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At the Intersection of American Sign Language and the Performer-Percussionist: A Hybrid Practice

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

At the Intersection of American Sign Language
and the Performer-Percussionist: A Hybrid Practice

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

in

Contemporary Music Performance

by

Christopher Richard Clarino

Committee in charge

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2019
The Dissertation of Christopher Richard Clarino is approved, and it is acceptable
in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2019
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

At the Intersection of American Sign Language & the Performer-Percussionist: A Hybrid Practice

by

Christopher Richard Clarino
Doctor of Musical Arts in Contemporary Music Performance
University of California San Diego, 2019
Professor Steven Schick, chair

This dissertation investigates the shared spaces between American Sign Language (ASL), percussion and performance art, and addresses the following questions: Does my work successfully merge these disciplines into a singular practice? In this hybridized practice, is corporeality fundamentally relatable? For example, might a layperson relate to the playing of a drum more deeply on an emotional and physical level than the playing of a viola harmonic? Similarly, in ASL; are inherent qualities of the language – facial expression, non-manual
markers, personification, and explicitly visual referents – also relatable to the layperson in the same way? Do these build a bridge to the middle ground of my practice?

These topics and questions will be addressed in the context of the following works: Carolyn Chen’s *Threads* (2012), Lydia Winsor Brindamour’s *early morning (dew, spiderweb)* (2016), Tiange Zhou’s *Me/Monologue* (2018), Larry Polansky’s *VEDITZ* (2018), Yiheng Yvonne Wu’s *Your Hat* (2018), and my adaptation of Franz Schubert’s *Erlkönig* (1821). Through musical analysis and deconstruction of the works mentioned, I have attempted to answer the technical and cultural questions that have risen through preparation and performance.
Introduction

“Language, in a way, is a screen in front of the emotion and the action.”
-Meredith Monk

Background

The catalyst for this research was my desire to highlight the implicit relationships between American Sign Language (ASL), percussion, and performance art. Prior to my repertoire for ASL performer-percussionist, an explicit discourse or body of work that merged these separate practices did not exist. Seven new works and one adaptation of a vocal work now exist for the medium.

Many may view music and deafness as polar opposites. The common notion that music is a purely sonic practice, and the notion that deaf people live in a world void of sound, are both fundamentally flawed. Yet, many common threads exist between these communities, not least of which highlights the communicative role of percussion as an early form of long-distance message relay, and ASL as a formalized method of communication. Rather than exploring the complex and nuanced relationship between the Deaf-World and sound, this writing will examine the corporeality of American Sign Language, the embodied percussionist, and my role at the crossroads of these disciplines. In doing so, my work will illuminate the broad spectrum of comprehensibility, accessibility and experiential individuality present in our society.

The complete body of my commissioned work is available in score format in Appendix A. These include Carolyn Chen’s Threads (2012), Edo Frenkel’s There is Nothing (but they) Outside (2013), Lydia Winsor Brindamour’s early morning (dew, spiderweb) (2016), Tiange

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1 Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister and Ben Bahan refer to the “Deaf-World” as a minority group possessing a unique language and culture.
Zhou’s *Me/Monologue* (2018), Yiheng Yvonne Wu’s *Your Hat* (2018), Elisabet Curbelo’s *The Little Mute Boy* (2018), Larry Polansky’s *VEDITZ* (2018), and Aristea Mellos’ *Web of Threads* (2018). Video and audio documentation of select works are available as supplemental material. While these portfolios have been the primary focus of my doctoral research, this writing provides context and insight into performative and interpretive challenges present in these works.

**Research Questions**

This writing addresses the following questions: Does my work successfully merge ASL, percussion and performance art into a singular practice? In this hybridized practice, is corporeality fundamentally relatable? For example, might a layperson relate to the playing of a drum more deeply on an emotional and physical level than the playing of a viola harmonic? Similarly, are inherent qualities of American Sign Language – facial expression, non-manual markers, personification, and explicitly visual referents – also relatable to the layperson in the same way? Do these build a bridge to the middle ground of my practice? Through musical analysis and deconstruction of the works mentioned, I have attempted to answer the technical and cultural questions that have risen through preparation and performance.

**Research Context**

The context of this work lies within two realms: as a practitioner of both percussion and American Sign Language, my research is set in a hybrid context which merges multiple art forms in the creation of a new performative voice.

This writing is organized into four parts.
Chapter 1 contextualizes my research against preexisting bodies of interdisciplinary work for gestural percussionist, speaking percussionist, and work that combines deafness with concert music.

Chapter 2 analyzes themes of gestural iconicity, abstraction, corporeality, ownership, and translation present in my commissioned works.

Chapter 3 functions as an analysis of my works for signing performer. These pieces will be viewed through the lenses of the themes addressed in Chapter 2. While learning and performing these works, interpretative issues unique to each piece arose. These issues and my solutions will accompany this analysis.

Chapter 4 summarizes my claims, reflects on the success of my work and posits plans for my future work in this medium.
Chapter 1: Examples of Preexisting Interdisciplinary Works

“It has become clear that visible bodily action is often integrated with speech in such a way as to appear as if it is its partner and cannot be disregarded… ‘Gesture’ we suggest, then, is a label for actions that have the features of manifest deliberate expressiveness.”

-Adam Kendon, *Gesture – Visible Action as Utterance*

I view my work as a natural extension of the following interdisciplinary practices. Navigating these practices, and the artists associated with them, have helped me discover and develop my unique voice.

1.1: Gestural Performance

In recent years, several composers have integrated what Kendon describes as the “manifest deliberate expressiveness” of gesture into their musical work. These gestures are not a natural by-product of sound production, nor are they part of the formalized vocabulary of conductors. Rather, they are a separate, performative compositional element. Gesture may also be viewed as a corporeal relative to formalized sign languages. Its presence is an essential component of a complete message in ASL. As Steven Schick states in *The Percussionist’s Art: Same Bed, Different Dreams*, “In many ways percussion music has always been about the body. We see the relationship between percussion and the body in the traditional association between percussion and dance that can be found in almost every culture.” (165) When composed physical gesture is paired with percussion, the instrument’s intrinsic corporeality is augmented and recontextualized. This relationship manifests in works by the following composers.
Mark Applebaum

My introduction to the realm of gestural performance occurred through UCSD alumnus Mark Applebaum’s *Aphasia* (2010).² This solo work pairs audio playback, comprised exclusively of transformed vocal samples, with choreographed gestures. Applebaum describes these gestures as “…a kind of alien, pre-verbal, and rhythmicized sign language” created by the composer and executed by the performer.

I first performed the piece in 2012 at the Banff Centre for the Arts’ *Roots & Rhizomes Percussion Residency* and have since performed it several times. *Straightjacket* (2009), for percussion soloist with percussion quartet, precedes *Aphasia* and was commissioned by Steven Schick and the Banff Centre. Similar to *Aphasia*, Movement II – *Isopangram* pairs the soloist’s gestures with an accompanying quartet of percussive sound effects. *Gone, Dog. Gone!* (2012), for two percussionists, incorporates the same gestural vocabulary as the aforementioned pieces. This duo requires both performers to alternate between instrumental and gestural material.

Applebaum has integrated the ASL signs DONE and DEAD into his extensive vocabulary of gestures. Although these gestures may resemble signs, and are labeled as such, their semblance of a sign is used only as a means to describe the gesture. These borrowed gestures retain no ASL meaning.

At first glance, the barometer of success in these works lie solely in the performer’s ability to execute prescribed gestures in lockstep with sonic material. The allure of these pieces exists in the illusion that gestures either activate, or are activated by, their accompanying sounds.

² While *Aphasia* is not explicitly a percussion work – no percussion instruments are used – the percussion community has embraced and absorbed the piece into the standard repertoire.
(this is a stronger case with *Aphasia*, as the source of sound is not visible from the stage). While this illusion ultimately led me to learn *Aphasia* in 2012, I have since found value in examining the subtle, overlooked nuances of the performer’s face and posture that are present both in spoken and signed communication. This study left me in a dilemma; the composer explicitly states that

The face stares blankly at a fixed point in the middle of the audience and remains unchanging, expressionless. [...] a foreign ritual with the flattest of affects - automatic, robotic, preformed, steady, practiced, habitual, and silent. Histrionic or theatric comportments (beyond the admittedly stylized blankness) are unnecessary and unwelcome; the piece’s expressivity resides in the very straightforwardness of the gestures themselves. (Applebaum 2)

I believe that a successful performance of this work requires an exploration into Applebaum’s “stylized blankness.” Without this, the nine-minute piece quickly becomes dull and uninspiring; the limited expressivity of uninflected gestures does not sustain interest. For example, I extend my neck slightly when *smelling grapefruit* in measures 43 (Figure 1.1) and 46, and my eyes follow the motion of my dominant hand when *sealing ziplock* in measures 80 and 81.
In measure 151, I adjust my gaze slightly upward and past the audience on the *I can fly* gesture. (Figure 1.2) Without this refinement, the performer’s arms extend horizontally to a “t.” With it, the performer is *flying*. This inflected motion forms a stronger relationship with the accompanying audio and represents a sense of iconicity that traverses all languages. A sense of weightlessness accompanies the gesture as bass frequencies from the previous measure drop out, and a wispy, high-pitched gust of wind rushes past. This affect adds nuance and character to the gesture while still adhering to the composer’s intentions.

![Figure 1.2: Aphasia, measures 151-152.](image)

I implement a similar approach at the end of the piece. Beginning at measure 179, Applebaum introduces an explicit one-to-one unison between the spoken word “one” and a two-handed outward wrist rotation (labeled *done*, after its ASL equivalent). Until this point, the aural-visual
balance between performer and audio has remained equal. Numbers in various languages, spoken in an array of caricatured voices, gradually saturate the sonic space and intensify the irony of the expressionless performer.

Figure 1.3: *Aphasia*, measures 201-204

While the audio gradually erupts into an incomprehensible din, the performer’s repeated motions become progressively smaller, akin to a cross-fade between sound and gesture. (Figure 1.3) For the final minute of the piece, the performer is instructed to remain motionless. A lone, suspenseful voice slowly and dramatically counts to ninety-nine. Rather than sitting still, I stiffen my fingers, broaden my chest, widen my eyes and straighten my back. These stylistic additions are minuscule and nearly imperceptible, but I believe that they contribute to the intensity and affect of my performance.
Karlheinz Stockhausen

Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Inori* (1973-74) pairs gestural soloist(s), referred to as “dancer-mimes,” with orchestra into a seamless confluence of movement and music. The soloists’ gestures are derived from thirteen religious adoration poses from various faith practices. (Figure 1.4) Stockhausen assigns a number to each pose. Vertical extensions of poses (the performers’ x-axes) are represented by a change in pitch, and outward extensions of the poses (z-axes) are notated by changes in dynamics. As such, the solo part (here labeled *Beter* – “one who prays”) is notated in standard music notation. (Figure 1.5)

Figure 1.4: *Inori* adoration poses

Stockhausen states:

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3 The solo part may be executed by one or more performers, although it has most often been performed with two soloists.
The gestures of prayer are performed absolutely in synchronisation with the orchestra by a person raised on a podium in the middle of the orchestra. A gesture performed with clasped hands in the region of the heart, close to one’s chest, corresponds to the pitch middle G, pianissimo, and with the longest duration. When this gesture is made in a forward direction, away from the belly, this corresponds to a crescendo from pianissimo, to be graduated in 60 levels. When the hands are raised or lowered, this corresponds to an alteration of pitch, and the vertical alterations of the gestures of prayer become a sort of chromatic scale of pitches distributed over 3 octaves… The different gestures of prayer are used like timbres and tempi.

In *Inori*, Stockhausen has stretched the skin of one practice (dance/mime) onto the skeleton of another (music), such that a visual representation of sonic material coexists in performance. As such, an exact correlation between sonic pitch, volume, tempi and timbre, and gestural size and spatial location arises.

Figure 1.5: *Inori*, measures 173-176.
Georges Aperghis

Unlike the aforementioned composers who have paired abstract gesture with sonic material, Georges Aperghis manipulates percussion’s performative gestures in *Les Guetteurs de Sons* (1981). Percussive gesture is borrowed from the percussion idiom, magnified, and recirculated into the work. In doing so, the lines between performed gesture and incidental gesture are further blurred.

Much of the tension present in *Les Guetteurs de Sons* originates from the manipulation of the preparatory motion of a drum stroke. Each of the three seated percussionists is equipped with a pedal bass drum and a large floor tom. An inherent dichotomy exists between these two instruments; the floor tom is clearly visible, front-grounded, and is involved in all gestural actions, whereas the mechanics of the bass drum stroke, played by the foot, are visually concealed from the audience.

Figure 1.6: *Les Guetteurs de Sons*, measures 8-17.
Player 2’s raised right hand forcefully lowers in measure 8, as if striking the floor tom, but does not make contact with it. This motion is paired with a soft bass drum attack by player 3 (Figure 1.6). The incongruency between gesture and the origin of the accompanying sound is jarring. Meanwhile, player 1’s right hand slowly raises for two seconds and remains above the floor tom for another six seconds. While one might expect a grand gesture to result from an eight-second preparatory stroke, a quick, *piano* downbeat is played in measure 12.

**Thierry De Mey**

Belgian composer Thierry De Mey is best known for his percussion trio *Musique de Table* (1987), a work now ubiquitous among professional ensembles and university percussion studios. In this work, three performers execute choreographed hand motions on amplified tables. De Mey, like the composers above, developed his own method of notation by establishing a nomenclature and assigning unique noteheads for each gesture. Fifteen years after *Musique de Table*, De Mey composed *Silence Must Be!* (2002) for solo conductor with live or prerecorded percussion. Barring the addition of conducting patterns in De Mey’s solo, many of the gestures from this solo can be traced back to *Musique de Table*.

An excerpt of De Mey’s nomenclature can be found below. (Figure 1.7) Sequences of gestures are first executed in silence, then repeated with accompanying audio. As in Applebaum’s works, sections with audio provide the illusion that gestures either activate, or are activated by, their accompanying sounds. In Figure 1.8, the right hand (notated on the upper staff) conducts a steady five-beat pattern while the left hand (notated on the lower staff) executes gestural material.
<table>
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<td>1.7</td>
<td><strong>LE REVER</strong> : la paume vers le haut, doigts joints et tendus vers l'avant.</td>
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<td><strong>LE TRANCHANT</strong> : la main est perpendiculaire au sol, à angle droit avec le bord de la scène, les doigts vers l'avant, le pouce en haut, doigts joints et tendus vers l'avant.</td>
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<td><strong>LE POING</strong> : le poinct est fermé, vertical, pouces en haut.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>LES POINTEES</strong> : mains tendues vers le haut ou le bas (ce signe intervient dans plusieurs figures caractéristiques).</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="notation" /></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>LA PIERRE</strong> : le poinct est fermé, horizontal pouces vers l'intérieur.</td>
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**Figure 1.7: Silence Must Be!, performance nomenclature (excerpt).**

**Figure 1.8: Silence Must Be!, Séquence A, measures 10-12.**
1.2: Works for Speaking Percussionist

In spite of the vast differences in grammatical structure and syntax, communication in ASL serves the same primary function as communication in spoken English. Parallels, then, between the role of text in works for speaking percussionist and signing percussionist should be evident and straightforward.

The correlation between percussion and speech has been explored at length by percussionist Bonnie Whiting. Due to the shared percussive sound worlds of percussion and speech, Whiting posits an inherent connection in *The Speaking Percussionist as Storyteller*. “…percussion instruments are more intimately tied to rhythm than pitch, and thus can be very good at imitating patterns of speech.” (92) Here, Whiting describes a sonic parallel much like the visual parallels between percussion and gesture.

In a language with no codified written form, the communal art of ASL storytelling has been a vital part of the preservation of Deaf culture. Due to the inescapable corporeality of the language, ASL communication is often viewed as a performative act. Cynthia Lohr Peters states, “An ASL storyteller, in telling a story to a group of viewers, does not just recite but performs to keep the interest and attention of the viewers, enacting one or more characters in a kind of semi-play, semi-mime, all the while conveying mannerisms, appearances, attitudes, and emotions.” (130) Whiting makes a similar claim when comparing the roles of the speaking percussionist: “Storytellers are performers who embellish….” (86)

Georges Aperghis’s *Le Corps à Corps* (1978) (Figure 1.9) and Vinko Globokar’s *Toucher* (1973) (Figure 1.10) use this rhythmic relationship as foregrounded material. Globokar states, “By taking a model outside the musical world, in this case spoken language, and trying

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4 Bonnie Whiting authored her DMA dissertation under the name Bonnie Whiting-Smith.
to “transplant” its organizational principles so as to create a musical “para-language” applied to percussion, our concept of percussion is enriched and radically changed.” (78) In 

*Le Corps à Corps*, the “para-language” is created through standard and experimental stroke techniques on the *zarb*, a Persian goblet-shaped drum. The para-language in *Toucher* is created on an undefined set of percussion instruments, chosen by the performer, to mimic phonemes present in the accompanying spoken text. In these examples, the relationship between percussive and vocal languages is augmentative and mutually reinforcing.

Figure 1.9: *Le Corps à Corps*, page 8, system 1.

Figure 1.10: *Toucher*, rehearsal B.
Aperghis’s *Retrouvailles* (2013) explores a similar musical para-language. Here, the organizational principles of spoken language are transplanted onto a collection of nonsense French syllables and fragmented words. When coupled with inflection and gesticulation, Aperghis’s syllables share a stunning resemblance to formalized language. In preparation for a performance of *Retrouvailles* in February 2018, vocalist Jonathan Nussman and I created a series of scenarios and dialogues to embody while performing the work. This work guided our interpretation and execution of both text and action. By doing so, we strove to elicit a sense of familiarity that may not be tangible in the accompanying nonsense text.

Figure 1.11: *Retrouvailles*, Movement II, measures 31-33.

Still other composers prioritize narrative threads over rhythm in works for speaking percussionist. Like the medieval bard, performers of these narrative works weave poetry and music into a singular performance. Frederic Rzewski’s *To the Earth* (1985) (Figure 1.12) pairs four pitched clay flower pots with a recitation of a Homeric hymn that is “spoken more or less together with the music.” (Rzewski 1) The pairing of syllables to rhythm is even less precise in *The Fall of the Empire* (2007) (Figure 1.13) than in his previous work. These narrative and rhythmic relationships, present in works for speaking percussionist, are also found in my works for signing performer-percussionist.
1.3: Musical Works Incorporating Sign Language

Helmut Oehring

To my knowledge, Helmut Oehring and Larry Polansky are the only hearing composers who have previously integrated sign language as a critical component of their musical works. Oehring, a child of deaf parents, includes several deaf performers both as signers⁵ and vocalists in his 2004/05 opera Unsichtbar Land. He states, “I compose the sounds of my childhood… the grunts, the uncontrolled utterances produced from deaf vocal cords. I like that… but is it enough

---

⁵ Oehring’s works use Deutsche Gebärdensprache (DGS, German Sign Language).
Deaf vocalizations in *Unsichtbar Land* are akin to what Dr. Michael Davidson describes as a “deaf performative – a form of speech that enacts or performs rather than describes…for the Deaf signer, speech is the sign of an alienating process….” (80) Oehring’s fetishization of the “grunts” and “uncontrolled utterances” of the deaf voice is tasteless and troubling. Throughout history, the greater hearing community has attempted to “fix” deaf people and eradicate deafness through eugenics, cochlear implants, and speech therapy. Oralism is often seen as a form of colonialism, an attempt to “normalize” deaf people and assist in their assimilation into hearing society.

John Hull, reflecting on the paradigm of accessibility in his autobiographical work *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*, poses the question “Since your face is not available to me, why should my face be available to you?” (48-49) In Hull’s example, one’s physical presence is made available passively in a visual medium. However, a deaf comparison encompasses a sonic medium. This exchange of information is active; a blind person must only exist to be seen, whereas a deaf person must create sound in order to be heard. If applying this sentiment to Oehring’s work, the deaf performer actively chooses to participate in revealing the disparity between performer and audience. At the request of a hearing composer, this action is exploitative.

Deaf performer Christina Schönfeld boasts a twenty-four-year working relationship with Oehring. She admits that, “…by voicing, Deaf Germans feel like they’re betraying their community, like they’re losing their identity. I’ve justified it by telling myself that this is the stage, not the real world.” (Goldlücke) Schönfeld’s justification is concerning. Her statement
assumes that an audience can also differentiate between the stage and the real world. Consider the hearing concertgoer, having no prior interactions with a deaf person, at a performance of *Unsichtbar Land*. Might this performance normalize auditory subjugation at the expense of the Deaf community?

**Larry Polansky**

Whereas Oehring’s fascination lies in vocal sounds produced by deaf performers, Larry Polansky’s compositional interests are firmly rooted in ASL poetics and cultural tradition. Polansky received funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2008 to study American Sign Language poetry and performance at Gallaudet University, Northeastern University and the Sign Language Center in New York City. Three years later, Polansky invited Patrick Graybill, Peter Cook, Christine Sun Kim and several others to Dartmouth College as guest lecturers for a course titled “American Sign Language Poetry and Performance in Translation.” In 2014, he curated a four-day festival of ASL performances at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Polansky has made several creative contributions to the repertoire for signing musician. 

6 The term “loan sign” now refers to signs that have been borrowed from other sign languages. This would more accurately be called a “lexicalized fingerspelling” sign round. (Loan)
Perception (2010) is Polansky’s second round for ASL signers. Although the performers are instructed to produce a translation of the English text into ASL, widely different rhythmized translations will undoubtedly arise. Maintaining rhythmic integrity and part interdependence found in the English-based score poses a challenge in translation. A glossed version of the text, provided by the composer, would be preferred in this setting.

To my knowledge, neither of these rounds have been performed.
"For piano left hand" (Figure 1.16) is the fourteenth movement of *B’midbar* (2008), a seventeen-movement work for solo piano. As suggested by the title, the piano material is performed exclusively with the left hand; the ASL text is almost exclusively signed with the right hand. This work evokes strong parallels to Paul Wittgenstein, a concert pianist who lost his right arm during World War I. Polansky instructs the performer to
Chose [sic] someone who has died in war. Learn to sign (in ASL or the sign of your choice) their name, age, date of birth, place of birth, date of death, as well as #Name, #Age, #Born, #Where, #Died [sic]. The latter signs can be done with two hands if appropriate (#Name, #Born, #Died in ASL). The other signing should be done with the R.H. while the piano part is played with the L.H. The pianist should sign himself, to the best of his ability, but he is encouraged to enlist the aid of a teacher in learning these few signs [sic]. Please add, in sign, any other information you want, during the fermatas between lines. (B’midbar 44)

I reviewed video documentation of this work, recommended by the composer, from a 2012 performance at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Although the pianist, a non-signer, should be credited for preparing the text with a native signer, facial expression and eye contact with his audience was missing from the performance. The emotional candor of this eulogistic text can easily be overlooked by a non-fluent signer who, inexperienced in non-manual signals, will likely prioritize piano material over signed material. In such performances, this work may risk becoming an exercise in dexterity and hand independence.

Figure 1.16. “for piano left hand,”

\[\text{Figure 1.16. “for piano left hand,”}^{8}\text{ from B’midbar, measures 7-10.}\]

\[^{8}\text{In glossed form, the signs listed at the beginning of each system should be in all caps. The number signs and brackets should be omitted.}\]
Paradox (2013) combines Patrick Graybill’s evocative ASL poem of the same title (here performed by Monique Holt) with incidental, quasi-improvisational material for two mallet percussionists, clarinet and guitar. Graybill’s poem uses contrasting figures to foreground his own longing, absence and barriers of communication with his hearing father. Polansky further extends this contrast by pairing a Deaf performer with hearing musicians. In the interest of underscoring the poem’s historical lineage, Polansky juxtaposes a pixelated projection of Patrick Graybill’s performance behind Holt’s live performance. (Figure 1.17)

Figure 1.17: Paradox performance photo.

1.4: Percussion Signing

Summer Loeffler describes rhythm as “a tool people use to maintain their culture.” (445) First documented on video in the 1930s, “percussion signing” may be considered the American Deaf community’s native music. This style of rhythmic signing, at times accompanied by a drummer, is performed as a group activity in social settings. (Bahan 35) The traditional signing rhythm is seen in Figure 1.18.
While Gallaudet University’s “Bison Song” is regularly chanted at sporting events, a standardized index of other chants does not exist. Instead, a unique set of signs are chosen to highlight the theme of each event.

Figure 1.18: Traditional percussion signing rhythm.
Chapter 2: Thematic trends in my commissioned works

“…the performer must understand that the performance qualities are literary and the literary qualities are performative…. the body of the poet cannot be ignored or taken for granted in ASL poetry because the body is bound up with the self of the text, even if that self is distinct from the poet’s self.”

Heidi M. Rose, “The Poet in the Poem in the Performance”

2.1: Gestural Iconicity

I attended the premiere of LJ White’s Community Acoustics, a Brenda and Steven Schick Commission, performed by the La Jolla Symphony in February 2019. In the final minutes of the piece, Schick turned away from the orchestra and, with outstretched arms, signaled a glorious event: several hundred members of the audience, each equipped with a pair of river stones, began tapping them together, erupting into the sonic equivalent of a stone rainstorm. For about one minute, Schick extended, raised, and lowered his arms to different sections of the audience. These newly minted musicians, comprised primarily of musically untrained members of the UCSD campus community, responded by increasing the intensity, frequency and volume of their stone taps.

Schick slowly retracted his arms and began wiggling his fingers and twitching his wrists – a motion evocative of the ASL sign for “shimmer.” The resultant sound changed. What began as an innocent game of “Simon Says” between conductor and audience became a thoughtful and meditative practice. The sonic material devolved into a natural and unpredictable sound world. None of this was expressly taught prior to the performance, nor was it arduously rehearsed. Virtually none of the audience musicians expected to participate in the performance before arriving. Yet, Schick’s gestures spoke volumes to the sonic output of his audience.
Gesture is an equalizer, a universalizing force across all cultures and languages. When cognates among etymologically related languages are unavailable, people instinctively resort to gesture for basic communication. Ursula Bellugi and Edward Klima’s seminal work *The Signs of Language* shines light onto the question of gestural relatability presented in my writing:

> When hearing-speaking people communicate, they too use gestures in varying degrees, but the gestures are clearly distinguishable from words. In signing, the various kinds of gesturing are in the same channel of communication as the regular lexical items. Since nonconventionalized gesturing is extensive and varied in deaf communication, and since it occurs in the same linguistic context as signing, a central question for the analysis of ASL is how to distinguish in the signing stream those gestures that constitute the lexical signs of ASL. (15)

Later, they add:

> …characteristics of the form of an ASL sign often are related (or relatable) to characteristics of its referent. (26)

Bellugi and Klima have observed that, while gesture serves different functions in both spoken and signed communication, it is present and a common denominator between both hearing-speaking people and ASL signers. The relationship between a sign and its referent can be a palpable point of entry for the non-signer into my work.

Bonnie Whiting discusses the role of physical gesture in spoken storytelling:

> In my opinion, physical and textual storytelling are inseparable. We find this in our own daily lives when we illustrate with our hands as well as our words a story or point in an argument, or when we read into the body language of a friend. Specifically, in the case of these more abstract pieces of music, the physicality and repetition of gesture can become the most graspable part of the story. Themes are articulated and re-articulated and a visual language is created that ends up supporting or complementing the actual text or vocalized utterance of the work. (19)
Gestural repetition and thematic articulation/re-articulation serve as primary compositional elements in my practice. Applebaum describes his unique gestural nomenclature for *Aphasia*, “…for purposes of notation the gestures are named by corresponding “real world” physical actions. For example, a closed fist held with knuckles facing up and positioned approximately one foot in front of the navel is named **Rock** (as in the game *rock, paper, scissors*) for ease of communication.” (2) Rather than using formalized signs, Applebaum borrows common, iconic gestures as compositional material. When reflecting on the success of Applebaum’s gestural oeuvre, the palpable relatability of these gestures must not be overlooked.

Percussion performance is intimately tied to gesture, and thus can naturally imitate everyday movements. The mechanics required to produce percussive sound are often clear and unmistakable. Assuming non-percussionists are familiar with cleaning a window or waxing a car by hand, they are well-equipped to perform Sarah Hennies’ *Second Skin with Lungs* or the percussion part to Hans Abrahamsen’s *Schnee*. Similarly, the hammer part in Gustav Mahler’s *Symphony No. 6* can be executed by anyone who is capable of swinging a hammer. By contrast, sound production on a wind instrument requires the development of embouchure and breath support that must be practiced and refined. The ability to create a proper tone on these instruments is significantly less intuitive.

### 2.2: Abstraction, Corporeality & The Role of the Performer

As Rose alludes in the above epigraph, a performance of ASL poetry is vastly different from a reading of written poetry. Whereas poets detach themselves from their written work after it has been printed and distributed (the same often applies to composers and their scores), a
work involving ASL cannot exist without physical representation. This relationship can also be found, to an extent, in live performance and video documentation of sonic work, but is defrayed and disembodied through audio recording. Regarding the embodiment of percussion, Schick writes, “The way a percussionist looks and moves on stage is among the most important and highly personal aspects of percussion playing. For percussionists the goals of individuality, complexity and coherence are as important in the world of gesture as they are in the sonic and interpretive aspects of performance.” (141) Smith further states, “Voice as sound is so specific; it defines an individual.” (102) These concerns are unavoidably present in the work of the ASL performer. Signing as performance is as equally specific and revealing. Even in a performance of Tiange Zhou’s *Me/Monologue*, in which my torso and face are hidden behind a metal sheet, my exposed arms and shoes reveal personal information.

A clear example of the direct relationship between sonic material and gesture can be found in the Japanese *taiko* drumming tradition. The physicality of a *taiko* drum stroke is often as large and as impactful as the sound of the drum itself. Yet, in Aperghis’ *Les Guetteurs de Sons*, gesture and sonic material may be mutually exclusive. Sign production and percussion sound production share a similar relationship. Exploring this relationship in performance offers rich creative potential. Tiange Zhou’s *Me/Monologue* highlights this relationship by navigating the manner in which signed material interacts with the metal sheet. Signs themselves become percussive attacks. The sign for “beautiful,” when executed slowly and gently, results in a fragile scraping sound on the metal sheet. In contrast, the sign for “me” is sharply and forcefully produced and produces an equivalent sound from the instrument.
2.3: Ownership

As a hearing practitioner of American Sign Language (ASL) with no familial connection to sign language or culture, I admit that I am more removed from the Deaf experience than other ASL artists. I consider myself an active participant in the Deaf community, but I do not identify as Deaf and have no tangible roots in the community. My involvement stems from my educational experience with the language. I minored in American Sign Language as an undergraduate student at the University of Rochester and continued my studies several years later as a student in the ASL/English Interpreter Training Program at Palomar College.

While the violinist is identified by a singular instrument, the classically-trained western percussionist assumes a pluralistic identity. The percussionist’s arsenal of instruments has been borrowed and assimilated from the battlefield, from religious ceremonies and from cultures of which they have little or no personal connection. My dedication and extensive study of American Sign Language and percussion offer me the opportunity to respectfully integrate these practices into my work.

Until now, my commissioned pieces for ASL performer have not involved creative input from the Deaf community. With the exception of Larry Polansky, who has strong affiliations with many revered ASL poets, each piece has been conceived by a hearing, non-signing composer with no ties to the Deaf community. Yet, these works were not conceived in a vacuum. A composer who wishes to create a successful work must have a certain fluency in ASL and Deaf culture. This creates a new set of paradigms in the commissioning process. Sharing aspects of Deaf culture with my music colleagues has been an unexpected and

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9 Virtually every ASL artist identifies as Deaf, hard of hearing, or is a child of deaf adults (coda). It is rare for ASL artists to perform the work of others; most do not rely on composers or other writers for material.
rewarding by-product of my commissioning project. I have brought hearing composers to Deaf performances and social events in an effort to familiarize them with Deaf culture, the people and the language. I work closely with them, either in person or through Skype, throughout the compositional process. Yet, due to the learning curve of learning a new language, many of these pieces were conceived using standard English as *lingua franca*. In such cases, I am left with the demanding task of rendering an appropriate interpretation in American Sign Language. While each piece’s compositional concepts were realized wholly by the composer, several of these commissioned works rely heavily on my interpretation. I take credit for my performances, but do not consider myself a co-composer.

Performers of works by other composers are communicators who aren’t fully in control of their message. I occasionally find myself, at the request of a composer or conductor, using a mallet on an instrument that I know will produce an inferior sound. In such cases, I either respect their request at the expense of my artistic integrity, or discreetly resort to other options. When commissioning hearing composers to produce ASL works, a lack of experience in the culture and language may result in the creation of insensitive, potentially offensive or logistically unrealistic material. I have addressed this issue separately in two unsuccessful commissioning experiences.

Edo Frenkel’s *There is nothing (but they) outside* (2013) is scored for an array of small percussion instruments, radio, and potted plant. While playing these instruments, the performer is asked to sign, recite text and execute obscene gestures. I soon realized that the physical logistics required to both sign and perform on instruments were impossible to execute. The composer was also unaware that ASL is not a direct translation of English. In Figure 2.1, the sentence “This I could not do.” on the bottom staff cannot be executed with five discrete signs.
I felt as if the obscene gestures undermined the integrity of the accompanying ASL material. The composer was unwilling to address these concerns and collaborate on a new version of the work.

Figure 2.1: There is nothing (but they) outside, page 3, system 1.

Elisabet Curbelo’s solo *The Little Mute Boy* (2018) was conceived as part of *Ululations and Gurgles of the Invisible*, a concert-length work involving dancers, musicians and video projection. The solo references Federico García Lorca’s poem *El Niño Mudo* and is scored for vibraphone, two timpani, bubble wrap, and four distinct pairs of sounds produced in two large bowls of water. *Betrothal* (2018), for signing vocalist and signing pianist, also accompanied this work in performance.
Curbelo did not express interest in the collaborative process required to develop an understanding of the culture. While “mute” may have once been an accepted term, this word has long since been labeled as a pejorative by the Deaf community. These works do not attempt to engage with Deaf culture. Rather than taking advantage of the expressive properties of the language, signs here are commodified and serve as an incidental component of the composer’s compositional template. The signed material in these works is largely unintelligible and inaccessible. I received the solo shortly before the November 2018 performance without enough time to address these concerns. The issues present in the works of Frenkel and Curbelo may have been avoided with better communication throughout the collaborative process.
2.4: The Role of Comprehension in Text-Based Works

Information access is often taken for granted by the hearing community. In a society predicated on speech communication, people who are deaf or hard of hearing are relegated to receiving secondhand information through interpreters, translators and captioning services. Securing these services is a burden most hearing people never experience.

My repertoire navigates information access and addresses accessibility barriers. Ultimately, this repertoire reflects the composers’ desires for accessibility. Repertoire that reinforces hearing privilege at the expense of the Deaf community is undesired and unwelcome. For example, the spoken and signed material in Carolyn Chen’s Threads are represented equally, yet a significant amount of signed content is absent in the spoken material of Larry Polansky’s VEDITZ. The accessibility paradigm is reversed when signed material is prioritized over spoken material. In such performances, a signing audience member may develop a deeper appreciation of the work. In other works, a lack of sign comprehension may be insignificant for
its success. The meaning of many of the signs in Tiange Zhou’s *Me/Monologue* is secondary to the character invoked by their production. A curious level of comprehension exists in my adaptation of *Erlkönig*. My audiences, comprised primarily of classically-trained musicians, are intimately familiar with the original vocal piece. Without access to the text, non-signers must piece their recollection of the poem with my visual performance.
Chapter Three: Analyses of Commissioned Works

“If our inventive domains are too constricted by this reasoning [the argument against *voice appropriation* of minority cultures by mainstream artists], are we thereby doomed to creative projects that cannot extend beyond the realm of autobiography?”

- Bruce H. Ziff & Pratima V. Rao, *Borrowed Power*

“I certainly do not believe the limited proposition that only a black can write about blacks, a Muslim about Muslims, and so forth.”

- Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*

**Carolyn Chen: Threads**

Carolyn Chen’s *Threads* is replete with layers of ownership and memory. The piece is predicated on a patchwork of related texts: *Shí Xiōngdì*, a Chinese folk legend from the Ming Dynasty, *The Five Chinese Brothers*, Claire Huchet Bishop’s 1938 English reframing of the aforementioned folk legend, and the composer’s childhood recollection of the folk legend. Chen “retold the story, starting from memory, then filling in from other angles of possibility or interpretation, sometimes contradicting, as different points of view will tend to do.”

Chen wrote *Threads* for me in December 2012 while I was a Master’s student at Stony Brook University. I gave the premiere performance in May 2013 at Stony Brook University on a solo recital at the Charles B. Wang Center Chapel. After several revisions, I performed the piece in the Conrad Prebys Music Center Experimental Theater on two occasions: on a Graduate Forum concert in November 2014, and as part of the California Electronic Music Exchange Concerts (CEMEC) in April 2018.

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10 Chen identifies as Taiwanese American.
Threads is scored for solo ASL interpreter with audio playback. Hanging above the corners of the audience are four large windchimes of differing materials: paper, leaves, wood/bamboo, and glass. These chimes are connected to long, taut strings that are secured to the floor behind me. In addition, three triangles hang from the ceiling above my head. At certain points throughout the piece, I wrap my arms through one or more windchime strings. In doing so, I activate the chimes while signing – a sonification of a traditionally silent language. The triangles are played sparingly, with the fingernail, to accentuate certain words and punctuation.

Figure 3.1: Photo of Threads in CPMC Experimental Theater, April 2018.
The premiere performance of Threads incorporated smaller windchimes. The original chimes, each about two feet tall, were placed in the four corners of the performance space and suspended on the ends of cymbal stands, as seen in Figure 3.2.

Carolyn originally intended for the windchime strings to be connected to my fingers. In response, I attached metal keychain rings at the ends of the strings that I looped on and off of a multi-pronged cowbell rack, as seen in Figure 3.3. We quickly abandoned the finger loops after the first performance; not only were the loops physically confining, but finger movement produced an underwhelming amount of windchime activity. The use of larger chimes, paired
with larger activating motions (i.e. with the arms) elevated the wind chime material from an incidental component to a sonic counterpoint against the signed material.

Figure 3.3: 2013 *Threads* rehearsal photo.

While not always essential to the success of a performance, score memorization is an elemental component of the percussionist’s practice. Due to the embodied nature of sign and the necessity for unimpeded communication between audience and performer, it is important to me that these works are memorized. Time constraints prohibited me from performing the premiere of *Threads* from memory. I instead used a large screen, placed on the floor, as a prompt from which I read my glossed version of the text. This text also included cues for the attachment and detachment of windchime strings. Because of my visual proximity to the screen, I chose to perform the piece seated. Since the 2013 premiere, I have memorized the text but have not memorized the windchime material. Instead, I rely on the text in real time to instruct my instrument choices. This decision, rather than memorizing the exact order of windchimes in the score, closely aligns with Chen’s compositional aesthetic.
The cathedral-height ceilings and lack of production support in the Wang Center prevented me from suspending triangles. Instead, a woodblock, played with the knuckles, was substituted to serve a similar function.

*Threads*’ accompanying audio file is comprised of three elements. Chen’s recitation of the written text is foregrounded. Interludes of ambient field recordings of water, wind, birdsong and other natural sounds bridge sections and contextualize the environmentally-based text. Processed triangle tones materialize and build up at several climatic sections, often accompanying acoustic triangle events. The original playback recording included no ambient sounds or triangle tones and was simply a reading of the text by the composer.

Lighting for the two UCSD performances, realized with the help of Jessica Flores and Daniel Ross, included a low, focused spot on the performer and an array of tree branch-shaped gobos in green and auburn hues projected onto the stage. Theatrical lighting was not available for the premiere performance.

A programmatic correlation exists between the text material and the windchimes implemented in each section; glass windchimes often accompanied text pertaining to church bells, wooden windchimes are often paired with water, and leaf chimes are often paired with wind and leaf-based text.

We soon realized while rehearsing *Threads* at UCSD that the triangles spun and struck each other upon activation. This didn’t bother Carolyn, as the lack of control present in the triangles paired well with my lack of control of the windchimes.
My first challenge was to render a comprehensible interpretation of the English text. While Chen describes the text as “…noun-heavy and synonym-light, using very basic vocabulary and simple sentence structure,” (1) the translation process was anything but basic and simple. I received the score two years after my last ASL class at the University of Rochester and had not signed since then. I was a novice signer and was nowhere near fluent. The text is particularly awkward to interpret; the English phrases are intentionally vague and full of extended metaphors. Due to the iconographic nature of the language,\textsuperscript{11} it is often difficult to be

\textsuperscript{11} The occasional clumsiness of iconographs, for example, is exemplified in the generic sign for HUNT, produced with two hands held in front of the chest in modified “L” or “gun” handshapes. This sign doesn’t visually represent other forms of hunting (i.e. trapping, bowhunting, slingshot, etc.).
ambiguous when signing. I have met with several professional interpreters in an effort to strategize my performance, and all of them have been left confused and unsatisfied with any conclusions or solutions we’ve reached. The conundrum is compounded by the fact that English to ASL interpretation rarely, if at all, exists in a one-to-one relationship. For example, a source text given to five different ASL interpreters will render five different interpretations. A common refrain when asking others for advice was “…but what exactly does that phrase mean?” The standard process for creative interpreting is to fully grasp the meaning of the message, acknowledge the text’s artistic or poetic qualities, and render an interpretation in a similar style or character. For example, if a source text contains rhyme or alliteration, an ASL interpreter may choose to instead highlight a particular recurring handshape in their interpretation. But if I can’t fully grasp the source text’s message, or if the text has multiple meanings, how can I render a satisfactory interpretation?

The text in Section 2 of Figure 3.5 pertains to shaking various objects. In English, the word shake can be used to satisfy all of these situations, but different stylized mimetic signs appropriate for each kind of shake must be used in an effective ASL interpretation. I interpret the phrase in section 2 “You listen, carefully, to the sound of the person being shaken, try to hear-” as follows: While the two previously described shakes correspond to handshakes and shoulder shakes, I morph from a one-handed /\B/ instrumental classifier shoulder shake into picking up the shaken person with a two-handed /C/ instrumental classifier. I then shake the body, diagonally positioned in front of me, lean my ear down toward it, and show a strained facial expression. I doubt that this shake is what Chen had in mind when writing this passage, but I feel that this action clearly relates to the shaken items in the preceding paragraph. By
creatively manipulating these classifiers and directly embodying the voice on tape, my performance strives to resonate with Ben Bahan’s claim that “The storyteller IS the story.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hands</th>
<th>Chimes on</th>
<th>Voice on tape</th>
<th>Tape sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(hands empty)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>You told me a story once, about a bunch of brothers. They had superpowers. They fought crime. Or committed a crime. I don't remember.</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td></td>
<td>You told me a story. You held the sea in your mouth, so I could look – for fish – and treasure. When you couldn't hold it any longer, you signaled, and I didn't hear.</td>
<td>underwater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td></td>
<td>You signaled, but I didn't hear. I couldn't see.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td></td>
<td>Somehow you were a very successful fisherman.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(start after)</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>There are things you shake. You shake apple trees to ask for fruit. Climbing trees, to see how much they can hold. Presents, bags of treasure, boxes of cereal, jars of coins – you shake to know what is inside, how much is left, how much is there to go still.</td>
<td>wind</td>
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<tr>
<td>L</td>
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<td>PL</td>
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<td>You shake the hands of people you don't know, the shoulders of people you thought you knew, maybe also to find out what is inside them. You listen, carefully, to the sound of the person being shaken, try to hear –</td>
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<td>PL</td>
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<td>PL</td>
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<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td></td>
<td>what is inside – how much is left – how much can they hold?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.5: Threads, Sections 1 and 2.

There is rarely a clear one-to-one correlation between sentences and phrases in English and ASL. If I choose to interpret a passage in a particular way, I’m effectively not interpreting it another way. This is not unlike the myriad of nuanced word choices available in spoken languages. My 2013 performance interpretation of Threads was vastly different than my current version. Not only was I restricted by my reliance on the score, I originally produced a literal, word-for-word interpretation of the text that prioritized English word order over conceptual meaning. My current interpretation includes repetition of signed phrases and a clearer, more
creative depiction of abstract ideas that align with Chen’s compositional aims: “…approaching English sentences as music, isolating the basic elements and permuting, inverting, repeating, varying them. In applying traditional compositional techniques to the sound of the lines – phrase rhythm, rhyme, and the little sounds and feelings in words – the process was exactly that of composing music.”

I’ve shown my performance video to several Deaf colleagues, with one suggested that I incorporate lights directed at the windchimes that would turn on when activated. This would strengthen the visual connection between signed and sonic material. Another Deaf colleague attended my 2018 performance and recognized common themes and understood my signing, but didn’t understand the meaning behind it. I was overjoyed; that is exactly how I first understood the piece in 2012. I have lived with the piece now for almost seven years and am still uncovering new layers of meaning that inform my performance.

While the main material of Threads – Chen’s recitation of a folk story and my signed interpretation – can be explicitly perceived, my physical struggle when signing with attached wind chimes serves as a cleverly interwoven metanarrative that roughly parallels the narrative arch of the story. The physical manifestation of struggle present in this work, paired with the vulnerability of an empty stage, is rather humbling. After all, percussionists often rely on the architectural framework of their instruments to dictate the character of their movement. As Schick states in The Percussionist’s Art, “The instruments serve as a frame, a stage for the disposition of dramatic action…. The potency of gesture therefore derives from its readability, in other words from the relationship between the size and nature of movements and a context outlined by the architecture of instruments.” (141-143) On a stage void of instruments, Chen’s
performance environment acutely frames each movement, each eye motion, with as much weight as any musical event.

**Yiheng Yvonne Wu: Your Hat**

Yiheng Yvonne Wu’s *Your Hat* addresses themes of ownership, immigration and language. The eighteen-minute work, scored for solo ASL signer and offstage voicing interpreter, alternates between segments of a fictional story (voiced by the interpreter) and a series of three unvoiced poems.

Yvonne and I workshopped ideas over Skype video sessions for a year before premiering the piece in October, 2018 with interpreter Rachel Schlafer-Parton at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville. I performed the piece again in January, 2019 at UCSD with interpreter Billieanne McLellan and in February, 2019, with voiceover audio playback, as part of the Oh My Ears Music Festival in Phoenix, Arizona.

Like *Threads*, sections of *Your Hat* were written completely in English and translated into ASL by me. Yet unlike Chen’s work, Wu interspersed short poetic interludes (which she unofficially refers to as “arias”) throughout her narrative which serve to reinforce and recontextualize many key words and overarching themes. The first poem is notated in standard music notation (see figure 3.6), while the other two are notated in glossed form with accompanying expressive markings.
In an effort to increase the audience’s connections between sight and word (there were no signers in attendance at the premiere), Yvonne added a short, instructional poem to the piece two days before the premiere – it does not formally exist in the current version of the score. Functioning much like the introduction of Vinko Globokar’s *Toucher*, Wu isolates and decontextualizes commonly recurring signs – WORD, BORROW, BOAT, CONTINUE, etc. and pairs them with their spoken counterpart. To strengthen this connection further, Wu asked Rachel and me to emphasize these recurring words when they appear in the narrative by either

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12 Signs written in English are known as “glosses” and are written in all caps.
slowing down or giving a slight pause after each of the words. By doing so, Wu hopes to allow the non-signer to recognize and understand these signs as they occur in the unvoiced poems.

The drum, positioned slightly downstage and to my left, serves a nontraditional role in the piece. The audience member is well aware of what a drum sounds or feels like when struck. Its presence and potential for sound remains, but it is never struck. The drum may serve as a reminder of what is missing in performance. Up until the last minute of the final poem of the piece, the drum has not been acknowledged, nor have any instruments been played. I produce the sign for LAND, a broad, round sweeping motion with an outstretched hand parallel to the floor, several times over the head of the drum. Wu had mentioned to me that “The potential – the almost touching – is, I hope, a “loud,” expressive silence.” In that instant, the drum is no longer a drum. The drum becomes the new land, the unnamed, fictional microcosm in which the previous seventeen minutes of the piece were framed. The production of the sign embodies a sensual, intimate exploration of the land. This raises several questions: has this “drum+LAND” been somehow autobiographical? Does this land represent the navigation of my identity both as a hearing percussionist (drum) and as a liaison to the Deaf community (LAND)? Or could this “drum+LAND” be a physical representation of the tympanic membrane – a representation of the sonic realm of the hearing world – and the deaf person’s journey through it?

One of the most heartfelt responses to this piece came from a Deaf colleague after watching the video of my Tennessee performance. She admitted that the piece brought her to tears; as a child, she came to the US as an immigrant from Mexico and could relate to the character’s struggle as both an immigrant and as a deaf person in a hearing family.
Tiange Zhou: *Me/Monologue*

Zhou composed *Me/Monologue* for solo ASL performer with thunder sheet in 2018. I gave the premiere on my final DMA recital in the Conrad Prebys Experimental Theater in February 2018 and performed again in April 2018 as part of UCSD’s “SpringFest” music festival.

A long, thin thunder sheet fully covers the performer’s head, torso and legs. The performer is positioned behind the thunder sheet for the duration of the performance and signs in front of and to the side of the sheet. The piece relies on a tightly woven interplay between the performer’s vocalizations (comprised of explosive, voiced syllables), signs, and three distinct types of thunder sheet attacks (with fingertips, with thimbles, and with knuckles). A majority of the signs implemented in the piece interact with the body. With the thunder sheet positioned in front of the body, the signs interact with it and produce sound. Like *Threads*, the signed material produces sonic material.

A question arose: If the body is removed from the sign (in this case, hidden by the thunder sheet), does any semblance of meaning remain? Since the sign for “treasure” is produced at the chin, for example, does the absence of a chin render the sign meaningless? Does the audience member assume or imagine the presence of a body instead? Similarly, how is the lack of facial expression in *Me/Monologue* perceived in relation to their signs? Facial expression is a critical component of ASL and can often differentiate two signs that are manually produced the same. Can comprehension and affect still be tangible without the face and body?

I believe that these signs, removed from the context of the body, are more easily perceived as gestures rather than signs. The presence of motivic repetition, common to both
traditional music and ASL poetry, is palpable and can be tracked here both sonically and visually.

Figure 3.7: Me/Monologue, page 3, system 2.

Schick parses this idea in relation to Vinko Globokar’s body percussion work ?Corporel: “…the forces of theater with their roots in quotidian gestures are universalizing. (We can all recognize ourselves in the everyday gestures of snapping, rubbing, and scratching.) However, music as the refinement of abstraction and reflection is individualizing.” In Zhou’s case, the abstraction of refined gestures becomes the universalizing linchpin.

One of the most effective and memorable sections occurs near the end of the piece. Zhou deconstructs and rearranges letters from the word “stranger” in short, jumbled, fingerspelled fragments. She pairs each letter to a sound, either produced with the mouth or by the other hand on the thunder sheet. This is another prime example of iconicity, as described earlier in Your Hat. In this 1:1 correlation, Zhou attempts to connect sight with sound, regardless of whether or not the observer knows the manual alphabet.
Lydia Winsor Brindamour: *early morning (dew, spiderweb)*

Abstraction is approached from a different angle in Brindamour’s 2016 work. I premiered *early morning (dew, spiderweb)* on my second DMA recital in December, 2016. I performed the piece once more at UCSD in January, 2019 and at the Oh My Ears Festival in Phoenix, Arizona in February, 2019.

Brindamour discovered Ella Mae Lentz’s performance video of *Dew on Spiderweb*, a 1995 poem by Clayton Valli. This poem describes the glistening of dew on a spiderweb among the branches of a tree at dawn. The poet attempts to photograph the scene, only to realize that the film had not been advanced. She then frantically recounts the image, only to realize in vain that the moment has passed. The poem ends as the poet savors the details from the scene and comes to terms with the impermanence of the event.

The original work is structured in three sections. Each section is comprised of the same signed material, but each iteration physically addresses different areas of the performance space. The variations among sections are characterized by distinct changes in signing speed and sign placement, resulting in \([a \, a’ \, a’’]\) form.
Brindamour extracted ten signs from the original poem and plotted them along imaginary x and y axes in the performer’s signing space. Signs produced while facing right, center and left are represented with purple, green and orange lines, respectively. The distance above and below the horizontal staff indicate relative placement of the sign above or below the performer’s chest. When two staves appear, they delineate left and right hands. Each system lasts approximately thirty seconds.

In Figure 3.9, the signs for “beautiful” (labeled here as “6”) and “wet” (“3B”) are employed. The first five productions of BEAUTIFUL are produced at their normal location in front of the face – the first three with the head turned to the right and the remaining ones facing forward – while the sixth repetition is produced slightly above the head. This sign neatly transitions into WET, as both signs share the same hand motion /5 > flattened O/. Signs with similar hand shapes are often compared to rhymes in spoken languages. The final four productions of WET are signed with the left hand. The first two cross in front the body into the right hand’s signing space, while the third is performed in front of the body and the fourth ending the phrase.

Figure 3.9: early morning (dew, spiderweb), page 1, system 2.
The technique of dissecting and isolating fragments of words is not unfamiliar to Brindamour. *Pale, pale light* (2015) for mezzo-soprano and gong incorporates a similar compositional technique, as described in Figure 3.10.

Text: The textual material used in this piece is derived from the line “white apples and the taste of stone” from Donald Hall’s poem “White Apples.” The poem, in its entirety, is included here:

**White Apples**

when my father had been dead a week
I woke
with his voice in my ear
I sat up in bed
and held my breath
and stared at the pale closed door
white apples and the taste of stone
if he called again
I would put on my coat and galoshes

The phonemes extracted from this text and used in the piece are as follows (written using the International Phonetic Alphabet):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{w} & \quad \text{(w)hite} \\
\text{ai} & \quad \text{(wh)ite} \\
\text{t} & \quad \text{(wh)ite, (t)aste} \\
\text{ae} & \quad \text{(a)pples} \\
\text{p} & \quad \text{(a)pples} \\
\text{av} & \quad \text{(of)} \\
\text{s} & \quad \text{apple(s), ta(s)te, (s)tone} \\
\text{too} & \quad \text{(s)tone} \\
\text{n} & \quad \text{a(n)d, sto(n)e} \\
\text{tei} & \quad \text{(ta)ste}
\end{align*}
\]

NOTE: Text is used with the permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Figure 3.10: *pale, pale light* performance notes.

Brindamour states that a performance of *pale, pale light* will always include Hall’s poem in the program notes. Similarly, a performance of Valli’s “Dew on Spiderweb” must always precede *early morning (dew, spiderweb)*. In doing so, Brindamour is inviting the observer to recognize connections between the source material and her work. These connections should be observable to the audience member in a signed medium, regardless of their knowledge of ASL.
Many ASL signs exist in a defined space proportional to the signer’s body. The location of the sign in space may have as much meaning as the sign itself. For example, the sign for “father” is always produced at the forehead. The same handshape, produced at the chin, represents the word “mother.” Signs produced away from their standard location still have some semblance of the original sign. These newly altered signs exist in an undefined, grey area on a spectrum of comprehensibility. Some antiquated signs, such as crank film, have become obsolete and unrecognizable to younger signers. While some signs lose meaning when produced away from their normal location, other signs acquire different meanings. For example, the wiggling /open-8/ hand in Dew on Spiderweb, translated as SHIMMER, describes rays of sunlight piercing dew droplets. Produced out of context and in front of the body, this sign might be mistaken for MOLEST. The manual sign for MOLEST will typically be accompanied by a matching facial expression to elucidate meaning. In Lydia’s poem, facial affect intentionally absent and undefined.

Removing Valli’s narrative further abstracts Brindamour’s piece and allows her compositional choices to foreground the work. Whereas the form of Valli’s poem is expressed in sign, Brindamour’s manipulation of signs produce form and phrases reminiscent of traditional music or poetry.

Larry Polansky: VEDITZ

Polansky composed VEDITZ for me in August, 2018. I premiered the piece on a solo recital at UCSD in January 2019 and gave two repeat performances in February as part of the Oh My Ears Music Festival in Phoenix, and as part of the UCSD music department’s Cross-
Wired Percussion Symposium. The work is named after George W. Veditz, former president of the National Association of the Deaf.

Veditz was a staunch proponent of recording and preserving ASL (then simply known as “the sign language”) through the new and burgeoning medium of moving picture films. Thirty-three years prior to his seminal 1913 lecture “The Preservation of the Sign Language,” the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf passed a resolution to ban the use of sign language in educational settings and revert to oralist methods of education, which included lipreading and speech therapy. This came as a critical blow to the American Deaf community; Deaf people cherished sign language as the heart of their identity and the cornerstone of their culture. In response to the resolution, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was founded in America that same year. Veditz, after becoming president of the NAD in 1904, made it his mission to collect video footage of lectures, stories and anecdotes by expert signers of his era.

George Veditz’s muse guides my performance of Polansky’s piece. The 1913 lecture is projected onto a large screen to my right. At times, I am asked to either sign alongside of him, provide a voiced translation, or perform on a setup of twenty-two percussion instruments, eleven foot-activated instruments, and multiple keyboard instruments. The intricacy and choreography involved in “VEDITZ” makes it one of my most challenging pieces to date.
Speech, sign and percussion are often layered in precarious and unidiomatic ways, leaving one or more performance methods compromised at the expense of another. Although Polansky attempts to solve this by pairing signed material with foot-activated material, several other passages create problematic performance challenges. In Figure 3.12, I perform beats 1-4 in the first and second staves with two mallets in my right hand while fingerspelling material with my left hand. Upon finishing with the left hand, I immediately grab a mallet from my right hand and perform the 7:5:4 polyrhythm in beats 5-8.
Each of the three methods of performance serve different, unique functions. My signed contribution to the piece provides little to augment the clarity of the source text.\textsuperscript{13} Rather, my main goal was to provide a direct copy of Veditz’s message (albeit a mirrored copy – Veditz signs right-handed and I sign left-handed) in an effort to strengthen the visual congruity between video and performer. Having said that, I occasionally tend to sign faster than Veditz in order to allow myself enough time to pick up mallets or adjust my feet for an upcoming entrance. This often results in a visual canon in which signed content is first viewed in my performance and immediately followed in the video.

While the complete signed text is available in real time, the spoken text is often disjunct and fragmented. Many of the spoken sentences are never finished, leaving the non-signer with only pieces from which to assemble meaning. The percussive material often complements the syllabic material of the spoken text. Although Polansky doesn’t explicitly instruct the performer to recite the text in lockstep with the music, note how the English phrase “For the last thirty-

\textsuperscript{13} Polansky suggested that I translate Veditz’s message into a modernized version of ASL, as many of the signs used are now antiquated and no longer in the vernacular. I ultimately decided against this option.
three years, we have strived…” directly maps onto the melodic line up until the quintuplet on beat seven in Figure 3.13.\(^{14}\)

![Figure 3.13: VEDITZ, measure 19.](image)

Figure 3.13: *VEDITZ*, measure 19.

Polansky also suggested that, in order to remain synchronized with the video, I keep a video monitor in my setup to refer to during the performance. Again, I decided against this option and chose to create an in-ear click track that I synchronized with the video through Logic Pro X. The logistical challenge of synchronizing multiple video outputs and incorporating extra hardware, plus the challenge of diverting my attention to a video screen during performance, seemed unprofitable.

**Franz Schubert: *Erlkönig***

This project grew out of a desire to highlight the innate expressive properties shared by ASL storytelling and the art song repertoire. Translating vocal repertoire into ASL revealed a practical method of merging disciplines in my performance practice.

\(^{14}\) An English translation is not printed alongside the musical material in the score.
Franz Schubert’s *Erlkönig* (1821) is traditionally performed as a vocal solo with piano accompaniment. With the help of Angelo Ricasata, a Deaf colleague, I created an ASL translation from an English translation of the original German text. I have performed this version with pianist Siu Hei Lee on my second DMA recital in December, 2016 and have since performed it with Inês Andrade at the 2018 New Music Gathering in Boston and with Kyle Adam Blair at UCSD in 2019. My audiences have been classically trained musicians who are familiar with the original work. This familiarity allows connections to be forged between my signs and their memory of the text.

Role shifting, a grammatical device in ASL storytelling, plays a crucial role in my performance. Spatial references must be established when representing two or more characters in dialogue. My performance establishes four distinct references: the narrator’s text is performed directly to the audience, and the Erlkönig’s text is performed with slightly bent knees, squinted eyes and rounded shoulders. I shift my torso and eye gaze up and to the right when performing the son’s text, and I shift my torso and eye gaze down and to the left when performing the father’s text. A vocalist must make similar distinctions in a successful performance of Schubert’s original work. Distinct vocal ranges, tonal centers and leitmotifs for each character are represented in the vocal part. Through role shifting, constructed dialogue and emotional affect, my adaptation serves as a visual representation of Schubert’s compositional aesthetic.
Chapter Four: Summary

“No one is disabled. Everyone is disabled.”
-Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand*

In response to a question from a patron at a La Jolla Symphony pre-concert lecture this year, Steven Schick explained that “The role of us as artists is to open the doors between music and life; to make us more acutely aware of our outside world.” Almost thirty years after the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, we still live in a world where access to information is not taken for granted. To this day, senseless fatalities still occur because of communication barriers at police stops. While Schick was not explicitly referring to the Deaf community as the “outside world,” his words serve as a reminder to make us more acutely aware of our society’s “other” worlds. Deaf advocates Nyle DiMarco, Millicent Simmonds and Marlee Matlin have brought deafness into the public eye, yet most hearing people are still oblivious of this outside world. They are completely disconnected with it and fumble through their limited interactions with deaf people. On a good day, these interactions are uncomfortable and awkward. On a bad day, they can be offensive, dehumanizing and in some cases even fatal.

This disconnect was especially made clear to me while attending and presenting at a well-known new music conference whose theme was “Accessibility.” Before arriving, the conference organizers claimed to have FM transmitters available for hard of hearing patrons, but struggled to find one upon request. There were no braille programs or large print programs available, no CART\(^{15}\) translators and no ASL interpreters on call. The conference registration

\(^{15}\) Communication Access Realtime Translation, also known as “live captioning.”
form did not give options for requesting ADA services. Additionally, attempts at engaging and involving people with disabilities in conference discussions were virtually nonexistent.

Over the past seven years, my efforts to hybridize American Sign Language, percussion and performance art into a singular artform have allowed me to explore deeper, critical approaches to each of my practices. It has allowed me the opportunity to share both the beauty of ASL with the hearing community and my love of music and performance with the Deaf community. This project has allowed me to forge new relationships with members of the Deaf community. Collaborating with hearing composers and eliciting feedback from Deaf colleagues throughout the creative process has been rich and rewarding.

I have discovered rich performative relationships between percussion, gesture, spoken text and American Sign Language in the context of my commissioned works. ASL may be organized and altered much like spoken text. Fragments of an ASL message, like phonemes in spoken languages, can be extracted and recontextualized. Non-manual markers, even the signer’s physical presence, may also be erased or altered in order to highlight or obfuscate other linguistic components. A work involving ASL can be arranged into a formalized product that shares organizational properties of traditional music. By withholding communicative information in performance, accessibility may be highlighted and foregrounded. Properties of traditional ASL poetry are also evoked in my work. Yet, I do not believe that these works have fully explored the use of facial expression. A work that foregrounds facial expression as primary material, similar to Carolyn Chen’s Adagio (2009) for slow-motion face choreography or Mauricio Kagel’s Phonophonie (1963), may bear fruit. Ultimately, my work serves to humanize a language and a community of which many hearing concertgoers are unfamiliar.
I am currently workshopping projects with composers Anahita Abbasi, Marcelo Lazcano and Theocharis Papatrechas in preparation for three new commissions for ASL performer-percussionist. I am also excited to explore opportunities for teaching music and percussion at schools for the deaf.

Deaf performer and educator Noah Buchholz recently appealed to the Deaf community: “…we need more Deaf artists to boldly trek into unknown territory and experiment with music...” I look forward to collaborating and creating works with Deaf artists, and am interested in discovering new ways of incorporating haptics and subsonic frequencies into works with the Deafblind community.

My work in this medium often feels less like a two-way conversation between the Deaf and hearing communities. There isn’t much I need to share with the Deaf community about sound; they unavoidably live in a world inherently directed by it. By highlighting the shared corporeality and thematic subtexts present in my commissioned work, it is my hope that this practice will build bridges and spark dialogues across communities. In doing so, we can begin to address cultural differences and learn to understand one another.
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De Mey, Thierry. 2002. “Silence Must Be!”


Frenkel, Edo. 2013. “There is nothing (but they) outside.”


Polansky, Larry. 2007. “#[DoWhat?AllYes/No?(ok)Back].”
- 2010. “Perception.”
- 2018. “VEDITZ”.


Wu, Yiheng Yvonne. 2018.”Your Hat.”

APPENDIX: CATALOGUE OF COMMISSIONED WORKS

Frenkel, Edo. 2013. “There is Nothing (but they) Outside.”
Brindamour, Lydia Winsor. 2016. “Early Morning (dew, spiderweb).”
Wu, Yiheng Yvonne. 2018. “Your Hat.”
Threads

for ASL interpreter
hands strung to chimes at a distance and
a story on tape

Carolyn Chen
2012
Background note

*Threads* was written for percussionist Christopher Clarino for a project combining music and American Sign Language.

In thinking about composing a piece involving ASL, I wanted to honor its languageness – its actual function as a means of communicating amongst people who might not otherwise be able to connect. I wanted movement not to disappear into abstraction, but to attempt to communicate – some kind of story. As someone who grew up between two languages, and living in China for the first time at the time of writing, these issues around communication – who you are able to communicate with, what you have the ability to express, what is able to be heard or understood – are particularly foregrounded.

The situation of the percussionist is a physical separation from instruments, the usual means of expression. The instruments are connected only remotely, by string – their sound cannot be virtuosically controlled. This leaves the percussionist in a somewhat vulnerable situation, paralleled by the situation of the audience, who might miss some of the story, or instrumental sound, depending on hearing ability. Always there are holes, and things to piece together. Understanding does not operate in perfect translation, but a tangled, personalized turning-over – in the hands of the performer, in the mind of the listener.

There was a Chinese folk story that I remembered from childhood, about a number of brothers with special powers, getting through adventures. Special abilities are always coupled with vulnerabilities and inabilities. Online, I found an English version, which was not quite what I remembered, but the discrepancy helped to thematize the unreliability of memory and utterance. I retold the story starting from memory, then filling in from other angles of possibility or interpretation, sometimes contradicting, as different points of view will tend to do.

Instrumental materials – paper, leaves, wood, glass – are elemental, and span a spectrum from soft friction sounds to more resonant collisions. Their relative dampness or brilliance corresponds to varying emotional tenors. The writing moves between different voices, sometimes more matter-of-fact, sometimes more wrapped-in-a-dream. The tone is somewhat influenced by the feeling of coming at English from Chinese: the writing is noun-heavy and synonym-light, using very basic vocabulary and simple sentence structure. Monosyllables abound. The other angle is approaching English sentences as music, isolating the basic elements and permuting, inverting, repeating, varying them. In applying traditional compositional techniques to the sound of the lines – phrase rhythm, rhyme, and the little sounds and feelings in words – the process was exactly that of composing music.

Carolyn Chen
December 2, 2012
Hangzhou
Performance Notes

Instruments

4 sets of windchimes, to be constructed in ascending order of resonance
- Paper chimes
- Leaf chimes
- Wood or bamboo chimes
- Glass chimes

Woodblock
3 triangles

Stage Set-up

On a proscenium stage, the performer occupies center of stage with woodblock and triangles. The performer keeps a stand with four threads attached to each set of chimes, set up roughly at corners of the audience space, placed on and removed from hands as the story on tape progresses. Wood and glass chimes are set up behind the performer on stage, paper and leaf chimes in the back of the audience, so that sound comes from behind and connecting lines flow through the audience.

Key
+ add to hand the loop of string connecting to chimes of given material – paper, leaves, wood/bamboo, glass – hanging at a distance – paper has a warm feeling, milder than scratchier dry leaves, wood is hollow [triangle and wood placed separately with signer, touched directly]
- remove string to chimes of that material
... wait for tape
P paper
L leaves
W wood
G glass
Order of action

The following score describes, from left to right, the actions of hands (aside from interpreting the text of the story), the total sum of sounding chimes connected to hands at any point, the words of the story on tape, and the content of accompanying sounds on tape.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hands</th>
<th>Chimes on</th>
<th>Voice on tape</th>
<th>Tape sound</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(hands empty)</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>You told me a story once, about a bunch of brothers. They had superpowers. They fought crime. Or committed a crime. I don't remember.</td>
<td>underwater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P</td>
<td>You told me a story. You held the sea in your mouth, so I could look – for fish – and treasure. When you couldn't hold it any longer, you signaled, and I didn't hear.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P</td>
<td>You signaled, but I didn't hear. I couldn't see. Somehow you were a very successful fisherman.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(start after)</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>There are things you shake. You shake apple trees to ask for fruit. Climbing trees, to see how much they can hold.</td>
<td>outside</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Presents, bags of treasure, boxes of cereal, jars of coins – you shake to know what is inside, how much is left, how much is there to go still.</td>
<td>wind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>You shake the hands of people you don't know, the shoulders of people you thought you knew, maybe also to find out what is inside them. You listen, carefully, to the sound of the person being shaken, try to hear –</td>
<td>tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>what is inside – how much is left – how much can they hold?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wait in pauses</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>The room was full of water. Your mouth was full of water, water you couldn't hold. You shook, like a fish.</td>
<td>underwater</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
<td>You spit it out, and your spit did not break, but stretched, on and on. It stretched into a line and followed you around, for the rest of your life, turning, following, as you turned.</td>
<td>tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
<td>What I didn't see:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
<td>You opened your hand. You pointed. This point, it stretched, into a line. The line was the end of the sea. Treasure.</td>
<td>triangle tones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tangle into cat's cradle untangle</td>
<td>P PL</td>
<td>The line was tied. I wanted to tell you, but my tongue was tied. The line, my tongue, was a fish. This is what I wanted to say. The brothers, they were you, they were all you. These are the powers you hold.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>start before tape, each line</td>
<td>LW</td>
<td>… You could swallow the sea. You could survive fire. Your neck was iron. Your legs could stretch, on, and on, and on, and on, like chewing gum. You could hold your breath forever. You couldn't be burned, stifled, chopped, or drowned. You must have been innocent. How else could it be so impossible to shake off a person?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>triangle after triangle after triangle after</td>
<td>L L L</td>
<td>We looked into the sun. The birds, they argued, sharp little feathers taking shots at our eyes. Nothing could shake our looking. Sometimes, the earth does the shaking for you. Sometimes, the water.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... ... ... ... brush table start after tape done</td>
<td>L L</td>
<td>The room was full of water, and everyone talking, they sounded like birds, I couldn't see, what they were saying. You moved, but I didn't see you. The sea you held in your mouth came back, and shook me. I stretched out my hand, it shook. My fingers swelled, flew out from my body, floated up, hot air balloons, and carried my pointing away with them. They were floating toward your voice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>triangle 12 triangle 12 triangle 12</td>
<td>L LG LG LG LG LG LG</td>
<td>The wind blew through the trees. Leaves shook. Village bells shook. They spat out sound to tell us that our point on the earth had fallen into line with the sun. This was the point in the day when we would come the closest. I felt something in my throat, it wasn't a song. Something I breathed in, it grew and rose, up through my throat, and I spat, but the thread, it didn't break, but followed me, followed me as I turned.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>start first</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cat's cradle tangle</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>accelerate</td>
<td>LG</td>
<td>LG</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knock wood or triangle at breaks</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slowing gradually, lag after</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>build up before tape, slow to fast, finish, + leaves, start over from wherever tape is</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>PL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>triangle</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>triangle</td>
<td>PL</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>start first</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>start first, slow</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>triangles</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>You were <em>calling</em>, and the <em>calling</em>, it spilled into me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G</td>
<td>I wanted to tell you, but you couldn't hear. I was a bird, to you. Sometimes, you run, you turn into a tree. Sometimes, I hear you, somewhere else, crying, a line to the end of the sea. I wanted to tell you, again.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L</td>
<td>I was underwater. I felt a line. I pulled. A thread. I shook. The leaves. They shook. My body. Was pulled, into the body, of a tree – its body was my body, its skin was my skin – and I raised my arm, and spread my fingers, and a beating of wings rushed past.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

gradually add all punctuate each sentence with 1-3 triangles

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>triangles</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>G</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>G</td>
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<td>G</td>
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birds
water

outside
buzz
tones
triangle

wind
in
leaves
NOTES

-The color of the line indicates the direction of the gesture.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{center} \\
\text{to the right} \\
\text{to the left}
\end{align*}
\]

-The height of the lines shows the vertical placement of the gesture.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{above the head} \\
\text{in line with the face} \\
\text{in line with the chest} \\
\text{in line with the stomach}
\end{align*}
\]
1- swirl to hand up (0:07)

2- up then down
    A. two fingers up (0:11)
    B. both hands down (0:12)

3- two types of tapping-
    A. FROM MOUTH, fingers together (0:14)
    B. in air (0:15)

4- circular movement to hand (0:16)

5- finger motion (0:18)

6- face swirl/ cut off (0:20)

7- cut off motion (0:22)

8- Camera- (0:24)

9- angular hand gesture (0:29)

10- winding (0:31)
    A. With right hand
    B. Without right hand

2A 3A— 3A 1 5 2B 3A——— 6 3B 1 —— 9 ———— 10 (rep)— 5 7———
2B 10 3B 6

— —— 2A 2B 3A 3B 5 2B 1 3A— 8 1 7——— 2A—9—3B———10——2A 1 5—— 8
6 9 10 2B 3B

4 5 6 7 8 10 3B 3A——3A 5——— 2B
The Little Mute Boy

Elisabet Curbelo (2018)
YOUR HAT
solo in ASL

Yiheng Yvonne Wu
2018
YOUR HAT
for Christopher Clarino

Performance Notes

Prologue and Story (Parts 1 and 2)
These passages are to be translated and signed in ASL while an interpreter, amplified and seated in the front row of the audience, follows the signing and reads the English version.

Poems
Words in CAPS are glosses of the ASL signs.
Words in lowercase are instructions or descriptions of movements.

Poem 2
“BOAT” is signed with a forward rolling motion (as if an oblong wheel rolling away from body), except where indicated.

Poem 3
This poem is performed while standing in front of a medium drum, positioned low enough so as not to encroach on signing space.
With each sign of I/ME, make an audible percussive sound on sternum.

Staging
Optional. Performer is encouraged to experiment with simple blocking choices to visually and spatially distinguish the Prologue/Story from the Poems. For example, the Prologue and Story may be signed from center stage, while Poems 1 and 2 performed a few feet stage-left of center. Poem 3, with drum, might then be a few feet stage-right of center. Conversely, the Prologue and Story may be stage left, Poems 1 and 2 at center stage, and Poem 3, stage left with drum. Spotlight(s) may be used to distinguish the spaces.
The English-language poet Li-Young Lee said, “I used to think that I was a guest in the language because I was Asian and learned the language at the age of eight. But I see now that we’re all guests in the language….It’s a feeling of dislocation with the thing that you love.”

If I’m a “guest in the language,” it feels like the words are “borrowed.” They don’t belong to me, and they feel awkward. Yet, the words aren’t actually borrowed—they don’t need to be returned. You just keep using them. They shape what you express, and you shape them to fit your needs. Maybe there is a mutual transformation.

Lee says we are all guests in the language. Maybe he means that words are only at the surface of our communication. They are an approximation of what we really hope to express.

Like an immigrant who eventually feels at home in neither her homeland nor her current location, who will never be rejoined with a complete sense of home, there is an eternal sadness about the way our words are sometimes separated from our deepest intentions.

Yet that rift is liberating and can itself be beautiful.
Poem 1

Fluid Tempo I

\[ \frac{3}{4} \]

WORD (tap R and L handshapes together)
tap tap simile
and bounce
\( \frac{3}{4} \) (longer bounce away)

Angular

\[ \frac{4}{4} \]

tap open and freeze

\[ \frac{2}{4} \]

Very slowly, bring hands toget. for next sign. Motion is very soft, slow, and rounded.

\[ \frac{3}{4} \]

“WORD” (looser)

\[ \frac{3}{4} \]

“WORD” (looser still)
touch fall limp, pull apart, circle back, palms down

\[ \frac{3}{4} \]

very slowly, bring hands together for next sign. Motion is very soft, slow, and rounded.

\[ \frac{3}{4} \]

“WORD” (looser still)
touch fall limp, pull apart, circle back, palms down

\[ \frac{3}{4} \]

very slowly, bring hands together for next sign. Motion is very soft, slow, and rounded.
WORD and SURFACE become increasingly indistinct and blend into one fluid gesture until finally the two hands are symmetrical:
1) fingers down, palms down and angled slightly towards you; thumbs together —
2) rotate hands: wrists going down, fingers coming up, across mid-line, the two hands overlapping —
3) continue rotation until fingers point upward and palms face you.

angular $q = 88$

slowly bring hands together for next sign

fluid $q = 66$

both palms up, slightly tilted outward; one circle

end circle at farthest point from body to fluidly become BORROW

keeping BORROW handshape, bring hands all the way to chest
Story, Part 1

[Sign in ASL]:

Your Hat

I arrive in the new land and knock at your door.

The new land is sunnier than I expected, so you give me your hat. I thank you but have nothing to offer in return. You say, go ahead, and find what you came to look for.

As I walk through the days of the sunny, new land, the hat keeps growing bigger and falls over my ears and then onto my shoulders. It is hard to see. Soon it grows down to my knees.
I begin to think it wasn't supposed to be a hat, when I suddenly walk into the other season of the new land: it rains and rains. I keep wiping the water from my eyes.

The hat has grown so big I turn it upside down, and it becomes a boat. I climb in and paddle through the days of the rainy land. I keep thinking that I must return your hat, or boat, as you must have had some use for it. You must be missing it. But I still don't have anything to offer you.
Poem 2
I “G-U-E-S-T IN LANGUAGE”
BORROW HAT
BORROW BOAT (here BOAT glides outward away from body without a roll)
BORROW BORROW BORROW (with slightly more effort each time. On last sign, bring crossed arms almost completely to chest)

(upper hand rises slowly with C/LOOK-FOR handshape but SUNRISE arm motion):
(right) LOOK-FOR/SUNRISE	 LOOK-FOR/SUNSET
(left) LOOK-FOR/SUNRISE	 LOOK-FOR/SUNSET

SUNRISE — (part way up, interrupt with) LOOK-FOR — SUNRISE (continues and finishes)

SUNSET — (interrupt with) LOOK-FOR — (continue briefly) SUNSET — (interrupt again, as if pulling “sun” slightly backwards) LOOK-FOR (a little more emphatically, a few more rotations) — SUNSET (continues and finishes)

CONTINUE BORROW (somewhat slowly, with effort)
CONTINUE BORROW (with more effort)

WORD
(freeze; long pause)

(symmetrical motion: index fingers and thumbs touch, pointed upward.
Slowly turn wrists so that, one by one, each finger touches corresponding finger of opposite hand. Continue rotation into BOAT as palms turn upward.)

(with rhythmic forward rolling motion, with each word representing one pulse of the rocking.
Accel. over this passage):
BOAT BOAT
GO-AHEAD GO-AHEAD
CONTINUE CONTINUE
BOAT BOAT
GIVE GIVE (one hand at a time)

(slow down and accel again):
BOAT BOAT BOAT BOAT

(expressively, varied speeds)
CONTINUE BORROW CONTINUE BORROW CONTINUE BORROW
GO-AHEAD GO-AHEAD GO-AHEAD
CONTINUE CONTINUE CONTINUE CONTINUE CONTINUE CONTINUE

(suddenly slow and continue to decel. Roll “backwards,” towards your body):
BOAT    BOAT    BOAT    BOAT    BOAT

(Cupped hands: one moves over the other, palms up.
Hold.
Very slowly close fingers as if grasping something precious.)
Story, Part 2

[Sign in ASL]:

By now, I know the trees, the buildings, the traffic signs of the new land, even as the waters hide the streets, and even as the places change every day.

As I paddle through the days, the hat starts to lose its shape in all the wetness. I worry about a leak in the boat, but barnacles grow and harden the misshapen sides. So I keep paddling through the days.

The waters turn clear and cloudy depending on the weather, the neighborhood, and the clarity of the thing I am looking for.

After a while, I’m not sure if I’ve been looking for you or for something else. But one day, I turn a corner, and your door appears—a few dry steps, just above the water. My eyes feel clear, and I knock on your door.

You appear, and I say, thank you again for your hat. You must have missed it. It has served me well.

You say, but you’ll still need it as you walk through your days in this land.

I say, but I’ve borrowed it so long, and I’ve been thinking about returning it all this time.

You say, keep it. I have many more of those. This one was not special.

I see that you mean it.

So I say, thank you again, and turn back to the boat, my boat. I see that the barnacles have formed a seat, just my size, even as the misshapen sides still make the paddling awkward.

I paddle through the days and back into the next sunny season. The water recedes, and the boat scrapes the ground. The barnacles die in the dryness. I thank them, and fashion a hat out of the seat. I walk through the sunny days, squinting a little less.
Poem 3

I BORROW WORD
I BORROW HAT
I BORROW BOAT
CONTINUE BORROW CONTINUE BORROW CONTINUE BORROW
WORD → SURFACE (several rotations, thoughtfully)

I BECOME LAND
I BECOME SURFACE
SURFACE
SURFACE
BECOME LAND
BECOME SURFACE SURFACE SURFACE
(very slowly) (ROOT)* SURFACE (ROOT) SURFACE

*(as upper hand slides across lower, fingers begin to interlock but only briefly and partially.
Upper hand is always in motion, continues sliding)

(faster, and accel.)
I BECOME LAND
 BECOME WORD
 BECOME SURFACE
 BECOME BOAT
 BECOME LOOK-FOR LOOK-FOR
(single rotation each hand)

(rhythmic at first, accel. becoming increasingly fluid)
I BECOME WORD
WORD BECOME ME
I BECOME WORD
WORD BECOME ME
 I BECOME WORD
 I BECOME WORD
 I BECOME ME
I CONTINUE CONTINUE CONTINUE (with increasing effort)

(C/LOOK-FOR handshape with rapid SUNRISE/SUNSET arm motion, alternating sides):
LOOK-FOR/SUNRISE
LOOK-FOR/SUNRISE
LOOK-FOR/SUNSET
LOOK-FOR/SUNSET
(increasingly energetic though not quite frantic, rapidly alternating sides, single rotation each)
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR
LOOK-FOR

(coming from opposite sides, hands suddenly clasp together, meeting high in the middle, as ½-ROOT, fingers halfway interlocking, palms slightly flattened, hands slightly stiff. Freeze in midair.)

(very, very slowly):
(keeping fingers locked as ½-ROOT, rotate hands until palms face up/down,
Very, very slowly, un-ROOT: slide fingers of upper hand out, as if with slightly effort.
Once fingers freed, fingers continue to slide across open palm. Fingers are light, feeling the palm. Float off near wrist.)

(very slowly, with same upper hand):
LAND (over drumhead, without touching, one circle at medium-slow speed)
LAND (slightly faster)
LAND (very slowly, sensually, fingers shifting slightly as if feeling textures on the drum surface. Face slightly leaned in as if for close observation)

CONTINUE

(pulling backwards, over drumhead without touching drum. WALK sign with all fingers):
WALK WALK WALK WALK

BOAT (formed close to body. No rocking. In one motion, cupped BOAT sign moves away from body, upward, as if going up a small hill, then down the hill, palms toward audience, as if giving something precious)

(at far end of drum, hands descend then separate, fingers opening slightly. Hands very slowly make semi-circle paths along respective sides of drum rim, palms still up but as if fingernails are able to feel drum with same sensitivity as fingertips. Maintain focus until hands return to body, falling at sides.)
VEDITZ

for percussionist/ASL interpreter
(with film)

for Christopher Clarino

Larry Polansky
Fairlee, VT,
July – August 2018
VEDITZ
for percussionist/ASL interpreter
(with film)
for Christopher Clarino
notes
VEDITZ is to be performed with the film “The preservation of the sign language by George M. Veditz,” made in 1913 and reprinted in 1934. This film is widely available on the internet and also commercially available on DVD. The film should be projected to the audience, and may or may not be visible in some way to the performer (either on a separate screen, or through performer position).

The performer must be proficient in American Sign Language.

The tempo of the score is quarter-note = 60 throughout. Measures in the score denote time spans (e.g. a 6/4 measure is 6 seconds). The score follows the film, and should be generally and closely, but not exactly synchronized with the “text” (ASL) of the film. The performer should have some method of synchronization, either by viewing the film during performance, or a click track.

Instrumentation/orchestration is left to the percussionist. A wide sonic palette is preferred, consisting of pitched instruments (probably mallet instruments, though electronic and other kinds of pitched instruments are possible), non-pitched instruments, and non-pitched instruments operated by the feet.

The performer is asked to speak, sign, fingerspell, play (from notation), and improvise in a variety of combinations. All instances of speaking and/or signing are notated as such.

x-noteheads denote non-pitched instruments, but are notated on the staff to roughly indicated “pitch” or “brightness” levels.

In pitched instruments, the notation should be considered as “pitch class” notation. In other words, any passage can be played in a register appropriate to the instrument chosen by the percussionist, but the register of a given passage should be as consistent as possible.

Each of the 15 sections of the piece have a gamut of pitches, which should be used as a reference for all pitched improvisation. When improvising, those pitches are primarily employed (though other pitches may very occasionally be used).

Acknowledgements
Dr. Carol Padden’s excellent translation of the film was used as the primary source for this work, along with an equally excellent (but markedly different) translation by my friend and teacher, Dr. Dennis Cokely. I am deeply indebted to both of these scholars for their work, not just on the Veditz film but for their scholarship and activism in ASL studies. I freely inserted some of my own translation ideas into the piece. Dr. Padden’s foundational essay, “Translating
Veditz" (*Sign Language Studies*, 4:3, Spring 2004, 204–260) was an indispensable resource in the writing of this piece.

Christopher Clarino requested this work, and is uniquely qualified to perform it, and I am extremely grateful to him for inspiring and collaborating on the project.

**Larry Polansky**  
Fairlee, VT,  
July – August 2018  
8/16/18 11:33 AM
Improvise quietly, sparsely (unpitched), perhaps rolling on a few instruments.

Continue improvising.

Speak: freely translate, and improvise on any instruments.

Banquets

Versailles
Improvise (non-pitch) continue improvising, and speak

Veditz still

speak and play

feet, or cymbal, gong, etc. let ring

quietly

small triangle, finger cymbal, etc.

(don't speak) speak and sign

any sound, vary freely

Language of signs

sign and play (feet)

speak and improvise


Continue improvising, don't speak

Speak and sign (hands and feet)

(don't speak)

Speak and improvise (from previous idea)

Noisily

Speak and sign

Sign (only)

3:20 C-D-E-F₆-G-Ab-Bb

Speak (freely translate) (improvise)

Speak (only)

Improvise (don't speak)

Improvise one quiet event

3:54 C-D-Eb-F₆-G-Ab-Bb

Speak; freely translate, and improvise on any instruments
11 6:28 C#-D-Eb-F-G-Ab-Bb
speak and improvise
(pitch, gamut)

let ring
(gradually disintegrate)

12 6:48 C#-D-Eb-F-G-Ab-Bb
speak; freely translate, don't play

FS THE PEETS THE DUDLEYS THE ELYS

THE BALLARDS different instruments
(one hand)

different instruments
(feet)

speak and sign
(feet)

speak and sign
SPEAK

VEDITZ

SPEAK

SIGN LANGUAGE

SPEAK

SPEAK AND IMPROVISE

SPEAK AND IMPROVISE

CONTINUE IMPROVISING

SPEAK AND IMPROVISE

MOVING PICTURE FILMS
let all notes ring

speak and improvise

improvise

speak and play

sign (only) the entire "measure"
[buts use the
namesigns of the three men]
[FAY, HOTCHKISS, MACGREGOR]

G-B-D-F
[don't speak]

speak and sign

(freely make dyads
from current gamut: G-B-D-F)

(free, with spoken text)
(vary low/high sounds)
speak and sign
improvise
(don't speak)
(speak, don't play)
(freely interpret and translate)
114  FS  PRICELESS

115  Veditz still

116  (damp slightly)

117  FS  RACE OF PHARAOHS

118  FS  THAT KNEW NOT JOSEPH

119  

120  

121  speak and sign

122  something delicate

"for they cannot sign"
Free, unmeasured, 61", improvise freely with the film

"God has given to deaf people"
VEDITZ
Sections, measure numbers, measure lengths, “translated text”
(text is largely taken from Carol Padden translation, but with a few changes taken from Dennis Cokely, and LP)
8/9/18 11:18 AM

1. 12 Credits [SECTION 1]

2. 4 Veditz standing still [SECTION 2]

3. 8 Friends and fellow deaf mutes: [SECTION 3]

4. 21 The French people love de l’Epee. Every year on the occasion of his birthday they gather together at [SECTION 4]

5. 13 banquets and festivities to show their appreciation that this man was born on this earth.

6. 7 They journey to his gravesite in

7. 11 Versailles and place flowers and green wreaths on his grave

8. 3 to show their respect

9. 4 for his memory.

10. 2 [Veditz still]

11. 8 They loved him because he was their first teacher. [SECTION 5]

12. 6 But they loved him more

13. 11 for being the father and inventor of their beautiful sign language.

14. 2 [Veditz still]

15. 7 For the last 33 years, with eyes filled with tears and hearts broken, the [SECTION 6]

16. 13 French deaf people have watched this beautiful

17. 4 language of signs

18. 5 snatched away from their schools.

19. 7 For the last 33 years, they have strived [SECTION 7]

20. 7 and fought for the restitution of signs in the schools

21. 6 but for 33 years their

22. 9 teachers have cast them aside and refused to listen to their pleas.
But their teachers would much rather listen to the worthless, cruel-hearted demands of people that think they know all about educating the deaf but know nothing about their thoughts and souls, their feelings, desires and needs.

It is like this in Germany also. The German deaf people look up at us American deaf people with eyes of jealousy. They look upon us Americans as a jailed man chained at the legs might look upon a man free to wander at will.

They freely admit that the American deaf people are superior to them in matters of intelligence and spirituality, in their success in the world, in happiness. And they admit that this superiority can be credited to — what? To one thing, that we permit the use of signs in our schools. The French deaf people base their inferiority on one thing, the fact that oralism must be taught in their schools. They have eliminated fingerspelling; they have eliminated signs.

But we American deaf are rapidly approaching some bad times for our schools. False prophets are now appearing with news to the people that our American means of teaching the deaf are all wrong. These men have tried to educate people and make people believe that the oralism method is really the one best means of educating the deaf. Our beautiful sign language is now
a. [Veditz pauses]

58. 6 beginning to show the results of their attempts.

59. 5 They have tried to banish signs from the schoolroom.  [SECTION 11]
60. 7, from the churches and from the earth.
61. 8 Yes, they have tried, so our [FS?] sign language is deteriorating.

62. 7 From olden years, the masters of this sign language,  [SECTION 12]
63. 4 the Peets,
64. 5 the Dudleys,
65. 3 the Elys,
66. 8 the Ballards are rapidly disappearing.
67. 10 And we, in past years, loved these men.
68. 6 They had a precise command of sign language.
69. 12 They could communicate to us using only signs and we could understand.

70. 13 But fortunately, we have several masters of our sign language  [SECTION 13]
71. 2 still with us.
72. 7 Edward Miner Gallaudet
73. 8 learned this sign language from his father,
74. 1 [NAMESIGN] Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet
   a. (not FS, Padden supplies full name).
75. 4 There are several others, like
76. 7 Dr. John B. Hotchkiss
77. 1 then NAMESIGN),
78. 8 Dr. Edward Allen Fay (then NAMESIGN),
79. 6 Robert P. MacGregor (then NAMESIGN)
80. 4 who are still with us.
81. 10 And we want to preserve the signs as these men now use them,
82. 6 to keep and pass on to
83. 5 coming generations.
84. 5 There are many men now alive
85. 6 who have learned their signs from men like these.
86. 6 Many have tried to preserve and pass on their signs.
87. 7 But there is one known means of passing this on, through the use of
88. 6 moving picture films.
89. 2 still

90. 3 Indeed,  [SECTION 14]
91. 1 our
National Association of the Deaf has raised a fund of $5000 for this purpose.

We have made a number of films. We have films of Edward Miner Gallaudet, of Edward Allen Fay, of John B. Hotchkiss and Robert MacGregor [all namesigns] and many others.

I regret that we not have $20,000, for we could have used it all.

If we had this amount of money, we could have performance in sign language, sermons in sign language, lectures in sign language. And not only would we American deaf enjoy the benefits of this, but no — deaf people in Germany, in England in France in Italy would also see these moving picture films.

Fifty years from now, these moving picture films will be priceless.

A new [SECTION 15] race of pharaohs that knew not Joseph” are taking over the land and many of our American schools. They do not understand signs for they cannot sign. They proclaim that signs are worthless and of no help to the deaf. Enemies of the sign language, they are true enemies of the true welfare of the deaf.
As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs. And as long as we have our films, we will be able to preserve our beautiful sign language in its ancient purity.

It is my hope that we all will love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to deaf people. [BOWS]
Web of Threads

This is a story about a girl who challenged authority.

Enter Aracne
with plucky self-confidence

Aracne, a talented weaver, spikes the interest of the jealous goddess Athena.
Athena, disguised as an old woman decides to pay Aracne a visit.

Enter Athena
A feeble voiced Athena demands humility from the proud Arachne.
"Humbly ask forgiveness for your conceit!" Arachne refuses!

Guiro (use finger nails)
Athena is unmasked!

No longer an old woman, but an all powerful goddess.
Athena challenges Aracne to a duel on the loom - a battle of the threads.
Aracne wins the battle. Athena is enraged.
Athena rips Aracne's tapestry into a web of threads.
There is no justice on this earth.
Aracne seeks solace in death.

accel... sans rigueur
Athena intervenes, instead transforming Aracne into a spider. She dangles by a silken thread for all eternity.