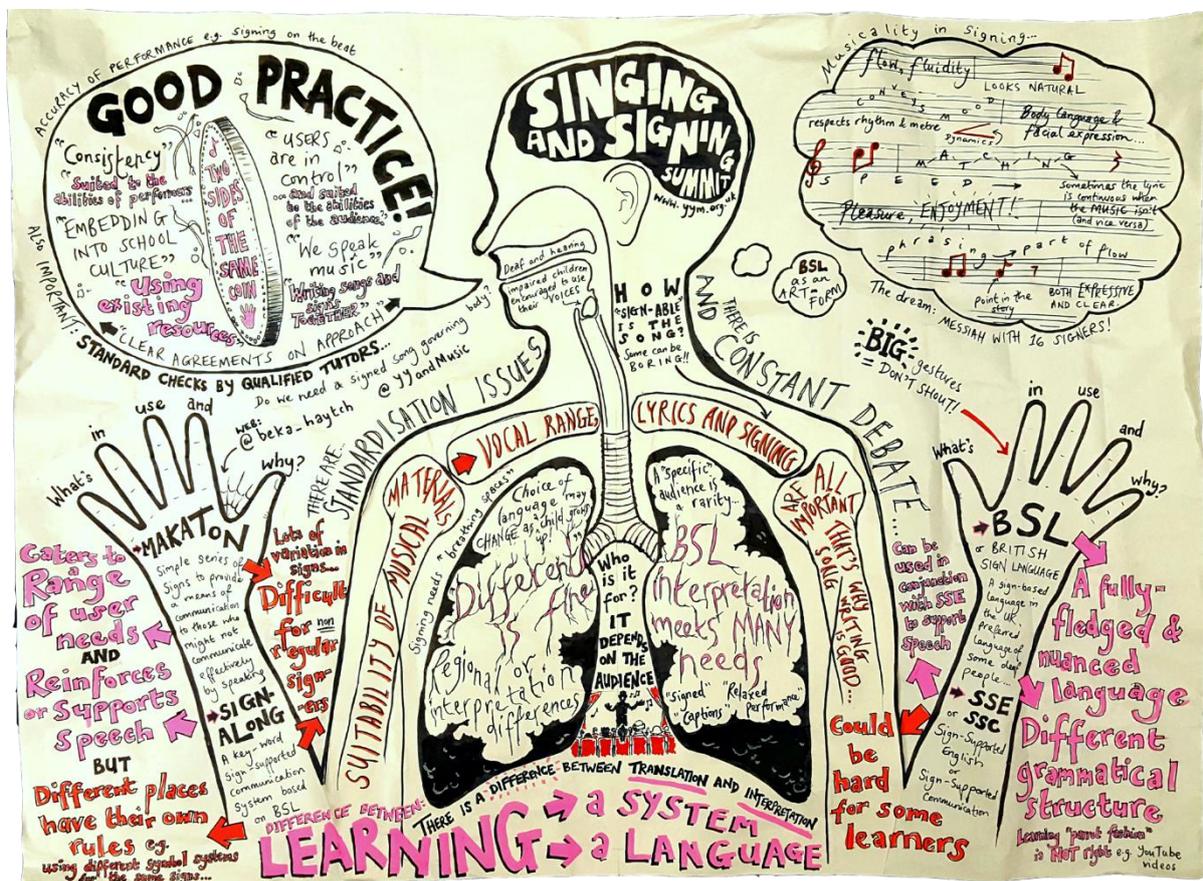


Singing and Signing: A Guide

Exploration, advice, guidance and good practice tips

This guide was developed as part of the **Great Singing Great Signing** project at Yorkshire Youth & Music, and was written in early 2018, eighteen months into the project. It drew on the expertise and contributions of musicians directly involved in the project, with valuable contributions from musicians and facilitators from around the country who work with Deaf, Hearing Impaired or Learning Disabled people. You can find the list of contributors in the Appendices.

The guide considers the different approaches to Singing and Signing, outlines differences and similarities in good practice, and explains the knowledge and understanding behind the choices made by music leaders and signing leaders.



Signing – What’s in use and why?

British Sign Language (BSL) is a complete language with its own grammar and syntax. It is a fully-fledged and nuanced language which works independently of spoken English and, importantly, not in the same word order. It is visually three-dimensional with (for example) dimensions being used to represent time or space. It can be pictorial – the word ‘bridge’ can be shown differently to describe shape, height, or distance. ‘Baby’ has different signs

depending on whether it is 'my baby love' or 'Mary had a baby'. Because of these variations, BSL interpretation for singing can be difficult for non-regular signers. In addition, metaphor is rarely, if ever, used. BSL is used primarily by Deaf and Hearing Impaired people, and does not need to be used in conjunction with speech.

Makaton is a proprietary sign system used in conjunction with spoken English to support communication. It has fewer signs - usually key words, originally drawn from BSL. It is used by people with a range of communication and learning needs, including children and young people with SEND.

Sign Supported English is signing which replicates spoken word order, word for word, to support spoken communication. It is used by Deaf and Hearing Impaired people, and by people with SEND.

Signalong is also a key-word signing system used to support spoken English, used in a similar way to Makaton.

(*Sign Supported Communication* is an over-arching term for signing systems and language, not a system itself).

In all cases, there are local and regional variations to signing, just as there are in language. Debate, development and standardisation issues are as common as in spoken English. Some communities (for example a special school) have their own standard signs and symbols which work effectively within that community but may not be understood widely outside it. For children and young people, the signing system they use may change as they grow, depending on the communities they are in, and their own learning choices.

Taken together, this means that signing with music and singing is not as inclusive as it might at first appear; a song may be signed using any of the systems, depending on the needs of the performers and of audiences. 'Signed' means different things to different groups, and a Makaton user may not understand BSL.

As social media increases and simplifies international connections, there may be more changes ahead. American Sign Language (ASL) for example uses only one hand (BSL uses both hands) and there is some evidence of a 'mid-Atlantic' sign language, known as PSE, developing.

The essentials for music leaders are;

- The signing system in use needs to be clearly stated and relevant to the performers and audience
- Even within a system, there will be options, choices and variations to consider; difference is fine
- Advice from a 'first language' signing user will always be helpful
- Signs used within one particular community may not have meaning, or be the choice, of a different community

Singing and Signing – who is it for?

The personal and social benefits of collective singing are well-documented. Singing and Signing is simply extending those benefits to participants and audiences who need signing to access music making. Some people may join a singing and signing choir and sign. Others may join and sing. Some may join and do both. If choirs are to be inclusive, then those options must be on offer, though for children and young people an aim is often for them to develop their voices.

Signing has two purposes; to meet the needs of performers who use signing for communication, and to meet the needs of audiences who need signing to fully appreciate musical performances.

Whilst the performers may share communication systems, this may not be true of the audience unless the signing system is specified in publicity, or the communication needs of the audiences are already known.

Signed Performances (usually where one or two signers are responsible for conveying dialogue and drama of all singers or characters on a stage) are different again. The signer must work in ways that meet the needs of different signing communities, convey the drama of performance, and show where different characters are singing (or speaking).

Captioned performances have subtitling (similar to TV) for Deaf and Hearing Impaired audiences.

Relaxed performances are where dramatic effects (loud volume, surprise noises, lighting and other effects) are reduced or warnings are given, 'house' lights are kept up, and where audiences can leave and re-join the performing space as they need to.

Good Practice and Quality in Singing and Signing

Singing and Signing relies on interpretation of words into signs, rather than word for word translation. Interpretation is a creative practice, and almost an art-form in its own right; in the hands of a world-class practitioner the results can be graceful and poetic, though most of us have to settle for a little less. Finding the best expression is a considered process, not a set of rules.

- In general, SSE does not work well in the context of singing. There are often too many words and the 'literal' translation is not helpful
- Learning from a video may be mechanically correct, but it is 'parrot' fashion; if signs are in BSL then sung words and signs are unlikely to be synchronous. It is copying, which is fine as long as the learner recognises these facts.

Basics of good practice;

- The signing system in use has to be articulated at the outset and approach agreed to meet the needs of all participants and potential audiences
- There are songs which lend themselves to signing, and songs that don't – see below

Songs for signing – suitability;

- Vocally suitable – they are appropriate to the vocal range and ability of the performers (of course the key can be changed to drop or lift the range to suit the voices)
- Lyrically suitable – the meaning of the words is clear and understandable to the performers and suitable for the audience (including consideration of explicit content)
- Lyrics can be translated into signs which can be memorised by the participants, and are interesting in sign as well as vocally interesting. This requires both expertise and judgement so consulting a signer is the fastest route to good assessment. e.g. ‘Happy’ by Pharrell Williams is full of metaphor and lyric repetition; there is only one sign for ‘happy’ which is two quick claps, making signing repetitive and the sign doesn’t lend itself to the sung word; the signs become meaningless if the instruction in the lyrics to ‘clap along’ is followed.
- Knowing the audience and their use of signing is essential; if sign is your first language, then the signs are paramount for you. If it isn’t, then other elements may be equally important.
- In BSL, signs and words probably won’t match; this means it takes longer to learn if you are both a speaker and a signer, because you’re saying different things at the same time, so allow more time for practise. For singers who are copying signing this is much easier

Moving up a level;

- Signs which match the pulse or rhythmic patterns of the song enhance memorising and make rhythm visible. Polished, flowing signs which convey the musical elements of the song mean that DHI audience members get as much of an artistic experience as hearing audience members do
- Signs with more gesture than everyday conversation add to the dramatic feel of the song (though endless big signs looks as if signers are shouting)
- As with other community music practice, participants involvement in decision making is as pertinent for signing as it is for singing; this matters where there are signing options and where metaphor is being interpreted, and where drama and gesture are being developed creatively, though this should not distract or detract from the signs and their meaning
- Where song and music creation is part of a project, signing can easily be an integral part of the creation process, rather than added later. Signs can just as easily be the starting point for song creation as lyrics.

Features of musicality in Signing

- Signs flow, conveying the shape of a line or a phrase in the way signs are made
- Signing looks natural, and signs ‘breathe’ in the way the music does
- Signs convey the mood of the music, as well as the words
- Signs convey dynamics and growth through the song (which means working out where to start, to avoid two verses of SHOUTING at the end)
- Body language and facial expression match the mood of the music

- Signing respects the pulse, rhythm and metre of the song (for example, 'Circle of Life' from The Lion King has a moderate pulse of four, but a slow feel of 1)
- There are a consistent number of signs in each line, and consistent numbers across verses (there are not 10 signs in the first verse and 20 in the second, compressed into the same amount of music and time)
- For conveying emotion or mood, the sign order may need to be altered so that the sign matches the musical and vocal 'climactic' moments of a line or verse
- Signs match the words and music appropriately; sometimes a lyric is continuous where music is not (e.g. over a line break) which needs to be made visible through signs
- Signs must be both expressive and clear; placement in the 'frame' for signing matters for people who need sign to enhance their experience (depending on the sign system, this can be the lead hand, the size of the 3D signing space)
- The progression of the story through the song matters. This may mean that signs develop through the song (e.g. two characters moving closer together as the song progresses)
- Enjoyment and pleasure in performing also matter ...

Some of these elements can be hard to explain – they may be in the musical instinct of a signing leader, not necessarily immediately understood by a participant.

Olympic Level;

Where there are multiple voices, or parts and harmony, then signing works in just the way that singing does – our ears (and so our eyes) follow the dominant voice whilst recognising everything else that's going on around it. We all 'downsize', compress or make choices about which elements to concentrate on, whilst acknowledging the complexity of the whole.

This is difficult in signing as our eyes aren't as good at registering many things the way our ears are. Signing leaders have therefore to make clear choices about the ways in which they will direct the audience's attention (in just the way that the conductor or choir leader would do for the music).

Resources

Yorkshire Youth & Music has a series of BSL signed songs on video, recorded by Paul Whittaker, on [our YouTube channel](#).

YY&M also has various resources available on our [Great Singing, Great Signing](#) web page and the [resources](#) section of our website.

Accessible Arts & Media (based in York) have resources [on their web-site](#) including videos for signing technique. They use Signalong, and participants invent their own signs as part of their creative process

DARTs (Doncaster Community Arts) '[We Speak Music](#)' project uses Makaton in Early Years including song creation and working in different languages spoken in the local community

Additional Information

Yorkshire Youth & Music is a community music education company working across the whole of Yorkshire, principally with children in challenging circumstances. This guide was produced as part of our Great Singing Great Signing project, funded by the National Foundation for Youth Music and led by Dr Paul Whittaker OBE

Singing and Signing Summit

The first Singing and Signing Summit took place on 30th January 2018 at the Doncaster School for the Deaf (part of Doncaster Deaf Trust). Organised and chaired by Gail Dudson, the Director at YY&M (as part of her MA with Sheffield University and in conjunction with our Great Singing, Great Signing project), the summit was a discussion to open the debate on how different organisations approach a singing and signing project.

Aims of the Summit

- To provide clarity about which signing systems work best in particular situations, and to consider the relationship between them and fluidity and change in sign languages
- To investigate and explain what good practice is;
 - Interpretation, translation and performance skills in signing
 - Quality principles in signing and music alignment
 - The value of musicianship in sign language interpretation
 - Understanding the needs of performers AND audience

Contributors

Dr Paul Whittaker, MBE, musician and interpretive signer, project leader Great Singing Great Signing

Rose Kent, Director, Accessible Arts & Media, York

Georgina Biddle, Newcastle Music Education Hub

Janet Wood, DARTs and Doncaster Music Education Hub, Singing Leader

Jane Goodman, Deputy Headteacher, Doncaster School for the Deaf

Natalie Davies, Singing Leader, GSGS

Anna Myatt, Singing Leader, GSGS

Paul Davies, Head of Doncaster Music Education Hub

Stephen Hestleton, BSL interpreter, GSGS

Flo Ingram, BSL interpreter, GSGS

Rebeka Haigh, YY&M, Visual Minutes Artist

Gail Dudson, Director YY&M, Facilitator