Audio Description’ (26 November 2022): <https://www.rte.ie/kids/2022/1121/1337392-the-toy-show-is-for-everyone-with-isl-and-audio-description/>.

<sup>36</sup> The ‘Circle of Life’ (1994) was composed by Elton John, the lyrics by Tim Rice with additional vocal solos by Lebo M. (Lebohang Morake) and Carmen Twillie.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Hakuna Matata’ was composed by Elton John to lyrics by Tim Rice.

understand that to be, and how we tell our kids and our deaf parents who are watching that actually that this is a refrain that everyone can do? I think we — I can't remember what that sign was now off the top of my head. [Tries to remember, sings first line of chorus] It was kind of — we knew it was like 'Be cool, be calm, let everything flow all of you,' you know? 'Don't get stressed.'

And so how we also introduced that as this sing-along element that some — that also our kids at home can go 'Hakuna Matata' [sings and signs] with us. So how we — which means that we foreshadow it at the start of the song; you know all these little bits and pieces to get in. So we did — yeah, it was a *real* challenge, but *really* gorgeous and I think — I think it worked really, really well. It was Sarah Jane, the deaf presenter, who did that in the end. But the three of us would work very intensely, and — so we would all know — and also, this was Covid time as well. So we all learnt the songs. We agreed a translation, put it down, and we all learnt that translation on the 'just in case' I went down with Covid, Sarah Jane went down with Covid, little Aisling went down with Covid, whoever. With the songs as anchors, we collectively agree a translation and then we learn them.

Coogan's insight details the many layers of interpretation necessary to produce unique ISL translations for these songs that would be succinct yet comprehensible, aesthetically pleasing while also replicable within the timeframe that the musical phrase allows for, so as much as possible on the beats of the music. It is evident that the trio undertakes multifaceted conversations on music and meaning, as she clarifies:

A lot of the discussion is 'Oh it means' you know, as an interpreter you go 'What's this utterance' in whatever language; 'What does the *mean* and how do I put it out in my target language; in sign language.' So, we go through that process and then we'd start listening to music and go, 'Ok, that doesn't fit. We need to stretch this, we need to make it shorter, we need to ...' but trying to keep the content of the meaning into the song. So often what you're doing when you're translating a song is you're — you have another rolling thing going; so you're hearing the music and you've a rolling script, a different script, 'I wanna hit this on this line, and this on this line, and this on this line.'

As we see from the above excerpts, considerable time and skill are required to distil a musical phrase into an essence that is concise and legible, and one that maps on to provide a holistic sign language interpretation of a popular song that takes into account the essential extra-musical utterances such as the emotional effect of the performance and the subtle yet important vocal inflections of the singer. Perhaps it is no surprise then that Coogan and her co-interpreters went 'viral' for their inspired and slightly chaotic live interpretations of the *Toy Show's* musical numbers; one headline announcement was



'Toy Show's sign language interpreter Amanda Coogan hailed a "national treasure."' <sup>38</sup> The interpretations by Coogan and colleagues Aisling Dragoi and Sarah Jane O'Regan of the musical numbers during the 2021 *Toy Show* received considerable positive feedback from both hearing and Deaf viewers on social media, as well as favourable reviews from press outlets in the show's immediate aftermath (see *Figure 3*), in an episode that included a guest performance by the Toy Show Choir with an unannounced appearance by Ed Sheeran.

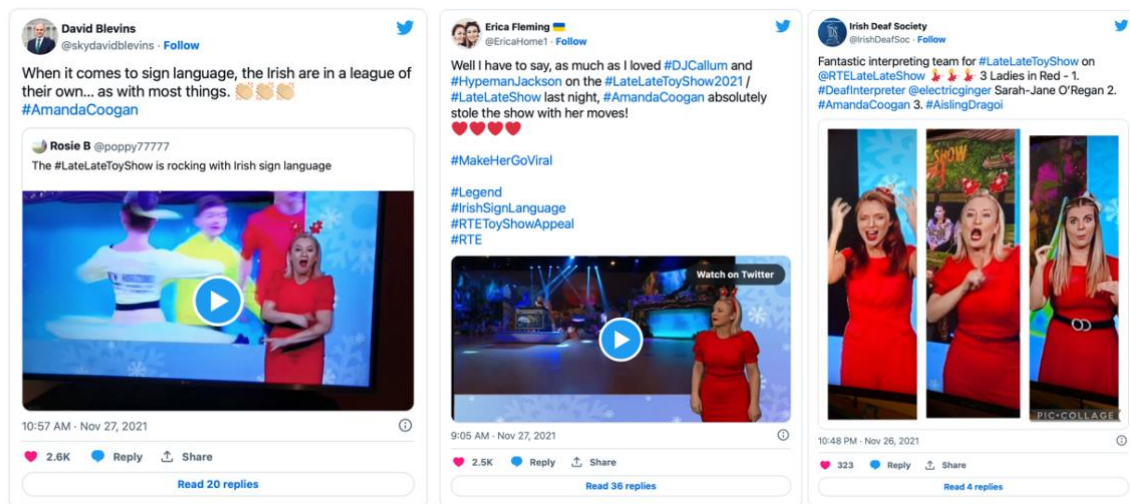


Figure 3. Some of the social media reactions to Coogan's Irish Sign Language interpretation of the *Late Late Toy Show*, November 2023. (Source: Twitter screengrabs)

In particular, viewers took to Twitter<sup>39</sup> in large numbers to express their delight at seeing Coogan provide live ISL interpretation to DJ Callum and Hypeman Jackson's largely instrumental rave track. As Coogan describes:

<sup>38</sup> For articles on the response to the *Toy Show's* ISL interpreters, see David Kent, 'Late Late Toy Show: People were loving the ISL interpreter for reaction to rave music,' *Irish Mirror* (27 November 2021) <https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/late-late-toy-show-people-25560695> Sarah McKenna Barry, 'Toy Show's sign language interpreter Amanda Coogan hailed a "national treasure"', *HER* (2021) <https://www.her.ie/entertainment/toy-shows-sign-language-interpreter-amanda-coogan-hailed-national-treasure-541414> and Bronwyn O'Neill 'The Toy Show's sign language interpreter, Amanda Coogan has become a viral sensation', *Evoke* (24 November 2021) <https://evoke.ie/2021/11/29/entertainment/celebrity/amanda-coogan-toy-show/>

<sup>39</sup> The platform Twitter was abruptly rebranded to X at the time of writing (July 2023); for consistency I continue to refer to the social media site as Twitter in this article.

## Video 2

I tell ya, I think [laughs] some of the songs I've translated ... they're beautiful. But actually the thing that people started sharing on social media was this ridiculous—it's a lovely little fella who was doing a DJ set and the actual words were 'Friday, Saturday,' I can't remember 'One, two, three, Friday, Saturday, Sunday.' Like ridiculous. 'Friday, Saturday, Sunday, oops!' And it wasn't meant to be me. It was meant to be Sarah Jane. Something happened, she went to the toilet and I just went '*and here we go!*' I hadn't really practised because it was so simple. And I just went, 'Ok, I'm on it. On it. Here we go! It's Friday, yeah!' So I was kind of unpolished, let's say, and being an *eejit*, and just in the moment going 'Right, here we go!', 'pull the wellies on, get into the mucky field' kind of [laughs].

The clarity and simplicity of the signs in the rave track almost invited members of the audience to learn and reproduce the ISL words for Friday, Saturday, and so on, especially when compared to Sheeran's (relatively) more loquacious lyrics that necessitated more elaborate expert interpretation provided this time by ISL interpreter Sarah Jane O'Regan.<sup>40</sup> This education and resonance, together with the heavy dose of humour with which Coogan delivered them [i.e. the lyrics], enabled this song to serve as a quasi-pedagogical tool that helped 'spread the gospel'<sup>41</sup> of ISL with a wider audience at home and abroad, many of whom may not have encountered such sustained engagement with ISL or Deaf culture before. This collection of signed music examples from the *Late Late Toy Show* – and the audience reception of them – shows that by expanding how musical works are communicated and mediated we can make a world of difference and enhanced enjoyment, not just for Deaf but for hearing audiences too.

### **Lost in translation: Challenges in interpreting 'Ireland' in Seán Ó'Riada's *Mise Éire***

On Easter Sunday 2016, a commemorative centenary concert called *A Nation's Voice* took place in the courtyard of Collins Barracks on the banks of the River Liffey, featuring 31 choirs with over 1,000 singers, the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, and one ISL interpreter acting as a liaison between the full concert programme and members of the

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<sup>40</sup> See Sarah Jane O'Regan's ISL interpretation of the Toy Show Choir's 'Leave Your Life' with surprise appearance from Ed Sheeran <https://youtu.be/FsTDiGgsi9Y>

<sup>41</sup> Coogan interview, March 2023.

Deaf community present. This formal concert, attended by President Michael D. Higgins, featured new music from Shaun Davey and Paul Muldoon alongside pieces by George F. Handel, Seán Ó Riada and Bill Whelan. The Orchestral Suite from Ó Riada's *Mise Éire* (1959) was a fitting choice for the programme, its name taken from Patrick Pearse's poem *Mise Éire* ('I Am Ireland'). Ó Riada's composition was a musical score to the landmark film of the same name. Directed by George Morrison and produced by Gael Linn, *Mise Éire* was the first feature-length Irish-language film. Ó Riada's score brought him national acclaim and a 'measure of popularity that was normally afforded artists such as Elvis Presley.'<sup>42</sup> This entirely orchestral suite, with no lyrics, proved particularly challenging for Coogan – the ISL interpreter hired by the Arts Council to provide live interpretation for this event – not least because to interpret the very word 'Ireland' into ISL is a surprisingly complicated task that depends on a wide range of contextual factors.

Coogan had to seriously consider her process in interpreting a completely instrumental work with such a loaded history and at an event commemorating such a complex yet watershed moment that culminated in the establishment of the Republic of Ireland. Dublin-born Coogan approached this task from her perspective of living in Belfast. While researching her translation, she grappled with how to inflect a seemingly simple utterance of 'Is mise Éire' and found herself asking 'I am Ireland? Who is Ireland?' because in ISL one must choose exactly how to inflect the sign for 'Ireland.' The ISL sign for Ireland was one that emerged at around the same time as the 1916 Rising, following older signs for Ireland that were steeped in colonialism and profoundly pejorative. Coogan described her thought-process behind interpreting 'Ireland' for this piece:

### Video 3

So ... where we're going from; where — how can I — I can very simply go from ... old signs for 'Ireland' that are *really* derogatory. Flicking the shamrock off your lapel [signs it] ... it's an English sign. Sometimes still used. We call it 'flicking the shamrock' but actually, some people say that it comes from 'speaking of those people who had to flick the fleas off them; they were so dirty,' so it was around emigration.

And there's another one which is this one [bounces curved right index and middle finger off the back of left hand] which is literally 'the potato pickers.' Yeah. The English still use that when

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Mary Murphy, 'A History of Irish Record Labels: From the 1920s to 2019,' in Áine Mangaoang, John O'Flynn, and Lonán Ó Briain, *Made in Ireland: Studies in Popular Music* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021), 22.

they're talking about us. Yeah. [Author interjects: I'm suddenly seeing your work in Stormont in a new light] There's a lot of controversy, in Stormont there was an awful lot of controversy because in BSL they still use this [signs 'potato pickers'] for the 'north' of Ireland. And I was using 'Ireland' as in —it's very militaristic [signs like military salute]. It's very 1916. It's very, very 1916.<sup>43</sup>

This multimodal conversation helps illuminate just how complicated the concept of Ireland is, and how loaded with very different meanings each ISL translation is. It also highlights how important context is when translating into sign language: how to approach a translation depends entirely upon who the intended audience is. It takes a considerable amount of audience research to produce an interpreted piece that achieves its aims.

For *Mise Éire* Coogan's strategy became to repeat what she calls the piece's 'refrain' of 'I am Ireland. I am Ireland. I am Ireland.' With each utterance of the refrain, and growing along with the orchestral grandeur, Coogan moved through the different signs for Ireland, from the older, oppressive signs of the 'flicking the shamrock/flea' and 'the potato pickers' and into the military salute sign for Ireland, creating an exceptionally expressive visuality to Ó Riada's music. Given that Ó Riada's score to *Mise Éire* is well-known to an Irish audience, to experience Coogan's astute new ISL interpretation of *Mise Éire* with this series of signs invites radically new perspectives for the audiences present. To experience the embodied signs alongside Ó Riada's familiar piece and Pearse's well-known poetry allows for a truly multimodal meditation on the meaning of 'Is mise Éire.' Much like the complex celebration of Ireland's centenary that *A Nation's Voice* was, interpreting Ireland in an ISL translation of *Mise Éire* is equally intricate, inseparable from politics and from colonialism – both historical and contemporary.

### **'Sing All Our Cares Away': Decolonizing the Deaf community through Damien Dempsey's songs of protest**

Themes of historical and contemporary colonial epistemologies feature prominently in the songs of Irish singer-songwriter Damien Dempsey. In a performance and songwriting career that spans over 20 years, over 10 albums, and collaborations with Sinéad O'Connor and Bob Dylan, Dempsey has always sought to use his music to challenge inequality and educate people about injustice in Ireland, as well as producing songs about overcoming trauma, resilience, and empathy. He champions 'a particular

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<sup>43</sup> For an example of the militaristic sign for Ireland, see Sean Dunne's ISL interpretation of the Irish national anthem, '*Amhrán na bhFiann* (The Soldier's Song)' by *The Journal* shared on YouTube (18 July 2018) <https://youtu.be/0q0IBgtIISc>.

postcolonial-inflected new Irish cosmopolitanism that places community, love, and social engagement at its heart, [and] in the process configuring Dempsey as a critical citizen who moves beyond insular nationalist and regional, postcolonial Irish concerns.<sup>44</sup> Dempsey's commission for the Abbey Theatre in 2023, *Tales from the Holywell* reflects on his life as a musician from the Dublin suburb of Donaghmede in words and song. It is perhaps no surprise that when the opportunity to interpret Dempsey's show presented itself, Coogan saw the potential for the thematics of Dempsey's music to map onto the deaf experience. The two-hour, one-man show featured his songs as well as scripted monologues, with a fair amount of ad-lib from Dempsey himself on the night. And as Ireland's national theatre, the Abbey offered ISL interpretation for audiences on one evening of the show's sold-out run, as part of a wider range of accessibility offers on other dates.<sup>45</sup>

Coogan already knew Dempsey's music before going into the project and was therefore familiar with its general thematic content and his take on protest songs. She was confident that if she could find fitting equivalences to capture the nuances of the songs and get the interpretation 'right, it would really land the way Damo's songs land for hearing people who are interested in that kind of subject.'<sup>46</sup> One of the songs included in *Holywell* was Dempsey's 'Colony' – a song that deals with the impact and legacy of colonization starting from his own Irish perspective before moving on to international discourses of colonization (including Native Americans and Australian Aboriginals, for example). Yet that interpretation was not without its own distinct linguistic challenges, not least since there is no one, single, direct sign for 'colony' in ISL. Coogan explains how she tackled this:

### Video 4

I was like, 'Oh! Ololololo. Where am I going here?' Because it [the concept of 'colonialism'] was so essential. So I did a very fast 'the country that was taken over' [signs it]. 'I sing the song of the "country that was taken over."'

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<sup>44</sup> Martin J. Power, Aileen Dillane, and Eoin Devereux, 'You'll Never Kill Our Will to Be Free': Damien Dempsey's 'Colony' as a Critique of Historical and Contemporary Colonialism, *MUSICultures*, 44/2 (2018), 29–30.

<sup>45</sup> The Abbey Theatre has included ISL interpretations of its productions since 2000. In *Holywell*, Coogan was positioned to the side of the stage so the audience could see her clearly. Other access measures offered for Dempsey's show in particular included captioned and audio described performance, and a touch tour of the stage and set. For more details see <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats-on/tales-from-the-holywell/>.

<sup>46</sup> Coogan interview with author, March 2023.

As Dempsey sings the song's opening line 'I sing the song of the colony', Coogan quickly maps her interpretation for 'colony.' The original recording of 'Colony' that appears on Dempsey's first album *They Don't Teach This Shit in School* (2000) lasts for almost eight minutes, culminating with the refrain 'You'll never kill our will to be free, to be free' sung by Dempsey three times. The 'you' here is ambiguous, Power, Dillane and Devereaux note, since it could be addressed to specific people or to the general Irish population.<sup>47</sup> By translating this song into ISL, the 'you' can be interpreted as addressing the conditions of colonialization experienced by the Deaf community, and how it continues today. While colonial rule is largely associated with nation states, discourse surrounding the concept of colonialism as it relates to Deaf communities was first applied by Harlan Lane in the early nineties, and later augmented by Owen Wrigley and Paddy Ladd, among others.<sup>48</sup> Deaf scholars Heath Rose and John Bosco Conama's research on linguistic colonialism has shown how a lack of explicit ISL language policy led to discrimination and inequality in relation to ISL users in Ireland. Linguistic imperialism led to policies in place to prevent the proliferation of sign language, privileged audism, and enforced oralism, and denied the linguistic rights of Ireland's Deaf community.<sup>49</sup>

Coogan brought her intimate knowledge of these converging thematic concepts into play for the show's finale number, Dempsey's rousing ballad 'Sing All Our Cares Away.' In the song's lyrics, each couplet of the verses recounts the glimpses of different characters going through personal difficulties of their own:

Mary loves the grouse, hides the bottles round the house,  
She watches chat shows and the soaps, broken-hearted but she copes.  
Michael's out of work, feels he's sinking in the murk,  
He's unshaven and a mess, finds it hard some days to dress.  
Stevie smashed the delph, 'cause he can't express himself,  
He's consumed by rage, like his father at his age.

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<sup>47</sup> Power, Dillane, and Devereux, 'You'll Never Kill Our Will to Be Free', 38–9.

<sup>48</sup> For further reading on issues of colonialism of Deaf communities, see Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* (New York: Knopf, 1992); Owen Wrigley, *The Politics of Deafness* (Washington: Gallaudet University Press, 1996); Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 2003). The culturo-linguistic model of colonialism of Deaf communities can be seen in George Veditz's 1913 film *The Preservation of the Sign Language*.

<sup>49</sup> Heath Rose and John Bosco Conama, 'Linguistic Imperialism: Still a Valid Construct in Relation to Language Policy for Irish Sign Language', *Language Policy*, 17/3 (August 2018), 385–404.

## Embodied Music

In her translation for this song, Coogan established a narrative that takes place on one street, where these characters are neighbours with their own struggles going on behind closed doors:

### Video 5

I thought it was a really beautiful song which kind of tells the story of what I imagined — I didn't ask Damo about this — different houses on the street and the private problems people have inside their front door. I thought it's kind of liberating because I think sometimes for some of the deaf community and the people I was thinking of, they feel like they're the only ones who are struggling, maybe. And it's often a revelation 'What? Hearing people feel that way too?' You know? So I built it, it isn't overt in the song, but I built it at the start of the song, I go 'On my street'. The equivalent of 'on my street and in this house, Mary has a problem with whiskey. She hides her bottles ...'

The song then builds to the uplifting chorus, where Dempsey triumphantly sings an anthemic refrain:

We sing, sing all our cares away.  
We'll live, to fight another day.

Coogan employed some particularly creative tactics to find a way to translate the hearing-centric idiom of 'singing your cares away' into one that the Irish Deaf community could relate to. Her solution was a beautiful ISL metaphor that you open your heart and just set it free. Coogan describes it as such:

### Video 6

It's a gorgeous — it's like, it's as if you're opening a bag, I suppose, at your heart; you pull it open and this kind of springs forth. And so I thought that metaphor is gonna pitch there. And then it's actually in the whole concert, it's the piece — it's his — it's the piece he invites everybody to sing. Now, in a normal Damo concert everyone's singing along to everything. But actually, in the Abbey — and he was very worried about it, I think — it was much more formal; that we watched these songs as stories. And then at the end, with 'Sing All Our Cares Away,' he invited us all to sing with him. And so I asked the Abbey's permission, could I translate that song on video and give it to the [Deaf] people who I knew were coming so that they could, you know, if they wanted to ...

[Author:] *Sing along?!*

This invitation to sing along by signing along serves as a very tangible way to bridge the gap between the Deaf and hearing worlds. Much like many of Dempsey’s hearing fans who may have prepared for going to his live show by listening to his music on repeat in the days leading up to the gig, a similar – though limited – opportunity was now made possible for the first time for Deaf community members who would otherwise not have had access to his music. Making a preview video of ‘Sing All Your Cares Away’ available for the ISL users meant they could experience Coogan’s interpretation before the show, follow the signs, and, if they wanted to, learn the signs so they could *sign* along for the show’s heartening finale (*Figure 4*).

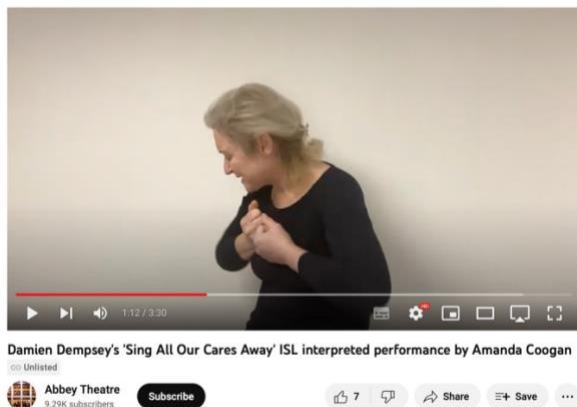




Figure 4. Two stills from the Abbey Theatre preview video of Coogan's ISL interpretation for Damien Dempsey's 'Sing All Your Cares Away,' showing the ISL metaphor 'open your heart and let it flow' used in the song's chorus. Source: YouTube.<sup>50</sup>

This level of prior access is not one that these communities are often granted, and the potential reward was great. The Abbey uploaded a swift, unedited recording of Coogan performing her interpretation of the song on the morning of the day that the sign language interpreted evening was scheduled. Coogan shared the video with those from the Deaf community that she knew were coming to the show, it spread through social media, and Coogan received some real-time feedback, giving her enough time to hone and further refine her interpretation to best suit her target audience. Coogan explains just how small the Irish Deaf community is, and how since many know her, they'll ask her directly:

### Video 7

'Are you doing that? I'm coming!' So I *know* who's coming. And so I was able to go: 'Psst! By the way, watch this [preview video] if you want.' So I got loads of feedback on it as well; on my choices. [sings] 'Stevie smashed the delph, 'cause he can't express himself.' And so there was a little 'Oh, oh make that a bit clearer. What's he smashing in that story? [In] that part of the song.' And so it was absolutely glorious to be in the Abbey and to have this, kind of — people *signing* back to the stage. And it wasn't just the deaf audience either. I could see a smattering of hearing people going 'Oh right!' Because I made it very simple as well. [signs as reciting the interpretation of the lyrics:] 'Open up your heart, sing all your cares away and throw them behind you' is basically what — to get them out of you and throw them behind — as in sing them away, you know. Feel that release or something by opening up about it. So it was actually very special. *Very special*. And, you know, Damo is so generous in those terms, that he's like 'Yeah, brilliant.' You know, 'Let's do it!' He was on guitar so he couldn't use his hands! [laughs]

In *Songs of Social Protest*, Dillane et al. remind us that 'sound is an integral part of protest, and singing is a way for ordinary people, as well as amateur or professional musicians, to sonorously raise their voices in an appeal for justice.'<sup>51</sup> As the closing number for the

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<sup>50</sup> To access the full video on YouTube, see the Abbey Theatre, 'Damien Dempsey's "Sing All Our Cares Away" ISL interpreted performance by Amanda Coogan.' 9 February 2023, <https://youtu.be/OhKWVMn8Op8>.

<sup>51</sup> Aileen Dillane, Martin J. Power, Amanda Haynes and Eoin Devereux, *Songs of Social Protest: International Perspectives* (London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018), 1.

show, all the audience could raise their voices *and* their hands, and connect through the shared message of Dempsey’s music, regardless of their level of hearing or prior knowledge of ISL. This collective experience of singing and/or signing in communion with one another, facilitated by Dempsey’s emotive music and Coogan’s powerful interpretation, enabled the show to end on a beautiful high, sending many audience members out into the night with that buzz of being part of that collective, participatory experience that is rare these days.

Both Dempsey and Coogan received overwhelmingly positive feedback via social media platforms from both the Deaf and hearing communities immediately following the performance, including a glowing review in the form of a tweet from one of Ireland’s well-known radio personalities, Joe Duffy, who happened to be at the ISL interpreted performance of *Holywell*. So impressed was Duffy by the Dempsey-Coogan collaboration that he dedicated a large segment of his well-known afternoon show *Liveline* the very next day to interview Coogan about the creativity involved in being a sign language interpreter, and to field calls from listeners who were equally enthusiastic about Coogan’s interpreting services, and who expressed an energy, excitement, and appreciation for ISL and Deaf culture more broadly.<sup>52</sup>

### **Deaf Joy: New affordances, multimodality and meanings in Beethoven’s Ninth**

This final case study is somewhat different to the previous three, which are all examples from Coogan’s extensive career as a professional ISL interpreter hired to translate for television, live concerts, and theatre, respectively. In this last example, we turn to Coogan’s parallel career as a performance artist – one that occupies the very crossroads of visual arts and theatre – and specifically her long-standing preoccupation with Ludwig van Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125. Beethoven’s Ninth and final complete symphony is widely revered, and it has become one of the great sonic symbols of world unity.<sup>53</sup> That he was known to be deaf by the time he composed it

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<sup>52</sup> Sarah Barrett, ‘RTÉ Liveline callers say ISL should be taught in schools’, *The Irish Mirror* (10 February 2023), <https://www.irishmirror.ie/news/irish-news/rte-liveline-callers-say-irish-29185573> To listen back to the radio discussion in full, see RTÉ Radio 1 ‘Flags Outside House – Sign Language & Amanda Coogan,’ *Liveline* (10 February 2023) <https://www.boomplay.com/episode/3349821>.

<sup>53</sup> For further reading on the socio-political and cultural reception of Beethoven’s Ninth, see Esteban Buch, *Beethoven’s Ninth: A Political History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Conor Farrington, ‘Beyond the *Ode to Joy*: The politics of the European Anthem’, *The Political Quarterly*, 90, 2019, 525–533. The European Anthem – an excerpt from the prelude to the ‘Ode to Joy’ from Beethoven’s Ninth – was formally adopted by the Council of Europe in 1972 and by European Union

seems only to underscore the wonder of this achievement even more, when his deafness signifies the moment his music truly became ‘wild and free.’<sup>54</sup> From its premiere in Vienna in 1824 to the present day, the piece has been performed, recorded, forensically studied by musicologists and critics alike as well as being officially adopted as the musical incarnation of Europe in 1972 – understood as bestowing certain European ideals of freedom, peace, and unity, especially in Beethoven’s setting of Friedrich Schiller’s poem ‘An die Freude’ (Ode to Joy) in its final movement.

The Ninth is a fitting piece for Coogan to work through in her own artistic practice. Most recently, Beethoven’s Ninth is the focal point in *Freude! Freude!* (Joy! Joy!), Coogan’s recent live exhibition, embodied performance, and living installation at the Douglas Hyde Gallery of Contemporary Art in Dublin.<sup>55</sup> This new immersive work is a collaboration between Coogan and Deaf artists Lianne Quigley and Alvean Jones, the Dublin Theatre for the Deaf (DTD) – a community theatre group founded over 45 years ago – and students from the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) at Trinity College Dublin – the only university offering courses in Deaf Studies on the island of Ireland. Together this impressive ensemble worked to develop an Irish Deaf community perspective on Beethoven’s magnum opus, offering ‘an embodiment of the struggle for acceptance, recognition and equality.’<sup>56</sup>

The Ninth has consumed Coogan’s thoughts for over twenty years. Individual movements have appeared in various live iterations of Coogan’s performance art. She elucidates:

### Video 8

I suppose I’ve been jumping in and around Beethoven’s music my whole life ... bouncing in and out of this piece. For the Liverpool Biennial in 2003, I got a hundred people to headbang to the ‘Ode to Joy’ which was so much fun. And so simple. Sometimes simple movement is great. What happened with all the Brexit stuff, in my little head, I was like ‘Shit! We need – I need a

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leaders as the official anthem of the EU in 1985. For various Council-endorsed versions of the European anthem, see <https://www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/the-european-anthem>.

<sup>54</sup> Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes quoted in Michael Levin, ‘What Can a Deaf Composer Teach Hearing Impaired Kids about Music? More Than You Might Think’, *Huffington Post* (20 January 2015) [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-can-a-deaf-composer\\_b\\_6491322](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/what-can-a-deaf-composer_b_6491322).

<sup>55</sup> *Freude! Freude!* live exhibition ran at the Douglas Hyde, 11–29 October 2023.

<sup>56</sup> *Freude! Freude!* programme notes, <https://thedouglashyde.ie/exhibition/freude-freude/>.

headbanging to Beethoven *now!* Because in my personal situation, I'm in the flux of Northern Ireland, Belfast, 'where are we?' Brexit has shook the Peace Process somewhat and ignited some very sectarian ideas. And so I thought 'Jesus, we need to—I need to.' In my imagination, I want people making a line around the border of Northern Ireland, headbanging to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. And then I was like, 'Which side do they—? Do we headbang from the north? Do we headbang from the south?' So, I was really enjoying this kind of—the beautiful and mental arithmetic of *what is* making a new piece of work, actually.

Part of Coogan's fixation on embodied interpretations of Beethoven in live art settings – and of the repeated joy that the ensemble members express in their interpreting of his music through and with ISL signs and gestures – may be understood, in part, as one of ownership of a symphony that evinces a vast symbolic association with unity. By bringing their embodied interpretations of the Ninth, members of the Deaf community claim Beethoven as a 'Deaf artist.' For Coogan, this is very much at the forefront of her sustained work with Beethoven's repertoire:

### Video 9

In some ways we're claiming him as a Deaf artist, which is a strange thing to—strange that it hasn't happened — that we *haven't* claimed him yet. But actually going 'Okay, hang on a minute, this is a deaf artist.' So, when I'm treating the first movement, for example, that kind of — and I'm mortified talking about this in terms of musicology—but you know that exploration, that kind of coming from nothing as the music does—and he—it *becomes* in front of us.

So ... I'm making sculptures based on the ear trumpets and all of that; hearing aids that he had hanging around and seemingly didn't use anyway. And so actually for this, the beginning of it, I'm taking those off the floor and they will rise to the rhythm of the music and we will lose sight of them; they'll just go. They will just be thrown away, I suppose, in that —removed; brought beyond the canopy. I suppose in a way, for my deaf collaborators, my colleagues, they're like 'Yeah.' In a way, [throwing away the hearing aids] allow us to turn the focus on the embodied language of sign language, the embodied understanding. And I believe he was a very embodied maker. You know, there's all these stories of him walking around, on his nature walks, literally banging out the music as he's writing it down in his sketch books. So I'm really taking that as a kind of permission. I also have a lot of references dotted in —you know, the story of the first concert of the Ninth Symphony where, as you say, he was bars behind and, as you say, the orchestra was following —the first violinist, I think, was the conductor who was keeping it on the beat. And as people erupted into applause, Beethoven had to be, I can imagine, tapped on the shoulder, and turned around, as he would, as people were rapturous at the piece. And he was beating out a different rhythm. So, this really excites me, actually, if you can imagine.

A shorter version of *Freude! Freude!* was shown in June 2023 at Cork's Crawford Art Gallery, where Coogan collaborated with the DTD and Cork Deaf Community Choir to perform their interpretation of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' (Figures 5–7) to a live audience.



Figure 5. Amanda Coogan [facing forward], Dublin Theatre of the Deaf and Cork Deaf Community Choir perform under the 'starry canopy' in Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' at Crawford Art Gallery, Cork Midsummer Festival (June 2023). Reproduced with permission from Jed Niezgoda.



Figure 6–7. Performers from Dublin Theatre of the Deaf and Cork Deaf Community Choir during ‘Ode to Joy’ at Crawford Art Gallery, Cork (June 2023). Reproduced with permission from Jed Niezgoda.

In this version, Coogan planned to have one of her Deaf collaborators positioned as a kind of Beethoven figure at the front with her back to the rest of the Deaf choir, and she has her own rhythm and choreography that are separate from that of the ensemble. Coogan uses this piece to explore the idea of sheer defiance in relation to Beethoven – a celebration of the fact that he continued to compose after his capacity to hear the outside world had gone. She emphasizes this point:

#### Video 10

But to *continue* to write the dreamscape of sound that you are obsessed with and convulsed with in your head and to make ... in some ways, that possibly, one could suggest, gave him permission to be so radical because it was only in his head in some ways, you know? And we live with the brilliant legacy ever since ...

## Embodied Music

From the steps of the Third Symphony, how as he was losing his hearing and as he was starting to become a little more radical with the form and into the Fifth, and into the Seventh — I don't know as much — and, you know, all the odd numbers! We can parse his challenging the form with the reduction in his hearing. So, 'reduction in his hearing' is to medicalize it, but actually his 'dislocation', maybe, from his arena of music and into the dreamscape of his own mind where the possibilities, obviously, were limitless, you know... And so to reclaim, then, and put that as an embodied experience with the foundation of the language of this, of my language ISL, but really embodied — an embodied translation of it, with that double of a figure — certainly in Cork in June. I'll have that figure who is off kilter with us, but still in this beautiful musing; this great, obsessive dreamworld of creating, of making something new, you know?

In these recent embodied performances of Beethoven's music, Coogan and her collaborators communicate multiple roles — orchestra, chorus, conductor, composer — as well as elements of rhythm, melody, harmony, timbre, dynamics, and form. On the one hand, their interpretation of the music, like every performance of Beethoven's Ninth, demonstrates the extent to which the Ninth's meaning cannot be contained within any one single interpretation. On the other hand, every performance, every interpretation is new. And with it a new meaning is brought to a two-hundred-year-old symphony.

### **Next steps: Deaf allyship in action**

Inaccessibility is not an act of neutrality. In Ireland, especially since the passing of the Irish Sign Language Act, the marginalization of Deaf bodies in public spaces, services, or cultural events can be read as an act of antipathy. Providing access in the form of ISL interpretation for music and live events invites us all to expand our critical interpretation — and opens the possibility for a heightened experience — of music and sound. Collectively, such performances demonstrate Deaf allyship in action.

The four diverse case studies outlined in this article, as well as the pioneering work of Deaf musicians and educators like Orla O'Sullivan, everyday performances by Deaf community choirs in community centres around Ireland, multisensory collaborations from deaf and hearing musicians in The Sense Ensemble, as well as trailblazing multimodal music videos by Sinéad O'Connor and others, not only reveal the limitations of an exclusively audiocentric approach to music but show the potential of what can be gained by thinking through music *corporeally*. To interpret musical works like Seán Ó Riada's *Mise Éire* or Damien Dempsey's 'Colony' through Irish Sign Language, as this article has shown, is to conduct a radical cultural analysis of music, and to critically confront how all language is culturally defined. To interpret Beethoven's Ninth into ISL, as we see in the Dublin Deaf Theatre and Cork Deaf Choir performances with Coogan, offers the opportunity for an inclusive meditation on what music means. For intersectional musicologists interested in moving the field forward,

we might – as Deaf scholar Paddy Ladd suggests – ‘begin taking our first baby steps in developing our new cultural literacy [in sign language(s)] by actively seeking out what it is they have to teach us.’<sup>57</sup> As such, this article represents a first ‘baby step’ towards understanding the unique relationship between sign language, Deaf culture and music in an Irish context. It is hoped that others more qualified than I will be motivated to take up the mantle and continue to research this area. In these case studies,<sup>58</sup> we understand that deafness does *not* mean the end of music, to (mis)appropriate Carolyn Abbate, but rather deafness opens the possibilities to begin multisensorial modes of experiencing music and human connection.

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<sup>57</sup> Ladd (2003): p. 25.

<sup>58</sup> While this article focuses primarily on the work of ISL interpreter Amanda Coogan, it is crucial to note that a significant corpus of work has been created by the contemporary Irish Deaf artists who are working with sound, ISL and/or BSL in their practice. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the work of these artists, but I encourage readers to look up the work of Deaf artists Alvean Jones, Lianne Quigley, Jane O’Brien, Paula Clarke, and many others. I draw particular attention to recent interactive, multi-sensory concerts like ‘The Body That Breathes’ – a collaboration between Lianne Quigley, Alvean Jones, George Higgs, Jane Hackett and colleagues at Dublin’s Unit 44.