

Handedness and gestural communication

It is appropriate to add a brief comment on the relationship, encountered over a considerable period of time and in relation to widely differing ability levels amongst students and collaborators, to the issue of handedness. When signing melody accompanied by chord progressions, it seems natural to a right-handed person to distribute these in a manner similar to the beginner pianist or the accordion player: the right hand takes the tune, and the left hand the accompaniment. At the more basic levels of Harmony Signing, this does not really matter so much (see **Videos 17** and **18**, in which student volunteers decide to employ their right hand for chord progressions). But it became noticeable that handedness played a part in some individuals' leading of Harmony Signing exercises, and this deserved attention. Several conductors (for instance, Benjamin Britten, Donald Runnicles, Paavo Berglund and Jules Buckley) reverse the hands in terms of which directs the beat and tempo with a baton, and which indicates such features as entries, emphasis and intensity. Choirs and orchestras appear to have no difficulty in responding to them. Several effective leaders of Harmony Signing have also requested that they reverse the roles of the two hands, and have achieved good results that have appeared entirely natural to participating performers.

However, problems seem to arise when right-handed directors, having first experienced Harmony Signing as performers, take on the directorial role with hands reversed. It may be that they have felt it most natural to mirror the actions of the leader for whom they have performed prior to being given the opportunity to lead (as is clearly the case in the chords-only progressions of **Videos 17** and **18**). But not only can this, at higher levels, create confusion for them: it also communicates with performers in a much less convincing manner.

Harmony Signing is a quintessentially social pedagogy, and one feels the need to deal with these occasions sensitively. Indeed, setting people at their ease is the most vital outcome that one seeks at all times, without which progress may be under threat. Suffice to say that the brain regions responsible for how we hear and process music, the neural laterality, are clearly different both in their balance and intensity of response. When concerned as to why an individual appears confused over their handedness in carrying out the leader role in Harmony Signing, it proves most helpful to talk to students one-to-one rather than in front of the group. A little experimentation with the way they hear and feel musical interaction, and how this may relate to past experiences or the instrument that they play, can provide an insight into the best way to prepare for leading the group on the next occasion.

In several of the other sections of the website, the issue of signing while performing vocally has been explored. Equally, the need to share out leadership opportunities so that all performers attain fluency in the creative and semiotic nature of the pedagogy as well as the response to the gestures of others has been stressed frequently. Harmony Signing is a language, learnt both through 'speaking' and 'listening'. While the two hands signal the operations required of performers, they also convey the self-expressive intentions of those leading.