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emajor@caschools.us

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STORYTELLING THROUGH IMPRESSIONIST MUSIC AND  
AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE: THE ENGULFED CATHEDRAL

Elise Major

Advisor: Dr. Louie Hehman

Reader: Prof. Dave Clark

4 May 2023

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**ABSTRACT**

“The Legend of the City of Ys” is a Breton story of a city’s downfall and curse to be swallowed by the sea. Years later, this tragic tale inspired “The Engulfed Cathedral,” a piano composition for Claude Debussy’s Preludes, Book I, L. 117. Following analyses of “The Legend of the City of Ys” and “The Engulfed Cathedral,” an interpretation of the narrative was created in American Sign Language to be performed with the music. The goal is to focus on inclusivity and accessibility in music for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals, and then expand that to consider how to bridge the divide between Deaf and hearing communities. This project illustrates that storytelling is a core aspect of the human experience that transcends boundaries and connects people despite their differences. By exploring a story through different modes of communication, the aptitudes and limitations of each medium can be assessed, and the value of diverse forms of expression can be recognized.



## INTRODUCTION

The French province of Brittany is the origin of many medieval Celtic legends, including *Kêr-Is*, or “The Legend of the City of Ys.” Greatly influenced by Breton religion, these legends are often anchored in themes of hubris, fallenness, and divine retribution. “The Legend of the City of Ys” tells the tale of a city sunk by its pride, placing it in the rich historical tradition of flood stories. Variations of “The Legend of the City of Ys” feature King Gradlon the Great and his daughter Dahut, a sorceress or Druidess who is tricked by a sinister mythical figure, often interpreted to be the Devil or Maonos, the Breton god of love. Guénolé the monk is also a principal character, establishing a monastery and prophesying the city’s downfall. Through the oral tradition, this legend and many others became central to French culture, resurging in popularity during the Romantic era, when the legends were finally written and published in French and Breton languages. The European sunken city motif seen in “The Legend of the City of Ys” has been particularly influential throughout history, inspiring a composition by the Impressionist composer Claude Debussy in 1910.

Impressionist music is rich in imagery, and this is evident in many of Debussy’s programmatic works for solo piano, which are often explicitly story oriented. Debussy’s *La Cathédrale Engloutie*, or “The Engulfed Cathedral,” narrates the Breton legend of the sunken city of Ys. The sonorities of church bells, an organ, and vespers emerge from a fog-like soundscape as the city rises from the depths for a moment of glory in the sun, only to be drawn beneath the waters once more. These effects are created through the use of church modes and melodies reminiscent of Gregorian chant, as well as compositional techniques such as planing and pentachords connected by common tones. Debussy guides the performer through the narrative with evocative markings that describe the desired effect of each passage. For example, the opening of the piece is

to be played *Profondément calme (Dans une brume doucement sonore)*, or “Profoundly calm (With the sound of a gentle fog).” Another intriguing aspect of “The Engulfed Cathedral” is the A-flat in measure 45 that is replaced by its “lower” enharmonic equivalent G-sharp, marking the exact turning point of the narrative, the beginning of the cathedral’s descent. The score reflects visually the story that is conveyed aurally.

Many of the same ideas that are expressed through music and literature can be portrayed through a visual language like American Sign Language. ASL is highly spatial and inflected, involving components such as facial expression, hand shape, and motion. There is a strong oral tradition of storytelling rooted in Deaf communities. ASL narratives and poetry, as well as percussive signing and ASL translations of mainstream songs are popular within Deaf communities. These artistic expressions in ASL have many of the same qualities as traditional Western music, such as rhythm, tempo, and dynamic contrast. Many signs have a natural musicality or artistry about them. However, instrumental music is traditionally interpreted as a single sign, MUSIC. Unless there are lyrics, music is generally not made accessible to people who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Music is composed of many elements, so a visual experience that is representative of the auditory experience should be made available regardless of the presence or absence of lyrics. I would like to engage in this by creating a performance of “The Engulfed Cathedral” that effectively communicates “The Legend of the City of Ys” through ASL as well as through music.

## Literature Review

At the time of this study, there is no known research specifically investigating accessibility to Debussy's music for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals; there is however, research that generally explores the intersections between Deaf culture and music. For example, Jessica Holmes explains in "Expert Listening beyond the Limits of Hearing: Music and Deafness" that many Deaf people engage in the universal language of music through "tactile, visual, and kinesthetic stimuli" (173). According to Holmes, hearing is a specific type of touch where vibrations stimulate the ear. These vibrations may not be heard by some Deaf people, but they can be felt. Holmes suggests that being Deaf does not automatically exclude someone from enjoying rhythm and musicality, or the storytelling aspects and poetic expression of music.

Another article which explores the Deaf community's relationship with music is Noah Buchholz's "Seeing Music? An Inquiry into the Place of Music in Deaf Culture." This article is written from the perspective of a Deaf person and considers the historical importance of music and its place in the Deaf community. The article notes Aristotle and Plato's writings on the power and mystery of music, mentions Biblical scriptures regarding music, and acknowledges music's influence on the development of Renaissance and Baroque architecture. Buchholz states that while many Deaf people do enjoy music, it is not as central to Deaf culture as it is to other cultures. Also, much of ASL music is not original, but is instead dependent on preexisting aural music. When interpreted from English to ASL, some elements are lost because "translating into another language is like blowing a dandelion" (Buchholz 5). The author observes that most works of music in ASL do not move people the same way audible music does with respect to getting stuck in the listener's head or making them want to dance. Buchholz states his belief in "a completely different

kind of music that touches all Deaf people in mystical and indescribable ways waiting to finally be discovered” (5).

Music education for the Deaf, another current area of research, is explored in “The Role of Music in Deaf Culture: Implications for Music Educators” by Alice-Ann Darrow. This article begins with a history of Deaf education and Deaf culture, then moves into a statistical analysis of reported experiences in music education of Deaf individuals. Many Deaf students enjoy music and appreciate the opportunity to take music classes, so Darrow posits that music education should be made accessible to Deaf and hard of hearing students. Emily Hatch also writes about this idea in “Performing Without Sound: Using Sign Language to Teach Expressive Qualities of Music.” Because sign language movements have elements of space, time, weight, and flow, they can be used to teach students about musical expression, particularly beat, dynamics, and articulation. By incorporating sign language into her elementary music classes, Hatch creates a more inclusive environment that enhances learning for both hearing and Deaf students.

Jody Cripps also investigates the relationship between ASL and music in “A Case Study on Signed Music: The Emergence of an Inter-Performance Art.” This article gives a brief history of ASL and how ASL narratives and poetry grew in popularity. It also mentions versions of ASL music such as percussive signing and translated songs, and explains that in some cases, signed music can be very abstract and “autonomous from the auditory experience” (4). However, signed music has many of the same qualities as traditional Western music, such as rhythm, timbre, melody, texture, harmony, and motif. Cripps also argues that like Western music, signed music is rooted in culture and social experience. The article analyzes two performances of original signed music in particular: *Eyes* by Janis E. Cripps and *Experimental Clip* by Pamela E. Witcher. The analysis is performed by both Deaf and hearing authors looking for use of imagery, musical

elements, and linguistic properties. In *Eyes*, imagery is used to depict ocean waves and harmony is incorporated by having multiple layers of complementary signs occurring simultaneously, exemplifying musical concepts such as motif and polyphony. Rhythmic repetition is also key, and the authors note that this seems similar in concept to auditory pitch, explaining that there is a connection between the frequency of a sign and the frequency of a sound wave. Overall, the emotional tone of the piece is solemn and even angry at times. In *Experimental Clip*, the poet signs different classifiers repeatedly in rhythm to represent crowds of people in a hurry. The performance also includes a poetically signed conversation of conventional signs. The authors observe that the variation in use of high and low signing space is similar to pitch variation in the voice. This piece is identified as more lyrical than the first.

In addition to works of original signed music like the pieces discussed above, there is also a genre of interpreted signed music. Amber Galloway-Gallego is an ASL interpreter who specializes in interpretation of music, often at concerts or festivals. She cites studies that state that when Deaf people feel music, it interacts with the auditory cortex, raising levels of dopamine and lowering those of cortisol. According to Galloway-Gallego, music is for all humanity and does not discriminate. However, the interpretation of music can be poorly executed because only the lyrics are taken into account, and the other elements of music are ignored. Galloway-Gallego takes parts of ASL and uses them to make visual music that is more representative of the auditory experience.

One final resource to consider is “Songs for Hands: Analyzing Interactions of Sign Language and Music,” in which Anabel Maler analyzes online ASL interpretations of songs. She describes how interpreters can modify signs or create new signs, called productive signs, to illustrate musical features such as pitch, timbre, and phrasing. Rhyme schemes can be created by altering the handshape, location, motion, orientation, or facial expression of signs. This gives a

sense of lyric closure. Artful use of signing space can create melodic arcs and represent changes in pitch and timbre. Rhythmic closure comes from the elongation of the last sign in the phrase. According to Maler, through song signing, we experience music in a more holistic way and also work towards bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing communities.

### **Thesis Question**

My thesis will engage in the work that has been done to improve accessibility to music by recognizing the connections between music and ASL. This thesis project investigates how literature, music, and ASL serve as mediums for storytelling and how they can work together to create an aesthetic experience that is meaningful to hearing, Deaf, and hard of hearing audiences. This allows for an evaluation of which elements of music can be successfully communicated through ASL and why. Most importantly, it contributes to the understanding of accessibility and inclusivity in music, the interconnectedness of the diverse ways we express ourselves, and the implications these findings have on interactions between Deaf and hearing communities.

This project considers what music truly is at its core. How can it be deconstructed and then recreated in a different language? How can comparable forms of expression in different mediums tell the same story or evoke the same emotions? How should this affect our interactions with people who communicate differently from ourselves? These questions should be considered by artists because in order to express ideas in a way that reaches others, we must have a clear understanding of first our own art forms, and then how they participate in a larger framework of interwoven methods of communication. Only then will we be able to expand our work beyond barriers of language, culture, and ability.

Background research on Breton history and culture, the French Impressionist Movement, Claude Debussy, ASL grammar and syntax, and Deaf culture serve as a foundation for this thesis. The performance aspect of this creative project is an experimentation with visual and auditory imagery informed by a detailed analysis of the major themes and overarching narratives of “The Legend of the City of Ys” and “The Engulfed Cathedral,” as well as a close look at highly regarded Deaf poetry. The goal of the creative process is to fit the ASL to the pace, rhythm, intensity, and narrative of the original piece. For example, repetition in hand shapes or motions can parallel alliteration or rhyme in text, as well as planing or parallelism in music. The tone of the writing and mood of the music can be portrayed through facial expressions and other mannerisms in ASL. With the final ASL narrative, I will create an inclusive performance of “The Engulfed Cathedral” in which music and sign language are performed simultaneously.

This thesis includes not only an English gloss transcript of the ASL to be performed, but also an illuminated score that artfully depicts the fusion of music, sign language, and storytelling. As a contemporary take on the medieval practice of decorating manuscripts, my illuminated score captures the aesthetic of an ancient legend, an impression of its performance, and the thought that perhaps forms of visual and aural communication are more connected than we realize.

This thesis can be considered a nontraditional translation project where distinctions between language and art blur, in the tradition of *ekphrasis* where an existing work is explored and expanded in another medium. Moving fluidly between vastly different modes of communication is complex and nuanced, but also rewarding. Each medium, through its artistry and idiosyncrasy, contributes something original and adds a layer of depth to the meaning of the story. This metamorphosis reveals novel insights into the nature of literature, music, and sign language. Viewing this classic story of an underwater city from different vantage points yields a rich

illustration of storytelling as a fundamental aspect of human expression despite differences in manners of communication.

Some things may be lost in translation, but perhaps some things can be gained as well. Some might say that translating into a different language is like blowing a dandelion and losing the seeds to the wind, but in this case, translation is more like light dispersion through a prism where the transmitted spectrum looks nothing like the incident light yet gives a clear image of what constitutes light and illustrates its very definition. The products of this project will not be identical to the source materials, but my hope is that we will be able to see more clearly what constitutes music, language, expression, and humanity, and what makes a story worth telling.

## **THE LEGEND OF THE CITY OF YS**

### **Historical and Cultural Context**

The story that the French composer Claude Debussy presents in “The Engulfed Cathedral” is inspired by “The Legend of the City of Ys,” a Breton tale similar to the stories of the Genesis flood and the lost city of Atlantis. This narrative was conceived long before Debussy’s lifetime in what would become the French region of Brittany. The legendary sunken city is said to be submerged off the southwest coast of Brittany under the Bay of Douarnenez. In 56 B.C., this land, known as Armorica (meaning “seaside”), was conquered by Julius Caesar, and occupied by Rome for a period of time (Furth 1). The name Brittany came about in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries when Celtic people immigrated from Wales and Cornwall in Britain to escape their Anglo-Saxon enemies (“History of Brittany”). Missionaries from the British Isles converted many Celts, contributing to the overt Christian ideology seen in “The Legend of the City of Ys.” The history of Brittany involves a constant struggle for independence complete with revolution, rebellion, and



invasion, from the Carolingians to the Norse to the Angevin Empire to the French Capetian Dynasty. Brittany became part of France when Anne, the heir of Brittany, married King Charles VIII and then Louis XII of France (“History of Brittany”).

### **Literary Analysis**

The legend describes King Gradlon the Great building breakwaters and tide gates around the city of Ys to protect his people from the sea. Gradlon is a pious man, but his daughter Dahut is wicked. This is illustrated by details such as the portrayal of the seven deadly sins serving under Dahut as her pages. A monk called Guérolé, hoping to cast light on the evil lurking in the shadows, founds the first monastery in Brittany. He prophesies ruin for the city if the people do not turn from their wicked ways. Some versions of the legend also include descriptions of another saint, a hermit called Corentin. A devilish stranger, perhaps Maponos, the Breton god of love, or the Devil himself, disguises himself as a handsome knight and seduces Dahut, convincing her to steal the gate key from her father’s neck while he is sleeping. They unlock the gate and rushing waters begin to flood the city. Guérolé wakes Gradlon and warns him to escape. Gradlon and Dahut mount Morvarc’h, the horse of the sea, but a voice tells Gradlon he must cast his daughter off to save himself. Dahut is transformed into a siren or mermaid who calls out to tempt passing sailors, luring them into dangerous waters with her sweet voice. Gradlon continues his journey, and the waters recede as he arrives in Quimper. To this day, there is a statue of Gradlon between two towers of a cathedral in Quimper.

## Illuminated Manuscripts

In addition to this sculpture, there are surviving illuminated manuscripts that depict the Legend of the City of Ys. Illuminated manuscripts are artistically embellished works of literature and are usually sacred texts or works of historical or cultural importance. “The Legend of the City of Ys” is a traditional Breton tale passed from generation to generation through oral storytelling. The Breton songwriter Olivier Souvestre (1831–1896) produced a written record of the legend and commissioned illustrations inspired by the early French style of illuminated manuscripts (SPL Rare Books). An illuminated manuscript of Olivier Souvestre’s account of “The Legend of the City of Ys” has been preserved. The pages are highly decorated with designs and images hand-painted on the vellum. The illustrations that border the text feature bright flowers and leaves that form a colorful frame on each page. The text itself is in French and is written in black gothic characters. Some letters are decorated with ornate designs on a gold background. Major plot events such as Dahut dancing with the mysterious stranger and Gradlon fleeing on horseback from the flood are painted in vibrant colors.





## LA CATHÉDRALE ENGLOUTIE

### The Impressionist Movement

French modernist composers of the early twentieth century sought to escape the overwhelming German influence on classical music by looking to French music of the past, as far back as the Gregorian chant music of French medieval composers in the eighth and ninth centuries. The principles of German Romanticism were cast out in favor of the traditional “French values of decoration, beauty, and pleasure” (Burkholder 783). Out of this context, a modern style of music emerged in France, often called impressionism because of its relationship to the impressionist paintings that were popular at the time. Musicians and artists of this style sought to observe something and then create an impression that reflects, but does not necessarily mirror, the original (Burkholder 781–782). For example, according to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, when Claude Monet studied the Rouen Cathedral under different lighting conditions and painted it over 30 times,



he was not trying to accurately replicate each architectural detail, but rather attempting to capture its atmosphere.



### **Claude Debussy**

Claude Debussy was a contemporary of Monet, living from 1862 to 1918. He studied at the Paris Conservatory, but also had the chance to travel to Russia, Italy, and Germany. Debussy was a major proponent of French modernism. His music is often categorized as impressionist, despite the fact that Debussy preferred to be associated with the symbolist movement. Much like

symbolist poetry's abandonment of traditional syntax, Debussy's music is liberated from common-practice harmonic progressions and disregards traditional music theory. Debussy's works do have tonal centers, but feature advanced harmonies influenced by whole-tone, pentatonic, and octatonic scales. Unresolved dissonances, parallel motion, and attention to timbre and coloration are also essential to his sound. Melodic motives are not developed in the traditional sense, but instead are repeated "with small changes, like an object viewed from different perspectives," similar to Monet's Rouen Cathedral paintings (Burkholder 782). Many of Debussy's compositions, such as "The Engulfed Cathedral" Prelude, are programmatic character pieces, with descriptive titles that reveal the intended image.

### Musical Analysis

The opening of the "The Engulfed Cathedral" is marked *Profondément calme (Dans une brume doucement sonore)*, meaning profoundly calm, with the sound of a gentle fog. The sustained pianissimo dynamic and steady quarter note rhythms contribute to this tranquil atmosphere. The delicate chimes of the repeated chord in the soprano voice, the ascending parallel chords in the inner voices, and the slow descent of the bass line shape each phrase.

X

Profondément calme (Dans une brume doucement sonore)

The third phrase begins like the first two but is then extended with new melodic material that stays in the middle and high registers of the piano. Integrating octave Es that toll like a distant church bell, a soft and fluid melody with predominantly half note motion is presented. The octave Es are emphasized with tenuto marks, making them distinct from other notes in the phrase. The music swells in a brief crescendo before its decrescendo back to pianissimo.

The musical score consists of two systems of staves. The first system starts at measure 4, indicated by a box with the number '4'. It features a treble clef and a bass clef. The upper staff contains a melodic line with tenuto marks on the octave E notes. The lower staff contains a bass line with tenuto marks on the octave E notes. The tempo/mood is marked 'Doux et fluide'. The second system starts at measure 8, indicated by a box with the number '8'. It continues the melodic and bass lines, ending with a fermata over the final notes.

In m. 13, there is an inversion of the bass figure from m. 2 and m. 4. The intervals are now an ascending fifth followed by a descending sixth with a tenuto on the second note instead of a descending fifth followed by an ascending fifth with a tenuto on the third note.

This leads to the return of a variation of the opening phrase, which now has a slightly thicker texture and is marked *sans nuances*, or without nuances or shadings. The planing chords of the inner voices ascend and then descend, drawing the first section of the piece to a close.

The second section of the piece begins in m. 16 with the marking *Peu à peu sortant de la brume*, or little by little coming out of the mist. The pattern of triplet eighth notes in the left hand creates an image of rippling waters as it rocks back and forth between two notes. The bass line then ascends and descends like a wave that crashes on the shore before receding into the ocean. The right-hand quarter note chords are marked pianissimo, with the interjection of piano *marqué*, or marked, whole note chords that are played by both hands.

Peu à peu sortant de la brume

sempre *pp*

*p marqué pp*

The overall dynamic increases to piano in m. 19, where the left-hand rhythms become more complex, alternating between triple and duple rhythms. The duple beat divisions at the start of each left-hand phrase occur in conjunction with the phrase endings in the right hand. The first note of each set of sixteenth notes in mm. 19–20 has a tenuto mark. These are emphasized because they are the highest pitches in these descending phrases and because they create rhythmic tension. The interplay between the voices throughout this passage is much like a take on the medieval hocket, where the beginnings and ends of phrases are staggered between different voices (Sanders 246). Here, the right hand plays an ascending phrase, and the left hand immediately takes over with a descending phrase.

18

*p marqué pp*

*p*

marqué

20

Augmentez progressivement (Sans presser)



This beginning of this pattern is marked *Augmentez progressivement (Sans presser)*, or progressively growing larger (without rushing), transitioning from a piano to a fortissimo dynamic level. The sound continues to build as thick chords and piercing octaves in the upper register, which then plunge into the rich lower register of the piano. The half note G marked sforzando acts as the dominant leading to the tonic C that lays the foundation for the climax of the piece. Both hands play a regal melody in parallel chords, creating an effortless full sound, a *Sonore sans dureté* that evokes a grand cathedral organ.

The image shows a musical score for two systems. The first system, starting at measure 25, features a treble clef staff with a half note G marked *sforzando* (sf) and a bass clef staff with a half note C. The music is marked *più f* and includes fingerings (1, 5) and a dynamic marking of *sf*. The second system, starting at measure 28, is titled *Sonore sans dureté* and features a treble clef staff with a half note G marked *sforzando* (ff) and a bass clef staff with a half note C. The music is marked *ff* and includes a dynamic marking of *coll'8*.

Heavily accented half notes ascend out of this texture, and rapidly decrescendo into distant the toll of a clock tower, reminding the citizens of Ys that their time is running out. Thus, with a change in notation from A-flat to its lower enharmonic equivalent G-sharp, the cathedral begins its descent.

37

coll'8

coll'8

coll'8

42

*p*

*più p*

*pp*

*più pp*

The third section of the piece narrates the last moments in the sun for the citizens of Ys. In m. 47, an *expressif et concentré*, or expressive and concentrated chant-like meditative melody provides forward motion, moving *Un peu moins lent (Dans une expression allant grandissant)*, or a little less slow (in a growing expression). This echoes melodic material from earlier in the piece but is now presented in a more exposed texture with a single voice, perhaps representing a priest or monk, singing over a bass drone.

Un peu moins lent (Dans une expression allant grandissant)

47

*pp* *expressif et concentré*

Additional voices later thicken the texture, giving the effect of a full liturgical choir. After swelling to a stormy fortissimo dynamic, the crashing waves subside, leaving nothing but an underwater murmuring.

60

8

*ff*

*molto dim.*

69

*pp*

In the fourth section of the piece, the city slowly sinks until it is once again completely submerged. In m. 72, the right hand plays an echo of the material from the opening of the piece, but this time accompanied by low, murky eighth notes in the bass marked *Flottant et sourd*, meaning floating and muted.

72

au Mouvt

*pp* Comme un écho de la phrase entendue précédemment

3 2 1 1 2 1

8

*Flottant et sourd*

The waters still and clarity is restored with the dotted whole note C in m. 84 that marks the end of the eighth note pattern. The opening material returns to close the piece, this time in a lower

register, as if moving below water level. Additional color tones add to the dreamlike quality. Finally, at the bottom of the last page, the title of the piece is revealed. In all of his preludes, Debussy waits until the end of the piece to notate the title. This shows that he believed that the music itself could create the desired atmosphere even before the aid of a written descriptive title is given.



(... La cathédrale engloutie)

## AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Because of its nature as a manual, visual language, American Sign Language gravitates towards impressionism through physical expression. Someone who does not know any sign language could probably guess what many signs mean because the shapes and motions are such clear reflections of the objects and ideas they represent. However, not all aspects of ASL are intuitive. ASL is a complex, nuanced language that is distinct from spoken English.

### Grammar and Syntax

There are dialects of sign language such as Signing Exact English or Pidgin Signed English that adhere to English grammar, but American Sign Language follows its own set of rules. Sentence structure generally starts with clarifying the tense and what is being talked about, and

then describes it, comments on it, or asks about it, and then ends with a closing signal. Non-manual signs such as facial expressions and head shaking may be used as well and can change the meaning of a word or sentence. For example, “What is your name?” would be signed as YOU NAME WHAT YOU, with raised eyebrows to indicate that it is a question, and “I went to school” would be PAST SCHOOL I GO-TO.<sup>1</sup>

### **Deaf Culture**

Because of the beauty of this unique communication style, many Deaf people do not view deafness as a disability, but instead as a culture. Deaf communities celebrate their shared language and shared experiences, and many individuals have no desire to wear assistive hearing devices or use spoken English. Some are hesitant because they do not want to have hearing values imposed on them in a way that could undermine their identities as Deaf individuals (Darrow 94). Others, however, do use hearing aids or cochlear implants for safety reasons or as tools to help them participate in the hearing world. Instead of feeling left out, they are able to take advantage of opportunities that may not be available to them otherwise (Darrow 108). People have strong opinions about what is best, so these choices can often cause division.

### **Deaf Poetry**

However, artistic expression is part of the human condition and can be used to bring people together despite their disagreements. Many artists from both hearing and Deaf communities express themselves through poetry. Deaf poetry differs from traditional English poetry because it

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1. The conventional written notation for signs in ASL is known as gloss and uses all capitalized letters.

is performed instead of written. Because of this, it is almost more like live music than written poetry. In ASL, two signs for POETRY have been used, one close to the sign MUSIC and the other representing expression from the heart (Rose 145). Deaf poetry often involves rhythm and repetition, much like the devices used in music. Signs that are modified from the original may also be used to enhance visual metaphors (Rose 146). When telling a story with multiple characters, a shift in mannerisms and body angle indicates a switch in which persona is being portrayed. All of these elements come together to create an aesthetic experience.

### **Traditional Interpretation of Music**

Instead of applying these expressive devices to instrumental music, interpreters typically sign MUSIC and then wait for something else to happen. Because of this, instrumental music is not made accessible to Deaf audiences. They are left wondering, “What kind of music?” Innovators such as Amber Galloway-Gallego are starting to change this in certain genres of popular music, but the inclusion of the Deaf community in the classical music scene is an area that is largely unexplored. It is time to embrace “innovative artistic practices” and “break away from the traditional mindset regarding what constitutes music” (Cripps 1). Music is more than just lyrics, so the other elements of music should be taken into consideration when interpreting music for Deaf and hard of hearing audiences.

## **ASL INTERPRETATION**

### **Objectives**

Using American Sign Language, a visual-spatial impression of the Legend of the City of Ys was created to complement Debussy’s “The Engulfed Cathedral.” This is designed to be

performed live. The objectives of this project are to improve accessibility and inclusivity in music by recognizing the connections between music and ASL, to evaluate which elements of music can be successfully communicated through ASL, and to explore the implications this has on interactions between Deaf and hearing communities.

### **Creative Process**

I began with Debussy's descriptive markings in the music and expanded the narrative from there, taking inspiration from the characters and major themes of "The Legend of the City of Ys." In the spirit of impressionism, I avoided finger spelling and instead chose signs that have strong imagery and naturally flow into each other. To align with the tempo and meter of the music, I decided to change signs on strong beats. I experimented with visual and auditory imagery, often placing signs with dramatic motions in the most intense passages of music and delicate signs in the most subdued passages of music. I also found that changes in register where the music shifts from high to low pitch or the vice versa could be signified by the use of a sign that clearly moves upwards or downwards through space. These moments also had to be created with signs that made sense within the larger structure of the narrative.

### **Transcript**

Glossing is a system of transcribing ASL that uses written English words to notate signs. This gloss was created to document the signed version of "The Legend of the City of Ys" that was created to be performed alongside Debussy's "*La Cathédrale Engloutie*." Below each line of ASL gloss is an English description of its meaning.

ONCE-UPON-A-TIME FOG FOG GENTLE BECLOUD SEA  
Once upon a time, a gentle fog clouded the sea

COVER CITY SUBMERGED BECAUSE SIN  
The sea covered the underwater city because of its sin

PEOPLE HEARTBEAT FULL PRIDE EVIL  
The people's hearts were full of pride

BUT EVERY ONE-THOUSAND YEARS DAY SUN GIVE  
But once every thousand years, they were granted a day in the sun

MIST APPEAR TOWERING CROSS CHURCH DISTANCE  
In the distance, the steeple of a church emerged from the mist

PEACE RIPPLES CHANGE SURGE MOUNTAIN  
Peaceful ripples in the water became surging waves like mountains

KING RIDE WAVE SPIRIT HORSE  
Upon which the horse of the sea carried the king

GO-TO THRONE LOOK CITY GLORY  
To his throne overlooking the city in all its glory

SKY BIRD BLUE BUTTERFLY  
A sky of bluebirds and butterflies

LAND DEAD OVERCOME GRAVE RISE BREATHE EXPRESS  
A land where the dead overcame the grave to rise and breathe again, crying

GLORY DARK-BECOME-LIGHT  
Glory to God, darkness has become light

GLORY NIGHT-BECOME-DAY  
Glory to God, night has become day

GLORY WRONG-BECOME-RIGHT  
Glory to God, our wrongs have been made right

GLORY SHAME-BECOME-GRACE  
Glory to God, our shame is covered by grace

GLORY DEATH-BECOME-LIFE  
Glory to God, we were dead but now we are brought to life



HALLELUJAH  
Hallelujah

PEOPLE LOOK CLOCK AND REMEMBER TIME VANISH  
The people looked to the clock tower and remembered their time was running out

FALL  
Thus began the descent

TIDE APPROACH STREET PEOPLE CRY  
The tide came in and there was weeping in the streets

PROPHET MONK CHANT MERCY LORD HAVE  
A monk chanted "Lord have mercy"

KING DAUGHTER BECOME FISH WOMAN HAIR-WAVE  
The king watches his daughter turn into a mermaid with hair like waves

GATE WATERFALL OVERWHELM  
As water overwhelmed the floodgates

HURRICANE STORM RAIN WIND FURY BECOME CALM  
The raging storm subsided

DEEP UNDER BURDEN REALITY  
Plunging into the depths under the weight of reality

RUMBLE MURMUR  
There is a rumbling, a murmuring

WHISPER SEAWEED NEBULOUS OCEAN  
Swallowed by wisps of seaweed and murky waters

ALIVE DOLPHIN TURTLE FISH  
Alive with dolphins and turtles and fish

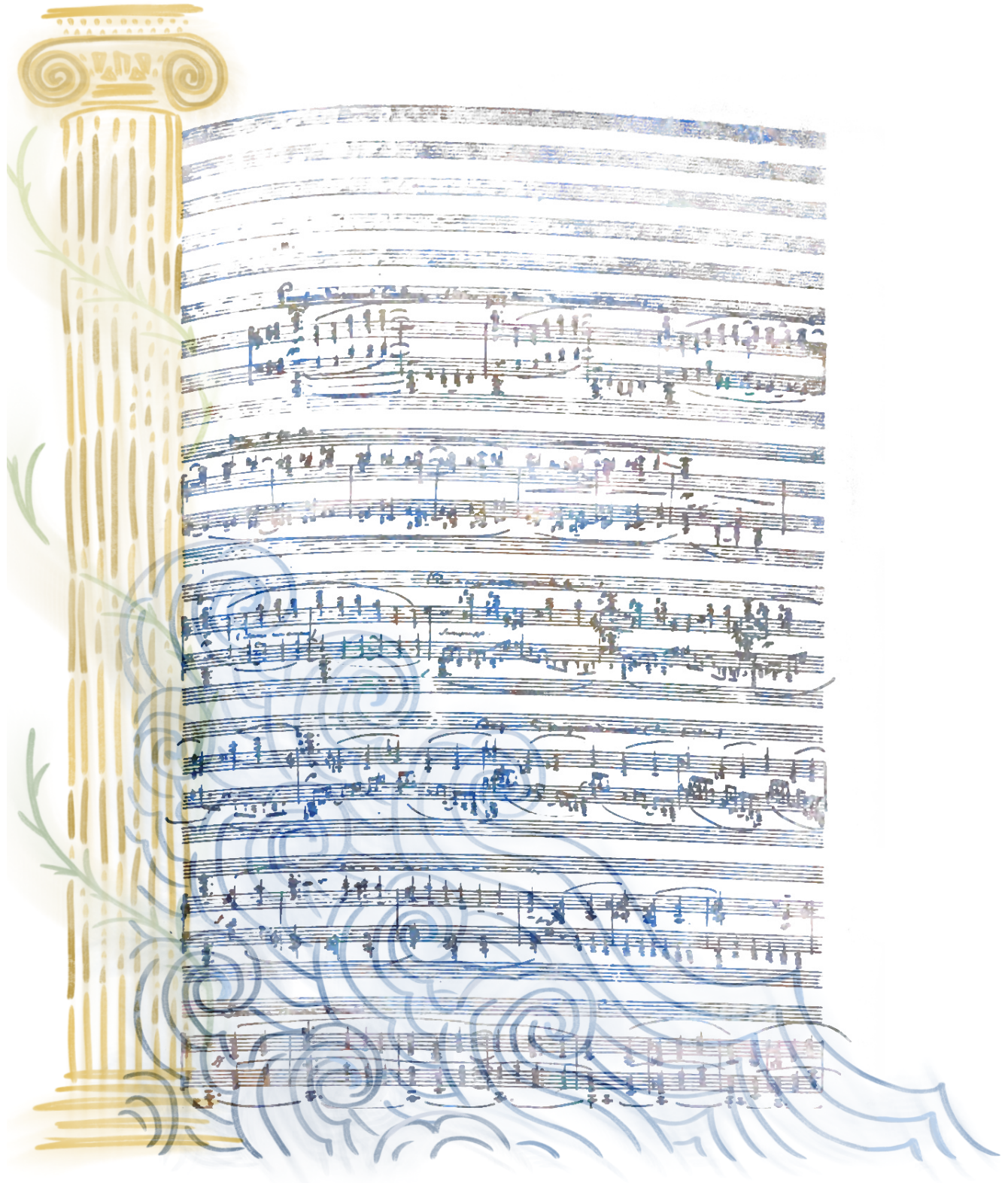
SUNSET MEDITATION ACCEPT  
A sunset meditation of acceptance

MOON STARS GLISTEN REFLECT OCEAN  
Lights from the moon and stars glistened as reflections on the water

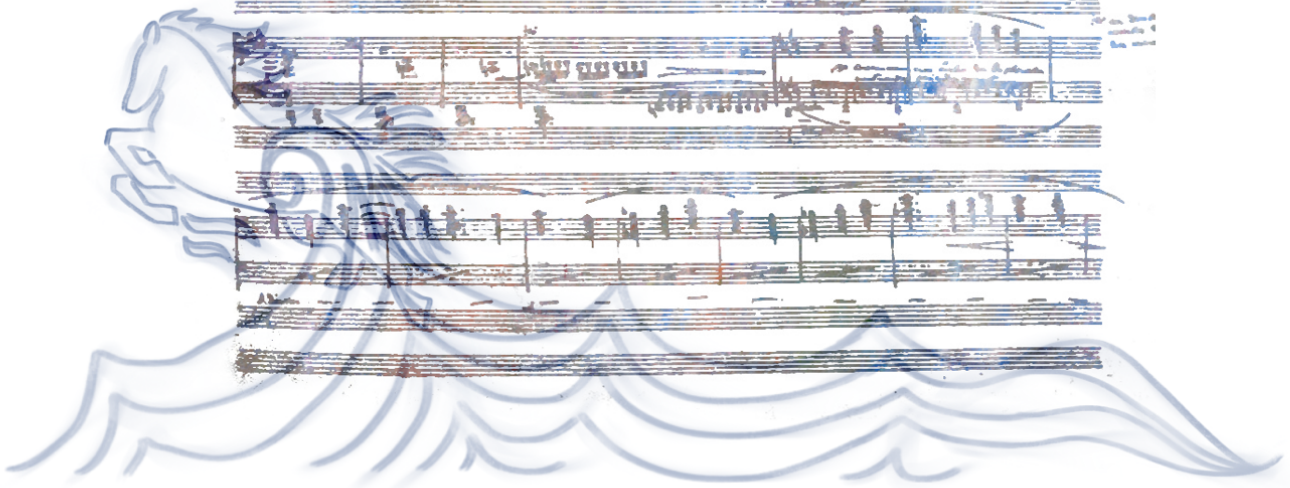
BUBBLES DREAM FORGIVE  
Rising with the last of bubbles, a dream of forgiveness

### **Illuminated Score**

In the spirit of medieval manuscript decorating, an illuminated score was created to depict “The Legend of the City of Ys” and “The Engulfed Cathedral” through a visual art medium. A copy of Debussy’s autograph manuscript serves as the foundation and was colorized with blue and gold. The color choices were inspired by the illuminated manuscript of “The Legend of the City of Ys” as well as by Monet’s Rouen Cathedral paintings. Elements of the story such as crashing waves, the horse of the sea, and the magnificent columns of the city of Ys are portrayed in a simple sketch style similar to the hand-drawn images in the illuminated manuscript of “The Legend of the City of Ys.”



A handwritten musical score consisting of ten staves. The notation is written in blue and brown ink. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music features a variety of note values, including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and beams. The score is organized into measures by vertical bar lines. The handwriting is fluid and characteristic of a composer's manuscript.







### **Analysis**

The first few lines of the transcript can be used as a sample analysis to show how the signs are related to the music. The sign for ONCE-UPON-A-TIME features a repetitive traveling circular motion that is the visual equivalent of the ascending parallel chords in the opening phrase of “The Engulfed Cathedral.” ONCE-UPON-A-TIME and FOG have similar open hand shapes and circular movements, so they are lined up with repeated phrase ideas in the music. Likewise, consistency in hand shape is used to enhance the flow of the piece from BECAUSE to SIN and HEARTBEAT to FULL. The waves of the SEA pulse with the steady chimes of the octave Es. The storytelling shines through the vivid imagery of the signs. For example, the hands forming rooftops in CITY followed by the lifting arm showing the rising sea level in SUBMERGED clearly illustrates the underwater city. SUBMERGED also raises the hand to forehead level in preparation for BECAUSE.

### **EVALUATIVE ESSAY**

#### **Translatable Elements of Literature, Visual Art, Music, and ASL**

The loud or quiet dynamics of music can be represented by large or small size of signs, although it is sometimes difficult to keep the signs small during the quiet passages on a piece as slow as this. Rhythm, tempo, and meter can also be incorporated. Signs with repetitive motions can be performed in rhythm at different tempi, and signs can change on strong beats to create a sense of meter. Multiple signs that have similar hand shapes or motions can be used to represent rhyme in literature or parallel phrase structures and developments of melodic motifs in music.

Signs that have distinct upward or downward motions through space can signify ascending or descending pitch, or a change in register.

The story itself is the most easily translated aspect of literature, music, and American Sign Language. In this case, the medieval aesthetic created by the art style of the illuminated manuscript can be transferred to music by imitating the sounds of a gothic cathedral through the extensive use of sustain, parallelism, and church modes. Once this scene is set, the narrative can be portrayed through words, sounds, or gestures. The tone and mood are conveyed mainly through word choice in literature. In music, this is done through dynamics and articulations, tempo and tonality, and melodic shape. In sign language, facial expression and posture contribute to the portrayal of different characters and emotions.

Literature, visual art, music, and sign language all have an element of artistic expression to them. Intentional choice of beautiful language can paint an image in the reader's mind, as can a gracefully signed word in ASL. An expressively shaped phrase in music can evoke an emotion, much like the colors of a painting can. These mediums are interconnected in many ways, informing, influencing, and inspiring each other.

### **Limitations**

Throughout the creative process, I found myself tempted to use the signs BELLS or RING or signs for other words that simply describe the music. Instead of incorporating these words into the interpretation, I opted to produce an inclusive visual alternative to the sounds that would be more relatable to members of the Deaf and hard of hearing community. I sought to choose signs that are connected to the story and would be meaningful to someone who does not have experience with music or other sounds. The success of the project is aided by the fact that this is a

programmatic work of music to begin with. It would be much more difficult to interpret absolute music that does not already have a clear narrative associated with it. It would not be impossible, but the resulting ASL interpretation would likely have to be more abstract, which may make it less attractive to some because it could be more difficult to understand and connect to.

### **Value of Storytelling through Multiple Mediums**

Using multiple mediums to tell a single story is valuable because it allows for the connection of diverse populations of people who have different abilities and different life experiences. It also promotes a deeper understanding of the story because each medium brings something unique to the table and has the power to illuminate different aspects of the story, allowing for it to be experienced in a new way. Also, people respond differently to art. For example, some people are deeply moved by music, while others may be more touched by a painting. Therefore, having multiple mediums means having the power to reach more people effectively.

## **REFLECTION**

### **Deconstructing and Redefining Music**

Throughout the process of analyzing Debussy's "The Engulfed Cathedral" prelude, I realized that music is more than notes and rhythms. It cannot be broken into mere sounds without losing meaning. Because of this, we should expand our definition of music to include the expressive elements of music, the storytelling aspects that have the ability to transcend sound. Through American Sign Language, music can be made without any sound at all. Music is not just for the hearing, and sign language is not just for the Deaf. These two modes of communication are



intricately interwoven, and embracing this reality will facilitate the coming together of two communities of people that have lived in separation for too long.

### **Accessibility and Inclusivity**

Accessibility and inclusivity are important in music, especially in classical music, which often has a reputation of being elitist because it is a field that has historically been dominated by white men. Putting effort into making classical music available to all people can shut down any notions that classical music is racist or sexist or ableist. The people most separated from classical music are those who cannot hear it. If we can bridge this divide and connect to Deaf and hard of hearing communities through classical music, I truly believe there are no limits to the power of human connection and no barrier too great to overcome.

### **Storytelling and Expression**

Storytelling is a core aspect of the human experience, and has been since the beginning of human existence. We have a natural desire to express ourselves and connect to one another through stories. This is seen when we write poems and sing songs and perform plays. This is seen in our everyday conversations and in our milestone moments. The stories we tell and the stories we live connect us to the people around us. We can broaden and deepen our connections by using different mediums of expression to work together to reach diverse groups of people. Viewing a single story through multiple lenses adds depth to the meaning of the story and allows us to experience it from a different perspective and understand it in a new way. Everyone has a story to share. But if we do not actively work towards accessibility and inclusivity, not everyone will be able to hear it. We

must be willing to think outside the box and find new ways of communicating and better ways of connecting. This way of living is a story worth telling.

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