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Songwriting as a Form of Artistic Citizenship

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Abstract

This article examines VisualVoice, a Finnish musical group that integrates Finnish Sign Language and Finnish in its songs. Their work, as part of a larger research project on deafness, can be suggested as a form of artistic citizenship by actively promoting social inclusion and challenging traditional notions of musicianship. The duo's songwriting process, analyzed through a conceptualization of artistic citizenship and "maker in/for/of society," reveals how they translate the lived experiences of d/Deaf individuals, particularly those relating to residential schools, into music, fostering historical awareness and empowerment. The article examines song signing as an art form and the concept of artistic citizenship, contrasting them with the duo's songwriting process and highlighting their contribution to linguistic and cultural inclusivity. Ultimately, VisualVoice's work suggests the power of art to effect social change and create a more inclusive society and a more inclusive music education.

Keywords

Artistic citizenship, d/Deaf culture, maker in/for/of society, sign language, songwriting, VisualVoice

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Equality is a prerequisite for both artistic and pedagogical work in Finland (Juntunen 2018; Westerlund et al. 2021). The improvement of the status of sign language is one manifestation of this development, as the transition from "sign language shame" has evolved into a linguistically vibrant culture with a hopeful future (Koivisto and Katsui 2024; see also Harmon 2023; Rothe 2022). In Finland, one of the goals of the truth and reconciliation process planned by the Finnish government for the d/Deaf[1] is to increase awareness of sign language culture and sign languages as well as to raise awareness of past injustices among both authorities and private individuals (Ministry of Justice n.d., see also Koivisto and Katsui 2024). Historically, the enforcement of oralism had profound adverse effects on the linguistic and cultural identity of d/Deaf individuals, highlighting the importance of recognizing and supporting sign language as a vital part of d/Deaf education and culture (Koivisto and Katsui 2024; Ladd 2003). This article introduces VisualVoice, a group that combines Finnish Sign Language and Finnish in their music and artistic endeavors. VisualVoice served as a creative partner in the *Voices of a Silent People—Renovated Bodies*, a three-year research initiative (2021–2024) combining science and art at the University of Oulu, Finland and Humak, University of Applied Sciences, Finland. Funded by the Kone Foundation, the project focused on deafness and the history of the d/Deaf (Kone Foundation 2020).

Scholars agree that art has the potential to significantly impact broader social thought (e.g., Belfiore and Bennett 2007; Clift, Phillips, and Pritchard 2021; Freedman 2025, Reeves 2002; Westerlund et al. 2021). Even European Union policy (European Commission 2017) has emphasized the arts' role in addressing broader societal challenges, recognizing their direct and indirect engagement with issues such as inequality, migration, climate and environmental change, social justice, conflict, and violence, as well as loneliness and isolation (see also Foster, Mäkelä, and Martusewicz 2019). Art, by its very nature, serves as a form of communication and offers insights into aspects of the world that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Freedman 2025; Kertz-Welzel 2022). Recent research has highlighted the potential social and health impacts of arts engagement, though robust evidence remains limited. While some studies suggest arts participation may promote wellbeing, improve health outcomes, and enhance social inclusion (Hamilton, Hinks, and Petticrew 2003; Gordon-Nesbitt and Howarth 2020; Juntunen and Sutela 2023), critics argue that many claims lack rigorous evaluation (Clift, Phillips, and Pritchard 2021), and art participation might even promote exclusion and perpetuate alienation (Boeskov 2022; Hess 2019; Kertz-Welzel 2022).

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Music has historically been a powerful tool for social change. Songs can convey messages about critical social issues, inspire movements, and foster a sense of community and solidarity (Brenner 2021; RaNa 2025; Sutela 2023). Gaunt et al. (2021) draw on Small's (1998) concept of musicking to show how participation in music—whether performing, listening, or creating—can be understood as a relational practice. In educational settings, this view positions music-making as a shared process where teachers and learners build connections, foster inclusion, and link musical experiences to broader social and cultural contexts (Campbell 2018; Pellegrino 2015). Indeed, musicking emphasizes music as a social, interactive, and participatory activity, relevant across diverse settings—from formal concert halls to informal workshops. According to Gaunt and colleagues (2021), it can provide a valuable framework for exploring the continuum between art for art's sake and socially engaged practice. Rather than opposing artistic value and social interaction, musicking bridges them, expanding our understanding of music's potential and reinforcing the need for intentional, reflective practice (Camlin 2023; Churchill 2015; Kertz-Welzel 2022).

This article extends existing theories of artistic citizenship (Bowman 2016; Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016; Garcia-Cuesta 2024) and Gaunt and colleagues' (2021) concept of the "maker in/for/of society." While these frameworks emphasize participation, belonging, and social good, they do not stress enough how historical trauma, systemic exclusion, and cultural specificity complicate ideals of cohesion and universality. Based on data collected in *Voices of a Silent People—Renovated Bodies* (2021–2024), the authors expand prevailing notions of artistic citizenship to promote broader perspectives in its conceptualization.

In *Voices of a Silent People—Renovated Bodies* (2021–2024), researchers and artists were committed to making the memories of d/Deaf individuals and sign language speakers visible by promoting social awareness, enhancing the multimodality of music education pedagogy, and rethinking music-making and performance practices (Kone Foundation 2020). This research project also expanded traditional notions of musicianship and authorship. VisualVoice's artistic process crystallized the production of new knowledge in ways that respect multiple realities, understand knowledge as evolving and complex, and promote diverse ways of experiencing and conveying meaning. By influencing social discourse through songwriting, VisualVoice can be interpreted as practicing artistic citizenship (Garcia-Cuesta 2024). What follows is the authors' depiction of signed songs as an art form.

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Song Signing and Signed Songs

In the United States, where there is a strong d/Deaf music culture, sign language music performances have existed since at least the early 1900s (Bahan 2006; Cripps et al. 2025). In Finland, sign language choirs have been a central part of d/Deaf culture (Koivisto 2010). Initially, their performances consisted mainly of interpretations of hymns in religious or patriotic contexts. In 1912, for example, a group of Finnish d/Deaf people performed the national hymn with whistling at the Nordic Deaf Assembly in Stockholm. The event has been described as a manifestation of the d/Deaf community's organizing and self-determined social participation at a time when choral singing was an integral part of nation-building (Wallvik 2000). Since then, the performance of poems and songs in sign language has remained central to d/Deaf cultural events (Koivisto 2010).

Although the importance of choirs has declined in recent decades, there are signs of a revival in the form of smaller ensembles (Cripps et al. 2025). In the early 2000s, the popularity of song signing increased among both hearing and d/Deaf people driven by advancements in video recording technology and the rise of video-sharing websites such as YouTube (Maler 2013). As sign language song interpretation became increasingly visible, the tradition of song signing, once purely face-to-face among d/Deaf individuals, expanded to include popular songs performed by hearing sign language students and amateurs (Cripps et al. 2025; Maler 2015). This fusion created a genre that now embodies both historical sign language traditions and contemporary adaptations.

Signed songs are one version of face-to-face traditions in d/Deaf culture (Bahan 2006). They consist of rhythm, timbre, texture, and motif, and are interpreted through d/Deaf experience and community (Cripps et al. 2025). Signed songs, which serve as cultural models of the d/Deaf community, differ from song signing tradition, which presents a song in sign language while the song is being sung or played (Bahan 2006; Cripps et al. 2025; Maler 2013, 2015).[2] Signed songs combine sign language and music in a way that allows d/Deaf and hearing audiences to enjoy the music and understand the song's message. Sign language signs and lyrics are synchronized with the words and rhythm of the song to form a cohesive expression (Maler 2013, 2015).

Bahan (2006) distinguishes between two primary categories: percussion signing and translated songs. Percussion signing involves the structured arrangement of signs into rhythmic patterns as they integrate the linguistic and visual elements of sign language with the temporal structures of music by or-

ganizing signs into deliberate rhythmic patterns (e.g., Maler 2015). Alternatively, translated songs are direct translations of spoken or sung lyrics into sign language (Bahan 2006); they typically aim to preserve the original semantic content while adapting signs to fit the timing, rhythm, and expressive qualities of the music. Unlike percussion signing, where sign language is shaped primarily by rhythmic and visual-musical considerations, translated songs prioritize conveying the original linguistic meaning, with musical alignment as a secondary concern (Bahan 2006). However, contemporary song signing practices in live performances and digital media extend beyond these two categories.

Indeed, signed music is deeply connected to the d/Deaf community because it originates from and reflects d/Deaf culture rather than being an adaptation of auditory music (Bahan 2006; Cripps et al. 2025). Unlike hearing people's use of gestures in musical performance, signed songs are a distinct art form rooted in signed language and inherently tied to d/Deaf identity. Importantly, signed songs are not limited to interpreting auditory songs or expressing exclusively d/Deaf experiences; they encompass universal themes, allowing d/Deaf audiences to engage with broader narratives (Cripps et al. 2025).

At the same time, Robinson (2022) critiques hearing-centric assumptions that privilege speech and auditory listening while marginalizing visual-tactile epistemologies fundamental to d/Deaf lifeways. Practices such as song-signing, often framed as inclusive, exemplify this bias by reducing sign language to aesthetic display and stripping it of grammatical and affective integrity, rendering it illegible to native signers (Robinson 2022, 868–73). According to Robinson (2022) such acts perpetuate epistemic injustice (see also Fricker 2007) by positioning "access" as a performative accommodation rather than a co-constructed process grounded in DEAF-centered communicative norms. Robinson's (2022) critique underscores how dominant speech-text paradigms misrepresent d/Deaf knowledge-making and necessitates a reconfiguration of listening practices to recognize visual-tactile modes as authoritative forms of epistemology (see also Friedner and Kusters 2020).

This critique strongly resonates with VisualVoice's songwriting approach, where Finnish Sign Language (FSL) and Finnish were treated as autonomous linguistic and cultural systems rather than hierarchical translations of one another. At the same time, VisualVoice's work aligns with contemporary shifts in the process of songwriting. Increasingly, music technology applications and tools provide opportunities to create music without requiring formal training or the ability to read and write musical notation (Bauer 2020). Indeed, the swift

pace of technological advancement has introduced new opportunities for creating, learning, and experiencing music, while networked connectivity has significantly transformed both social and musical interactions (Waldron 2018). This technological shift has also broadened the scope of musicianship (Fick and Bulgren 2022; Kardos 2018). This reconceptualization of songwriting fosters diversity in knowledge and skill production for previously marginalized groups (for example participation without Western music literacy skills). VisualVoice has also embraced this change. As researchers and artists in this project, the authors viewed songwriting as an opportunity to contribute to social change while expanding awareness of the lived experiences of d/Deaf individuals who attended residential schools. Additionally, researchers aimed to communicate key research themes to a broader audience through a music video.[3]

Artistic Citizenship and the Musician as a Maker in Society

Artistic citizenship emphasizes the role of the arts in fostering social change and developing citizenship skills. Artistic citizenship can also be used as a way to conceptualize artistic activity in the name of social responsibility, as artists use their creative skills to promote justice and address societal problems (Foster and Sutela 2024). As "a moving target" (Bowman 2016, 61), artistic citizenship does not have a single established definition, but it typically focuses on participation, personal and communal flourishing, and social responsibility (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016; Garcia-Cuesta 2024).

The concept of artistic citizenship has gained prominence through challenging traditional views that prioritize aesthetic appreciation over socially engaged practice. Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman (2016) critique the idea of valuing art primarily as an object rather than an action, asserting that the arts inherently reflect the political and ideological beliefs of real people in real contexts. This opposes the romanticized nineteenth-century ideal of the isolated, apolitical artist and aligns with calls for more socially responsive artistic models (Polisi 2016). For these scholars, artistic citizenship is a commitment to using one's creative capacities to engage with and contribute to the well-being of communities, recognizing the inseparability of artistic practice from social responsibility.

However, Elliott and colleagues' (2016) vision of artistic citizenship has been critiqued on different grounds. Bradley (2018) questions the term citizenship itself, arguing that citizenship, as both legal and metaphorical discourse, carries "negative normativity" and may "recreate violence against vulnerable peoples," raising concerns about how inclusion discourses can be exclusionary

and privilege-laden (72–73). In contrast, Gould (2016) critiques normalization within LGBTQ studies and music education, arguing that "normativity is achieved through assimilation," and warning that the push to normalize selected variant sexualities operates through preestablished norms (123). At the same time, scholarship on artistic citizenship has often aimed to reconcile social, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of artistic practice through forms of societal engagement and resistance (e.g., Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016).

When clarifying the earlier understandings of the term artistic citizenship and its central values, Garcia-Cuesta (2024) divided these definitions into two: the artist as an artistic citizen, and a society of/with artistic citizens. Artistic citizens use their artistic pursuits to change themselves and the world for the better (e.g., Bowman 2016; Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016). In contrast, a society of/with artistic citizens refers to social and communal flourishing through participating and interacting with the arts (e.g., Caris and Cowell 2016). These sets of definitions can be criticized for their reliance on normative terms of social good and personal improvement, which are often defined externally (Garcia-Cuesta 2024). Additionally, the concept can be understood as elitist and fosters a narrow, normative understanding of who and what an "artist" and a "citizen" are (Garcia-Cuesta 2024), including by placing responsibility and ability at its center. However, Bowman (2016) stresses that linking artistry and citizenship can matter when pursuing a move beyond elitist, apolitical conceptions of art and toward socially engaged and ethically responsible practices.

Artistic citizenship can also be a lens for promoting critical reflection. The concept can be used as a tool to question the belief that the arts always function as a positive factor for social change (Garcia-Cuesta 2024). At worst, the use of the term artistic citizenship can feel harmful to people who experience unbelonging, exclusion, and discrimination (Boeskov 2022; Bradley 2018). Thus, Garcia-Cuesta (2024) argues that the damaging potential of artistic citizenship might invite its use as a lens to promote understanding of artistic citizenship and artistry as a continuous, contested, and questioned process, thereby opening the way to more inclusive, plural, and co-created understandings of who can be an artist.

In the context of music, Gaunt and colleagues (2021) have formulated an idea of the musician as a "maker in society," which combines artistic excellence with social awareness. Rooted in craftsmanship (Sennett 2009), this concept values practical skill, embodied knowledge, and active creation. Unlike the mere reproduction of established works (e.g., playing canonical scores with little personal input), "making" in this context involves creative interpretation,

innovation, and social engagement with the social conditions surrounding the musical activity. While this understanding resonates with Small's (1998) broad notion of musicking—that is, any form of participation in a musical event—it is important to note that Small's concept is descriptive rather than inherently emancipatory. Small (1998) directs attention to the social relationships enacted through musical action. We use musicking to highlight the relational and contextual dimensions of musical practice, while acknowledging that the value placed on creativity and social awareness stems from Gaunt et al.'s (2021) framework rather than from Small's (1998) terminology.

Significantly, the phrase "maker in society" can evolve: 1) Maker in society—embedded within and responding to social contexts; 2) Maker for society—serving societal needs or goals; and 3) Maker of society—actively shaping culture and community (Gaunt et al. 2021). These variations reflect diverse ethical, social, and political orientations. They prompt musicians to reflect on their purpose, responsibility, and impact, thus bringing greater ethical and civic awareness into professional musical practice.

VisualVoice and Songwriting Process of the "Voices of a Silent People"

VisualVoice is the only music group in Finland that uses Finnish Sign Language and Finnish in their work. Before the current research project, VisualVoice had mainly performed cover songs. VisualVoice was invited to participate to the research project *Voices of a Silent People—Renovated Bodies* in order to compose a song about the themes emerged during the data collection and analysis. The research project consisted of three scholars (one d/Deaf and two hearing) and two artists from VisualVoice.

VisualVoice consists of two artists, Silva Belghiti and Laura Vaarala (also authors of this article). Silva is d/Deaf and the first sign-language actor to graduate from the Theatre Academy. Throughout their life, they have performed in the theatre industry in various art forms, from poetry to physical theatre. Laura is a sign language instructor and interpreter by profession. Laura describes their relationship with music as auditory. Laura's approach to sign language is also "fully hearing," which is how Laura describes their childhood and youth in a world of fully hearing people without sign language or a d/Deaf community. Additionally, Laura's home language is sign language due to their d/Deaf spouse. Laura and Silva are united by their desire to give space to each other and to appreciate each other's creative expression, which provides the basis for

artistic activities that promote equality. They are both autonomous performers, expressing themselves in their language, without interpreting or translating each other's expressions. Through this project, they developed the art of songwriting grounded in a d/Deaf-centred epistemology, a way of producing information through the visual-tactile senses. In their work, they rejected the idea of music as a tool for auditory perception and expression, as this would have excluded Silva, d/Deaf artist, from the process.

The songwriting process of the song called "Voices of a Silent People" drew on arts-based research methodologies (Leavy 2020), providing both a methodological and an ethical continuum for the research project. Doing so, it highlighted how songwriting is not just a method for enacting artistic citizenship, but an epistemological attitude that permeates the entire process, questioning the power relations of knowledge production and operating on the terms of the community (Bhattacharya 2019). Creative writing, or in this case songwriting, highlighted vulnerable experiences and initiated socially significant change in a therapeutic and pedagogical sense (cf. Faulkner 2016; Faulkner and Squillante 2019). At the same time, song lyrics can be interpreted as a form of "small stories," defined as fleeting moments and thus stories in people's everyday lives (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008).

The songwriting process spanned one and a half years, from spring 2022 to autumn 2023. Initially, Laura and Silva familiarized themselves with the research themes, engaging in discussions with three researchers of the project on the history of d/Deaf education and cultural identity. Researchers shared the narratives of d/Deaf individuals, particularly those regarding residential school experiences, with VisualVoice. At the same time, these narratives provided a foundation for the creative process. The narratives were part of a larger dataset consisting of interviews, conducted in Finnish or Finnish-Swedish sign language, with 114 d/Deaf individuals who had attended state schools for the d/Deaf. Rather than detailing individual interviews, recurring themes that had emerged across the narratives were discussed with researchers and artists. The larger dataset also included letters, mainly from mothers, written to the school principal expressing their concerns about the child's education and well-being. Their experiences highlighted the linguistic separation between hearing parents and their d/Deaf children caused by schooling. Although signing was prohibited in schools until the 1970s, children continued to sign, nonetheless. At that time, signing was stigmatized, and deafness was something to be "corrected;" these painful experiences emerged strongly in the data and were discussed before songwriting process.

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Through iterative collaboration, the artists first created the lyrics for the song (in Finnish Sign Language and in Finnish), and then refined its lyrics and structure, ensuring that both Finnish Sign Language and spoken Finnish were given equal artistic value. The composition phase included discussions on themes, emotions, and historical references, with feedback loops guiding the integration of sign language and musical elements. The tonal qualities, intensities, emphases, and dynamic variations of the song were jointly considered and agreed upon by Laura and Silva, even though each interpreted their own expressive role individually. Emotional content and overall mood were likewise predetermined. For instance, when Laura sang at a high volume, Silva responded with expansive movements, pronounced facial expressions, and emphatic signing. This was further developed in the composition of the harmony and the arrangement of the song.

The final arrangement was recorded professionally, ensuring accessibility for both hearing and d/Deaf audiences. Finally, the song was produced as a music video to foreground the storytelling most effectively conveyed through Finnish Sign Language. The music video was also presented and shared with the d/Deaf community, whose role in collecting the interview data for the *Voices of a Silent People—Renovated Bodies* (2021–2024) was crucial.

This study used a project diary and videos recorded throughout the songwriting process. The goal of the diary was to provide a shared platform for the Laura and Silva to reflect on their experiences of the live meetings, discussions with the researchers, new creative ideas and plots, and their positionality in the process. Video recordings of the sessions and shared discussions were also part of the project diary. Laura mainly documented the progress they made with Silva and the discussions they had throughout the process so that the researcher could follow their work in the diary.

The songwriting process can expand the concept of artistic citizenship by connecting multiple thematic dimensions. Surrounding the central idea are seven theory-based, interrelated aspects that shaped and informed the practice:

1) Political and historical contexts—acknowledging how songwriting is influenced by, and can respond to, broader societal and historical aspects like recognition of sign language, education and language policy, cultural identity, accessibility in media, and historical marginalisation (Koivisto and Katsui 2024).

2) Memories from the state schools—recognizing the role of collected memories in shaping creative work, preserving cultural narratives, and fostering shared identity, where these memories include experiences of linguistic, social, and educational exclusion (Sutela et al. 2024).

3) d/Deaf culture versus hearing world—recognizing the cultural and communicative differences between d/Deaf and hearing communities and how songwriting can bridge these worlds through multimodal expression, collaborative creative work, accessible storytelling, shared aesthetic experience, and cultural visibility and advocacy (Churchill 2015; Maler 2015).

4) d/Deaf ontology and epistemology—engaging with the lived experiences, identities, and ways of knowing specific to the d/Deaf community. The songwriting process is influenced by how music is conceived, experienced, and expressed. Rhythm, phrasing, and expression emerge through visual, tactile, and spatial modalities, with sign language's poetic features forming an integral part of musical structure (Bahan 2006; Churchill 2015). Themes and narratives draw from shared d/Deaf experiences, while collaborative creation ensures that works originate from and reflect d/Deaf cultural aesthetics (Robinson 2022).

5) Social responsibility—framing songwriting as an act with ethical implications, aimed at contributing positively to both d/Deaf and hearing communities. VisualVoice addressed issues of equity through art itself—using songwriting, performance, and visual storytelling as means to celebrate diversity, and create spaces for shared cultural experience (see also Churchill 2015, 2022).

6) Calling for equity in music performance—advocating for inclusive performance practices that give equal value to diverse forms of musical expression, including sign language performance (Bahan 2006; Churchill 2015; Maler 2015). This challenges the privileging of purely auditory performances and experiences, which can marginalize visual-gestural forms of musicality and exclude audiences and performers whose engagement with music is not based on hearing (Sutela and Ahonen 2024).

7) Equity in language—ensuring that both spoken and signed languages are respected and represented equally within lyrics and musical expression.

After the artistic process, the researcher wanted to understand the songwriting process more deeply and thus focused on interpreting the narratively thick and meaningful parts in artists' writings in the diary (Gubrium and Holstein 2008), identifying three themes: 1) from exclusion to linguistic and cultural inclusivity, 2) raising historical awareness, and 3) empowerment through songwriting. After the researcher's analysis, Silva and Laura validated the themes. What follows are themes reflected through theorizations of artistic citizenship and the musician as maker in/for/of society.

VisualVoice—Artistic Citizens and Makers, Despite Society

1) From Exclusion to Linguistic and Cultural Inclusivity

Laura wrote about their visualization of the song with Silva at the beginning of the songwriting process:

> At the beginning, a person stands on a theater stage, in complete darkness, in front of an audience of hundreds. A spotlight turns on and illuminates the stage, and this person decides to go on stage because she has something to say. She approaches the spotlight, but the light always moves away from her. The person is confused and tries to catch the light, which constantly shifts as she gets closer. She has to keep following the spotlight. Suddenly, someone else gets on stage, goes straight to the speaker's spot, and the spotlight stays on her. The audience is impressed and gives applause. A person stands aside and wonders how this is possible. She decides that things must change: "You need to look at me, I need to be visible."
>
> Everyone has the space to be an expert, and everyone gets on stage. Some go on stage by themselves, and some are helped. Externally, people are very different, and not all illnesses or disabilities are visible. Not everyone is happy that these are visible. The audience suddenly realizes that there is a wealth of expertise on stage, and that these people are more than their disabilities. In the end, all the people are on stage, and all the lights turn on. Some of the audience members also joined the stage. The audience represents the majority population. (Project Diary 16.5 2022)

This description functions as a metaphor for social inclusion and visibility, foregrounding the importance of enabling diverse voices and forms of expression to be both seen and heard. It stresses how structural exclusions, such as the position of sign language as an art form, linguistic exclusions in performing arts, and power imbalances shape who is recognized as an "artistic citizen" in the first place. This excerpt depicts the ongoing and fragile process of "artist-becoming" (Garcia-Cuesta 2024) among d/Deaf and/or sign-language artists in auditory-based musical performance. While VisualVoice was privileged in many ways within the d/Deaf community, they remained unknown and unrecognized as artists, both in the d/Deaf and hearing communities, and had to address many accessibility issues in songwriting (cf. Robinson 2022).

VisualVoice began their songwriting by visualizing feelings of exclusion and injustice, drawing from the lived experiences of the d/Deaf minority situated within a predominantly hearing world. This is called a cinematographic technique in the creation of stories (Bahan 2006; cf. the use of metaphors in Churchill 2015). Historical injustices, such as the systematic denial of sign language instruction in state d/Deaf schools and the forced use of oral methods, which often alienate learners, remain deeply embedded in collective memory (Koivisto and Katsui 2024; Sutela et al. 2024); by engaging with these stories, VisualVoice sought to reimagine a pathway from exclusion to inclusion. However, the framework of artistic citizenship risks romanticizing this process by framing it primarily as a harmonious negotiation of shared meaning, potentially downplaying the historical violence and systemic inequities that continue to shape the experiences of d/Deaf individuals. This concern resonates with

Bradley's (2018) critique of the term citizenship as carrying normative and potentially exclusionary implications.

From the outset, VisualVoice aimed to create linguistic and cultural freedom in musical expression, moving beyond the assumption of artistic equivalence between spoken and signed languages. The choice of a music video format allowed sign language performance and musical interpretation to coexist on equal terms, creating a visual-gestural space for authentic expression (Maler 2015). Yet this coexistence also exposes a limitation of much artistic citizenship literature: its idealized notions of dialogue and mutual understanding often assume that different cultural and linguistic systems can be easily integrated. In practice, VisualVoice found that full equivalence was neither possible nor desirable. Instead, they allowed each language to develop an independent, culturally specific narrative, connected only by a shared emotional direction rather than a unified textual meaning.

For example, in Finnish the lyrics of the song are: "Better to look ahead; there's no way to dwell on this anymore," and Silva signs: "KEY SWOLLOW-1[4]," meaning that the thing will be hidden and will not be returned anymore. Similarly, when Laura sings in Finnish: "Don't behave like that," Silva signs "DON'T SIGN -3," which was an old way of expressing the negative form. At this point, Laura and Silva got help in choosing the signs from the d/Deaf scholar of the research project.

This decision challenged instrumentalist interpretations of artistic citizenship (e.g., Elliott, Silverman and Bowman 2016), which emphasize more collective participation and inclusivity but can inadvertently devalue artistic autonomy and cultural specificity. By rejecting linguistic equivalence, Silva and Laura foregrounded difference as a creative resource, rather than something to be resolved or smoothed over. This suggests that socially engaged art can be increasingly potent when it acknowledges friction and when it refuses to collapse diversity into normative ideas of cohesion. Indeed, such friction is not only social or aesthetic but also epistemological: it exposes how knowledge is differently embodied, expressed, and negotiated across hearing and d/Deaf contexts. Rather than assuming a shared communicative framework, the collaboration required participants to recognize distinct modes of knowing (visual-spatial, tactile, gestural, auditory) and to work within the tensions between them. In this sense, the artistic process becomes a site where divergent epistemologies meet, sometimes uneasily but in ways that open space for expanding what counts as knowledge within collaborative artmaking.

Here, Gaunt et al.'s (2021) concept of the "maker in society" provides a beneficial yet critically ambivalent lens. The notion of the musician as a "maker" foregrounds craftsmanship, embodied knowledge, and active creation, linking artistic excellence with social awareness. VisualVoice exhibits this ideal through their ability to respond creatively to the specific social and historical context of d/Deaf experiences, shaping meaning collaboratively through performance, co-creation, and interaction. At the same time, their work exposes the epistemological stakes embedded in "making": how knowledge is differently communicated and legitimized across hearing and d/Deaf contexts. In this light, the act of making does not merely involve social responsiveness but requires negotiating dominant hierarchies of linguistic and cultural authority as well as recognizing the unequal status assigned to diverse ways of knowing. Thus, while Gaunt et al.'s (2021) framing celebrates the embeddedness of artistic practice within social life ("maker in society"), it can also imply a relatively harmonious integration between artistry and social responsibility. Instead, this songwriting process showed that "making" is more often contested and negotiated, rather than serving pre-existing social goals. VisualVoice redefines both artistic and social meanings through their refusal to subordinate difference to sameness.

By granting equal value to signed and spoken lyrics while preserving their autonomy, this songwriting process did more than reflect existing or past social realities. It actively reshaped them, challenging dominant hierarchies of linguistic and cultural legitimacy. In doing so, VisualVoice moved beyond a vision of art as a medium for inclusion alone, using songwriting to create new forms of belonging grounded in recognition, negotiation, and artistic difference. In this sense, the multimodal and bilingual songwriting process became a performative and interactive act that reconfigured normative assumptions about language, voice, and embodiment, challenging dominant ideologies that privilege oral or audio-centric modes of expression in music and, thus, artistic citizenship.

2) Raising Historical Awareness

Laura wrote about their discussions regarding the lyrics of the song with Silva:

> We pursue narrative storytelling, which describes a person's growth towards adulthood through the events happening around them. The theme of Voices of a silent people—renovated bodies reflects the core of this song, also examining the experiences of the d/Deaf and how their bodies adapt to the surrounding world. The main idea is that a d/Deaf child grows up in an environment where everything revolves around speaking. As a child, the home language, gestures, and home signs are their only means of communication. This raises the question: how alone and isolated can a d/Deaf child feel within

> their own family? Dormitory experiences are either hell or paradise. Fellow sufferers, who share the same experience, become the d/Deaf child's friends and family. At the same time, mothers' letters to the school and their concern about whether the child will end up in class A, B, or C, as it determines the child's proficiency in the Finnish language and thus their opportunities for better education and life. (Project Diary 12.12–22.12 2022)

This excerpt illustrates how Silva and Laura sought to integrate the historical injustices and lived experiences of d/Deaf individuals into their songwriting. Their process was shaped by memories of growing up in conditions of limited communication, systemic exclusion, and forced assimilation, in which state schools prohibited sign language and prioritized oralism until the 1970s (Koivisto and Katsui 2024; Sutela et al. 2024). While this integration resonates with the ideals of artistic citizenship, which emphasizes social engagement and community relevance (Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016; Polisi, 2016), it also exposes oversights. Many understandings of arts and artistic citizenship assume that art naturally fosters belonging (e.g., Belfiore and Bennett 2007; Clift, Phillips, and Pritchard 2021; Freedman 2025; Reeves 2002; Westerlund et al. 2021). Yet, these authors often fail to account for deep historical trauma and ongoing structural power imbalances. In contexts like this study, inclusion cannot be reduced to participation; it requires confronting histories of exclusion and recognizing how legacies of marginalization shape the present.

While learning from the memories of the old d/Deaf interviewees, VisualVoice participants also considered incorporating old signs into the lyrics. Old signs refer to Finnish Sign Language signs or sign forms that were once commonly used but have, over time, changed, become less frequent, or remained primarily in use among older signers (Jantunen 2003). In the end, they played a minimal role, even though older d/Deaf people used them in interviews. From an artistic point of view, old signs would have overmixed the lyrics, and the VisualVoice wanted the lyrics to be artistically and linguistically coherent. At the same time, the researcher and VisualVoice participants became aware of how ongoing structural power imbalances and internal hierarchies of the d/Deaf community affected the songwriting process. Not all members occupied the same privileged position within the d/Deaf community, especially in the context of music making. After the release of the music video, members of the d/Deaf community both praised and questioned their artistic work. In particular, the artistic use of sign language was at times difficult to interpret, especially for those less familiar with its poetic conventions. It challenged expectations of immediate clarity, raising questions about accessibility even within the d/Deaf community. At the same time, however, the music video received significant

praise for its powerful representation of silenced histories of d/Deaf education, bringing forward experiences that had mainly remained unspoken or marginalized.

This led the researcher and VisualVoice participants to reflect on how artistic processes can be exclusive, as access to them is often affected by historical injustices in education and society, and thus mediated by language fluency, educational background, or alignment with dominant (music) cultural practices (see also Koivisto and Katsui 2024). To acknowledge this complexity is not to dismiss the aspirations of those seeking full inclusion, but to recognize the lived struggles of those who remain excluded from cultural participation and shared meanings in society (see also Bradley 2018).

One key tension in artistic conventions between d/Deaf and hearing communities emerged when working with lyrics that carry layered, historically rooted cultural meanings, particularly in how those meanings are interpreted and translated across auditory and visual modalities. For example, the passage "you go to a, b, or c class" invoked painful memories for d/Deaf individuals, reflecting a practice of sorting pupils based on their perceived ability to learn spoken Finnish, which determined their access to education and even their future opportunities (Koivisto and Katsui 2024; Sutela et al. 2024). For hearing audiences, these lyrics may appear neutral or insignificant, underscoring a broader problem: concepts of artistic citizenship often presume a shared interpretive framework, overlooking how meaning is fragmented across cultural and linguistic boundaries.

By deciding to retain the contested passage after Laura explained its cultural weight, VisualVoice prioritized preserving the culturally specific meanings embedded in the original lyrics rather than modifying them to enhance accessibility for all audiences. This decision underscores a fundamental limitation of much instrumentalist thinking in artistic citizenship (e.g., Elliott, Silverman, and Bowman 2016), which frames artistic practice as serving collective social good. Artists pondered whose "good" is being served, and who decides? In privileging d/Deaf perspectives, even when their meanings remain opaque to outsiders, the project exposed how attempts to universalize meaning can reproduce marginalization rather than dismantle it. Artistic citizenship's normative emphasis on cohesion and participation risks obscuring the necessity of conflict, friction, and difference in socially engaged art (Bradley 2018).

This critique extends to Gaunt and colleagues' (2021) model of the "maker in/for/of society." While the concept celebrates the embeddedness of artistic practice within social life and foregrounds responsiveness, it too risks idealizing

the relationship between art and society. By framing the artist as a maker for society, the model assumes that social needs and artistic purposes are stable and agreed upon (see also Kertz-Welzel 2022). In contrast, VisualVoice's process demonstrates the opposite: meanings were contested and sometimes irreducibly divergent. In this sense, VisualVoice acted less as makers for society and more as *makers, despite society,* creating work that pushes against dominant historical narratives and refuses to dilute cultural specificity to accommodate mainstream accessibility.

Moreover, the project highlighted another oversight in broader artistic citizenship literature: its tendency to position citizenship as a normative endpoint, a state of belonging, recognition, and participation, rather than an ongoing struggle. This observation aligns with Bradley's (2018) critique of citizenship as a normative and potentially exclusionary discourse. For d/Deaf individuals whose histories involve systemic exclusion, the very language of citizenship can feel alienating, suggesting inclusion into structures that have historically denied their experiences (Koivisto and Katsui 2024).

3) Empowerment Through Songwriting

Laura describes their conversation with Silva:

> Today we talked about signed songs. Silva explained that these songs are very close to poetry, making it hard for even d/Deaf people to distinguish between a song and a poem. The way it is expressed can make a difference, but it remains a very unfamiliar concept for many. In signed songs, the expression rarely originates purely from sign language. Often, it is derived from, translated into, or adapted from Finnish. Visual vernacular techniques, an art form of sign language, are frequently used. In this project, Silva emphasizes the importance of considering a song's background and significance. What does the song mean, and how is a song created from someone's (like a d/Deaf person's) background? These questions lingered in our minds, sparking reflections on how sign language culture and art can enrich and deepen our understanding of diverse expressions. Silva describes a song that starts with a peaceful, lullaby-like tone, capturing the innocence of childhood. It then shifts to a rhythmic, military-style drumming, symbolizing the strict routines of boarding school life. The song blends these elements, showing resilience and hope, creating a powerful narrative that resonates deeply. (Project Diary, 13.10 2022)

This excerpt illustrates how VisualVoice rooted the songwriting process in a d/Deaf-centered history, culture, and epistemology, ensuring that creative decisions emerged from within, rather than being imposed from outside. Silva's way of perceiving the world, closely tied to visual imagery and atmospheric mood (see Maler 2015), highlights the importance of recognizing diverse epistemologies and narrative forms within the arts. VisualVoice conveyed emotions

and a sense of gradual empowerment through facial expressions. The song's more melancholic opening is marked by withdrawn expressions. As the song progresses, emotional and atmospheric shifts become evident, revealing surprise, anger, frustration, joy, and playfulness. Toward the conclusion, the mood transitions to joy, openness, and empowerment.

The idea of staging the chorus of the composed song with raised hands carried powerful layers of meaning. Beyond its immediate embodied symbolism, it offered a visual gesture of solidarity and collective strength for those who had historically been silenced (Katsui and Koivisto 2024; Sutela et al. 2024). In transforming raised hands into a central expressive motif, the artists created a communal act of resistance, reclaiming signing as celebrated rather than hidden. By staging raised hands as both an act of pride and a reminder of past silencing, the songwriting process situates artistic practice alongside these struggles rather than above them. Their songwriting process made visible what has long been invisible to hearing society while simultaneously reclaiming d/Deaf identity as a site of empowerment. In doing so, it unsettled dominant narratives that define who can "make" and "belong" in music (Bennett and Rogers 2016; Hess 2018). By treating singing and signing as equally valid, embodied forms of expression, VisualVoice challenges not only media representations of deafness but also broader cultural assumptions about the legitimacy of musical performance (Cripps et al. 2025; Sutela and Ahonen 2024).

This songwriting process not only depicted d/Deaf ways of storytelling but also resisted hearing-centric assumptions embedded in dominant cultural frameworks, including those that underpin much discourse on artistic citizenship (Churchill 2015; Robinson 2022; Sutela and Ahonen 2024). While the latter celebrates pluralism and inclusion, it often fails to address the historical asymmetries of power that make such ideals difficult to realize in practice (Garcia-Cuesta 2024). VisualVoice aimed to address these asymmetries by centering d/Deaf experiences while transforming often painful memories into symbols of empowerment.

Discussions between researchers and artists during the project frequently reflected on the impossibility of changing the past, as well as on the potential for reframing the future. Researchers and artists felt that there is no longer any need to feel ashamed of signing, of being d/Deaf, or of not speaking. For example, Kertz-Welzel (2022) and Garcia-Cuesta (2024) suggest that citizenship is an excellent example of how utopian values can promote the critical revision of reality and enactment of change. These utopian values can be linked to the utopian potential, which does not refer merely to utopia as an end goal, i.e., an ideal

future society, but also to the processes and opportunities of human action leading towards it (Foster and Sutela 2024). In practice, this reframing appeared in the group's discussions as a shift toward affirming d/Deaf identity and signing as valid and valued forms of expression, thereby challenging earlier internalized norms of marginalization. For marginalized people, visibility alone does not guarantee belonging or opportunities for action towards a better future. Following Garcia-Cuesta (2024), artistic citizenship must be reconceptualized not as an aspirational endpoint but as an unsettled, ongoing process of negotiation, where inclusion involves challenging dominant structures rather than simply joining them.

Conclusion

This study examined how songwriting can function as a form of artistic citizenship, particularly in the context of d/Deaf cultural expression. VisualVoice's process of creating music in both Finnish Sign Language and Finnish illustrates how songwriting can foster inclusivity, raise historical awareness, and empower marginalized individuals and communities. Rather than constituting a straightforward success story, the collaboration unfolded as a complex, ongoing negotiation between hearing and d/Deaf cultures. Misunderstandings were not incidental but structurally embedded in the encounter, reflecting distinct cultural norms of communication and expression (Kusters et al. 2017; Robinson 2022). These tensions, however, became generative, pushing participants to reflect and adapt. The historical injustices toward d/Deaf communities continued to shape interactions, producing an asymmetry that at times rendered hearing participants overly cautious in their communicative choices, a dynamic rooted in the legacy of systemic marginalization and in truth and reconciliation processes.

While this asymmetry was ethically motivated, it occasionally constrained spontaneity and risk-taking, revealing how past exclusions continue to shape present collaborative dynamics. Negotiation extended beyond cultural dimensions to encompass temporal frameworks: the schedules and evaluative rhythms of academic research contrasted sharply with the open-ended, iterative temporality of artistic practice, echoing broader epistemic tensions in interdisciplinary work (Lynn et al. 2020). Reconciling these divergent logics required sustained dialogue and flexibility. This project taught that such processes thrive not through the erasure of difference but through its recognition and negotiated coexistence, positioning misunderstanding as a constitutive element rather than a deficit within collaborative knowledge production.

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This songwriting process underscored that intercultural and interdisciplinary collaboration is not merely a technical challenge but an ethical and epistemic endeavor (Burnard et al. 2017). For music educators, the process offers critical insights: it demonstrates the pedagogical value of embracing difference as a resource rather than a barrier, cultivating dialogic spaces where misunderstandings are reframed as opportunities for deeper learning. For example, integrating signed songs into music curricula can be a valuable addition to school music education, recognizing it as a legitimate form of musical expression. Music educators can introduce song signing as a creative practice alongside traditional vocal and instrumental instruction (see Maler 2015; Sutela 2025). This requires a collaboration with the d/Deaf community. At its best, this collaboration can expand notions of musicianship by challenging conventional ideas of who can be a musician and by emphasizing diverse musical expressions (Churchill 2015).

Music educators can collaborate with sign language artists to highlight the visual, rhythmic, and spatial aspects of music-making beyond sound and the hierarchy of senses (Churchill and Bernard 2020; Sutela and Ahonen 2024). This promotes accessibility and visual and kinesthetic learning strategies for d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in the classroom. This could include the use of haptic feedback technology, visual music notation, and multisensory approaches to rhythm and composition (Palmer, Lahtinen, and Holt 2024). At the same time, using songwriting for social awareness allows music educators to guide students in projects that explore themes of identity, historical awareness, and cultural diversity. Such action can encourage students to see music as a tool for social change and a form of artistic citizenship (Bennett and Rogers 2016).

The conceptualization of artistic citizenship, as explored through the songwriting practices of VisualVoice, demands a fundamental rethinking of its normative assumptions. This study demonstrates that historical and structural asymmetries continue to shape artistic practice. For d/Deaf individuals, who are often marked by systemic exclusion, artistic citizenship itself is not a neutral concept but a contested terrain, entangled with legacies of marginalization and ongoing struggles for recognition. Ethical responsiveness in artistic citizenship calls for practices that confront historical trauma, redistribute cultural authority, and recognize plural epistemologies, such as the visual-tactile modalities central to d/Deaf ways of being, acting, and knowing.

Cultural sensitivity further demands vigilance against the universalizing tendencies embedded in citizenship discourse. As critiques by Bradley (2018) and Garcia-Cuesta (2024) remind us, aspirations for inclusion can reproduce

violence when they ignore the pain of normative exclusion. Artistic citizenship, therefore, must be reconceived as an ongoing, contested process rather than an aspirational endpoint. It should function as a critical lens, one that interrogates whose "good" is being served, who defines it, and at what cost. To conclude, this study argues for a pluralistic and ethically grounded vision of artistic citizenship: one that values co-created meanings, embraces discomfort, and resists the erasure of cultural specificity. Such a reconceptualization positions artistic practice not as a tool for assimilation but as a site of negotiation, resistance, and transformation.

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Notes

[1] In this article, we use the term "d/Deaf" to capture the diversity within the d/Deaf community. However, it's important to note that many scholars are moving away from this term because it creates a division between nonsigning deaf individuals (deaf) and signing deaf individuals (Deaf), which oversimplifies the complex range of language practices and identities (Kusters, De Meulder and O´Brien 2017). For us, using "d/Deaf" highlights the complexity of these issues.

[2] The concrete example of a signed song is for instance the Gallaudet University Bison song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psfetUCGu0Y

[3] Music video can be seen through this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B04zKMR3IG0

[4] Numbers indicate spatial loci (directions or positions in signing space) toward which pointing is directed. The space is conventionally divided using numbers to facilitate glossing: 1 refers to the signer, 2 to the space directly in front of the signer, and so on.

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