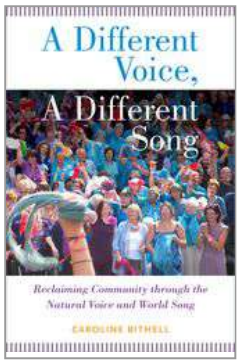

A Different Voice, A Different Song: Reclaiming Community through the Natural Voice and World Song
Caroline Bithell

Print publication date: 2014
Print ISBN-13: 9780199354542
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: October 2014
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199354542.001.0001

In Search of the Natural Voice

Caroline Bithell

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199354542.003.0003

Abstract and Keywords

Chapter 2 unpacks the notion of the “natural voice”, aided by an examination of two major initiatives. The first is the UK-based Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network. The convictions enshrined in the NVPN’s statement of philosophy and working principles are brought into dialogue with matters of aesthetics and structural organisation pertaining to music in oral traditions and with issues of class and race in the development of the Western classically trained voice. The second is the Giving Voice project, an initiative of the Centre for Performance Research (based in Wales but working with partners worldwide) and the international body of practice that it represents. Reference is made here to the influence of pioneering work in experimental theatre. The reader is also introduced to English folksinger Frankie Armstrong, the main inspiration and driving force behind the NVPN.

Keywords: voice, Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network, Giving Voice, Frankie Armstrong, oral tradition, experimental theatre

The Original Instrument

How might we begin to describe the voice? Where is it located? What is it made of? What does it say?

The voice is a musical instrument we are all born with. We carry it with us, unseen, wherever we go. It may be suppressed or temporarily silenced, but it cannot be mislaid. Unlike our material possessions, it cannot be confiscated or stolen. We may be stripped of all that we own, but our voice, like our memories,

remains. And when it is heard, it says something vital about the deepest layers of our identity, our commitment, our intentions, and our aspirations.

Yet the voice is not always as resilient as we might hope. When it goes wrong, it becomes a mystery. It may fall victim to physical problems. It may be compromised by age or ill health. It may be affected by stress, anxiety, unhappiness, or lack of confidence, revealing information about our psychological well being that we would prefer to keep private. It announces our presence before we come into view. It can betray our moods and attitudes, allowing listeners to detect excitement or boredom, approval or disapproval, appreciation or disdain. Or it can simply get into bad habits through prolonged misuse. Even when we know these things, it is difficult to separate mind from matter, to keep the voice and the sounds it produces objective in a way that might be possible when we play a different kind of instrument.

In many ways, the voice is not so much an object as an action. Unlike other internal organs, “it has no location in the body except when it is in action, sounding” (Fitzmaurice 1997: 247). When the production process is set in motion, it manifests itself as a series of waves and pulses. We may begin, then, to describe the passage of air across the larynx and explain the properties of airwaves. But the voice cannot be reduced to the science of physics or biology alone. There is something else, something ineffable and less easy to put into **(p. 46)** words. Sounds made by the voices of others have a somatic effect on us. They can make us quiver, give us goose bumps, make the hair stand up on the back of our neck; they can make our blood surge and our hearts beat faster. Less benign voices can make our hearts sink, muscles tense, and adrenalin pump as we run for cover. The voice is clearly more than the sum of its physical parts. The vibrating bands of muscle, ligament, and mucus membrane we call the vocal cords are only half the story.

When, in the post-industrial, urbanised, Western world, we think of the singing voice, we may hear in our mind’s ear the voices of opera singers, cathedral choirs, the popular singers of the day; we may hear, perhaps, the voices of children in the playgrounds of yore. But there are myriads of other voices less often heard or imagined—keening voices, chanting voices, clamouring voices, ululating voices; the voices of Mediterranean fishwives, Swiss cowherds, West African praise singers, Argentinian shamans, Bahrainian pearl divers, Taiwanese farmers, Korean *p’ansori* opera singers, Tibetan monks. Not all these voices sound “musical” or “nice” to the modern Western ear. Some may sound chaotic, primal, grating, or out-of-tune. Some make us uncomfortably aware of the bodies from which they emerge. But there are other ears that listen out for signs of the body in a certain roughness of the throat or a catching of the breath that reveals ways in which the body has lived and suffered and come to know both pain and

ecstasy; these ears wait to be touched by what Roland Barthes speaks of as “the grain of the voice” or “the body in the voice as it sings” (1977: 188).

These other voices often seem to draw inspiration from the natural world, imitating or entering into dialogue with the voices of birds and insects, sheep and goats, wind and thunder, and borrowing qualities of timbre or styles of ornamentation. These other voices move through pitches and textures that resist being captured on paper and defy precise repetition; they exist only fleetingly, until the echo fades. They occupy realms far distant from the “clean”, disembodied head voice cultivated in the Western classical world, which reaches its epitome in the prepubescent treble of the English cathedral choir. Prized for its purity of tone, precise intonation, clear enunciation, and ethereal quality, this is a voice that often appears disconnected from any base physicality.

Where, in all of this, is the “natural voice”? At the most literal level, the natural voice is the voice nature gave us, the voice we were born with—a voice that might be construed as primordial, naked, instinctive, and authentic; a voice that has not yet been constrained or adulterated by modern, grown-up, educated notions of what sounds “proper”. For Kristin Linklater, author of *Freeing the Natural Voice*, “the exploration of one’s own voice is the search for the ring of truth, something natural and real that began with vital authenticity in the first breath and the first cry” (http://www.kristinlinklater.com/, acc. June 12, 2013). Perhaps it is also a voice in tune with its surroundings and **(p.47)** responsive to the rhythms of daily life. This innate voice—at once individual and a fundamental part of being human—is also ready to sing.

Frankie Armstrong and the Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network

In Britain and Ireland, the term “natural voice” has come to be associated above all with the Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network, a loose-knit organisation of people who lead open-access singing groups, community choirs, and voice workshops and who “share a common philosophy in relation to singing and groupwork” (http://www.naturalvoice.net/, acc. June 12, 2013). The key figure behind the development of the network (as noted in chapter 1) was English folksinger Frankie Armstrong, who continues to act as the movement’s most revered mentor. The NVPN had its tentative beginnings in 1995, at a reunion of “graduates” of the voice practitioner training weeks that Frankie had been running since 1988, and it is Frankie’s vision that lies behind the official statements of the NVPN’s aims, philosophy, and working principles as presented on the NVPN website. The story of how Frankie arrived at her approach to voice work, both her philosophy and practice, is crucial to understanding how and why the NVPN came into being and is therefore considered in some detail in chapter 3. Here, I focus on what has become the NVPN’s credo.

The NVPN Philosophy and Concepts of Music in Society

The various position statements brought together in a document entitled “NVPN Philosophy and Working Principles” offer a useful starting point for understanding what “natural voice” means in the NVPN context and, particularly, how the principles of birthright and inclusivity are brought into dialogue with a vision of the world’s oral traditions. (See the full document in the Appendix.) At the same time, they invite comparison with broader critiques of the gentrification, institutionalisation, and professionalisation of music making in contemporary Western societies.

Reading through the statements that constitute the NVPN philosophy, it soon becomes clear that the concept “natural voice” refers not only to the voice itself but also to an ideology, a methodology, and, to some extent, a repertory. If a natural voice practitioner had written the book *Lies My Music Teacher Told Me* (Eskelin 1994), for example, at the top of the list of myths to be toppled would have been: “Some people can sing and some people can’t.” Natural voice practitioners are united in the conviction that “singing is everyone’s birthright” and believe without reservation the truth of the adage, “If you can walk, you can dance; if you can talk, you can sing.” This belief is, of **(p.48)** course, not exclusive to the NVPN. John Potter writes in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*: “You don’t have to be a virtuoso to express your own emotions. Everyone can speak, and everyone can sing” (2000: 1). The central mission of the NVPN is to help people reclaim this birthright, which leads logically to their commitment to inclusivity and their development of teaching styles that accommodate differing levels of musical experience and ability.

The fundamental tenet that “singing is our birthright” (affirmed at the beginning of “Philosophy and Working Principles”) leads to a statement that alludes to the historical role of singing as part of everyday life and its potential for sustaining community:

> For thousands of years all over the world people have sung—to express joy, celebration and grief, to accompany work and devotion, to aid healing—without worrying about having a “good” voice or “getting it right”. Song has been a part of life, a way of binding the community together. We aim to recreate the sense that vocalising, singing and singing together is natural and open to all.

The notion of community reappears later in the text with the statement that “creating a sense of an accepting community is an essential element of our approach in working with groups”.

The next point is about the individual and the way in which singing may relate to physical and emotional states:

> Each person’s voice is as unique as their fingerprint and, respecting that individuality, we aim to provide people with opportunities to express themselves vocally and to develop their full vocal potential. The voice we are born with is capable of freely expressing a full range of emotions, thoughts and experience—this is what we mean by the “natural voice”. However, the tensions and stresses of daily life create physical and emotional blocks to the natural voice. We therefore focus on breath and bodywork as the foundations of healthy voice use.

The triad of voice, breath, and body alluded to here puts in frequent appearances in my later analysis of teaching method, particularly with reference to the nature and function of warm-up exercises (see chapter 4).

The text then goes on to refer more explicitly to the idea that therapeutic work may be required as part of the process of realising one’s vocal potential:

> In this culture many people see themselves as non-singers because of previous experiences of criticism and judgement. Many are excluded from singing groups if they do not have music reading skills. Therefore, in our work we aim to counteract these experiences and to give people confidence in their melodic voice by providing a supportive learning environment.

(p.49)

In practical terms, the most obvious way to create a learning environment that is open to anyone, regardless of whether or not they can read music, is to replicate “natural” modes of transmission. This is explained in a list of the ways in which the principles ascribed to by natural voice practitioners inform their practice:

> The majority of music in the world comes from the oral tradition and we aim to teach songs as far as possible by ear, recognising that this is the most accessible and effective way for the majority of people to learn and retain songs in the longer term.

The rejection of scores as a point of departure goes beyond questions of accessibility, however. Working orally can be seen as part of a broader ethos that looks beyond the elements that can be fixed in written notation by a composer or scribe—to be more or less slavishly followed by the performer—to other, more ephemeral components that engage the human body and spirit. Within an oral/aural tradition, music is brought to life as it is created anew in the very moment of performance and, in the case of multipart singing, this requires listening to and interacting with others. It is significant that this mirrors a fundamental (if oversimplified) distinction between the approach of the historical musicologist, who works primarily with manuscripts and records from the past, or with repertory that is essentially static, and that of the ethnomusicologist, who

typically engages with people in present-day societies and with traditions that are alive and changing.

The notion of singing as a “natural” part of everyday life, accessible to and inclusive of all, is certainly reinforced in much of the writing about music in Africa. The authors of *Let Your Voice Be Heard*—a collection of songs from Ghana and Zimbabwe published by the World Music Press that is found on the bookshelves of many voice practitioners—owe the inspiration for their title to Francis Bebey, who writes in his book *African Music: A People’s Art*:

> Any individual who has the urge to make his voice heard is given the liberty to do so; singing is not (generally) a specialized affair. Anyone can sing and, in practice, anyone does.…This is the essence of the collective aspect of African music; no one is ruled out because he is technically below par.
>
> (Bebey 1975: 115)

The authors of *Let Your Voice Be Heard* concede that experts do exist, as do complex forms of music requiring a high level of skill or specialisation, “but within the context of most African vocal music there is also ample room for participation by those with less polish but equal motivation” (Adzinyah, Maraire, and Tucker 1986: 2). The songs included in the collection lend themselves to working with groups of mixed ability or experience so that a lively, rhythmic, and harmonious sound is achieved quickly and relatively painlessly. As well as **(p. 50)** being structured in a way that facilitates participation, the songs also provide an opportunity to explore different qualities of voice. The addition of movements or simple dance steps increases enjoyment while also improving coordination. It is hardly surprising, then, to learn that songs from different parts of Africa have proved especially popular in natural voice circles.

The authors of *Let Your Voice Be Heard* also quote John Blacking’s description of his observations of music making among the Venda people of South Africa:

> It is the process of music making that is valued as much as, and sometimes more than, the finished product. The value of music is, I believe, to be found in terms of the human experiences involved in its creation.
>
> (Blacking 1973: 50)

Constructing music so as to maximise participation correlates with “the most fundamental aesthetic” that (to use John Miller Chernoff’s phrase) “without participation there is no meaning” (1979: 23). This is another principle that is carried over into natural voice contexts. Here, the concern for accessibility combines with a focus on “the enjoyment of singing” to inform the statement in the NVPN’s “Philosophy and Working Principles” that “the main focus is on the

process of coming together to sing whilst at the same time developing people's vocal skills". Performance is not ruled out—"within the context of performance [we aim] for the highest standards"—but it is not the primary goal and, as noted earlier, some natural voice groups describe themselves explicitly as "non-performing".

The question of whether music itself is a universal language may be contentious, but appreciating and making music would certainly appear to be a universal feature of human society. Many writers from outside the field of ethnomusicology have been quick to seize on John Blacking's oft-quoted (if debatable) assertion that "there is so much music in the world that it is reasonable to suppose that music, like language and possibly religion, is a species-specific trait of man" (1973: 7). Less ambitious is Blacking's claim that music "is there in the body, waiting to be brought out and developed, like the basic principles of language formation" (100). Some scholars of human evolution have suggested that singing, in fact, preceded speech. Blacking himself argues that there is evidence that singing and dancing preceded speech by "several hundred thousand years" (1987: 22), and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, construed the earliest language as a kind of song or chant. Steven Mithen, in *The Singing Neanderthals*, sets out to explore and vindicate Blacking's proposal that there had been a "nonverbal, prelinguistic, 'musical' mode of thought and action" (2006: 5).[1] Noting (among other indicators) that the manner in which adults instinctively communicate with babies offers corroborating evidence that "music has a developmental, if not evolutionary, priority over language", he argues that the conditions of child **(p.51)** development suggest that "the neural networks for language are built upon or replicate those for music" (69–70). If this were indeed so, then we might invert the "If you can talk, you can sing" mantra to "If you can sing, you can talk". At the bottom line, as David Reck so vividly expresses it, "every human being on earth is (potentially, at least) a walking, living, breathing machination of sound" (1997: 44).

The image of the open, egalitarian, naturalistic singing community that natural voice practitioners seek to recreate would appear to be diametrically opposed to the contemporary Western model of the highly trained professional musician performing pre-composed works, usually read from a printed score, in a dedicated arts venue for a comparatively passive audience, most of whom—whilst appreciating music—would not consider themselves to be "musicians". Even in the West, however, such a clear-cut distinction is of relatively recent origin and is not universal; nor are the two models mutually exclusive.

Frankie Armstrong has on numerous occasions elaborated the notion that many people in modern British society are actively discouraged from singing. As children, they may have been told that they were "unmusical" or a "growler", or they may have been labelled "tone-deaf". In classroom singing they may have

been instructed only to mouth the words so that they would not “spoil” the “nicer” sounds made by the other children. Frankie proposes that the nineteenth-century Northern European notion that “some people could sing and some people couldn’t” easily translated into “some people should sing and some people *shouldn’t*”—a state of affairs that had “much more to do with acceptability and gentility and the aspirations of the educating and cultured classes” than with musical ability per se (Armstrong interview 2008). In Frankie’s assessment, the critical turning point was the introduction of compulsory schooling, following Forster’s Education Act of 1870 (Armstrong 1997: 44). Her vision of the way in which the naturally “raucous” singing of children did not match the ideals of refinement embraced by their teachers brings to mind Grant Olwage’s discussion of the rise of the bourgeois voice in Victorian Britain. This approved voice (the domain of the white middle class) created its antithesis in what Olwage calls the “anachronistic voice”—the type of voice used by children, slum-dwellers, black Africans, and other supposedly uncivilised peoples. If the bourgeois voice signified all that was “good”, “pure”, “refined”, and “cultured”, then the anachronistic voice could be censored as “ugly”, “rough”, “vulgar”, and in need of reform (2004: 206–207).

John Potter similarly sees the rise of what we now refer to as “classical singing” as being linked to the ascendancy of the middle class in the nineteenth century, arguing that “the increasingly powerful middle class…created the atmosphere in which a new concept of singer could flourish: the singer not just as artist, but singing as an exclusive art form, which required not just art but artifice” (1998: 63). He also believes this shift to be related—in England **(p.52)** and other English-speaking countries—to the establishment of Received Pronunciation, prescribing a new standard accent for English in which all traces of regional accents were eradicated. This pronunciation demanded that the larynx be lowered and the oro-pharynx widened, a position that closely resembled that required by the new singing technique (64).

Gary Tomlinson draws our attention to a parallel development whereby, in broader terms, music as an art form underwent a redefinition as instrumental music. In the eighteenth century, he writes, “a full-blown modern conception of music had not yet taken hold so that song could still pose itself as an expressive mode shared by Europe with the rest of the world”. Later, however, non-European singing came to be regarded “not as equivalent…to contemporary European practices but as a survival in far-off places of practices Europe had long since outgrown”. “Song” was now replaced by the concept of “music”, “represented above all by the burgeoning genres, institutions, and traditions of instrumental music”, which posed “a new, exclusionary category redolent of European spiritual superiority” (Tomlinson 2003: 33–34). The places where culture was now located added to its exclusive status. Simon Frith writes of how, in the nineteenth century, so-called high art was institutionalised by the bourgeoisie “as a transcendent, asocial experience (in the contemplative bank-

like setting of the gallery and the concert hall, the museum and the library)" (1996a: 116).[2]

The class-based analysis that unites these perspectives is shared by John Blacking, who views the musical specialisation that took hold in modern industrialised societies as representing a backward step. If (he asks) all members of an African society were able to make music and understand and appreciate their musical system, as he had experienced at first hand when living among the Venda, why should such capacities be more restricted in a society assumed to be more advanced? These musings give rise to another of Blacking's often-quoted formulations about the invention of "unmusicality":

> Does cultural development represent a real advance in human sensitivity and technical ability, or is it chiefly a diversion for elites and a weapon of class exploitation? Must the majority be made "unmusical" so that a few may become more "musical"?
>
> (Blacking 1973: 4)

What is at stake, Blacking argues here, is not an individual's inherent musicality but the ways in which a society defines musicality and then proceeds to label as "unmusical" those who do not meet its criteria. It is also clear that, in contemporary Western societies, such as Britain, access to music does not depend solely on "talent", however that is defined. It also depends on financial status, parental encouragement, and personality type—matters on which Christopher Small has much to say in *Music, Society, Education*. Music education in British schools has usually depended on a child's family **(p.53)** being in a position to contribute to the cost of individual weekly lessons and to hire or purchase a musical instrument. In the early stages of learning, children also stand a far greater chance of success if their parents have the time and inclination to supervise daily practice and, later, to accompany them to orchestral rehearsals at the weekend. The children themselves must have the capacity for working alone: they need to be self-motivated and tenacious. The "hard work" required as a child makes his or her way up the ladder of graded examinations on the path to "becoming" a musician might also be related to the Protestant ethic of deferred gratification that adheres to schooling as a whole.[3]

Small takes up the theme in a more revolutionary call to arms in his later book *Musicking*. If so many people in Western societies "believe themselves to be incapable of the simplest musical act", it is either (he suggests) because they were deprived of the means to develop their latent musicality while the nervous system was still forming or, more often, "because they have been actively taught to be unmusical". Agencies that Small identifies as "militating against the musicality of ordinary people" include "the system of stars and superstars that...lives on the assumption that real musical ability is as rare as diamonds and

as hard to cultivate as orchids” (1998: 210). Many schoolteachers, rather than view their task as one of helping to bring out each child’s inherent musicality, actively contribute to this process of “demusicalization”. Small reserves his greatest wrath for the “odious” label “tone-deaf” and for the all-too-common instruction given to children who have difficulty learning to sing in tune to mime the words:

> The voice is at the center of all musical activity, but it is all too easy to silence and very hard to reactivate, since those who have been silenced in this way have been wounded in a very intimate and crucial part of their being. In my opinion any music teacher caught doing such a thing or using the epithet tone-deaf of a pupil should be sacked on the spot.
>
> (Small 1998: 212)

Adopting a critical stance towards the institutionalisation and gentrification of music as an “elite” art form does not mean that what has often passed for “proper” singing is to be rejected out of hand, as Frankie Armstrong is quick to point out: “The style of singing that grew up in the courts, churches, parlours and, later, concert and opera halls of Europe is, at its best, both sublime and dramatic and we would be spiritually and culturally impoverished without it.” The problem lies in “the inappropriate dominance and imposition of this aesthetic on the majority (through the education system) [that] still filters down to children today” (1997: 44). The NVPN, alongside other community music organisations, plays a complementary role by offering a different order of experience aimed at a broader cross-section of society, only a small percentage of whom will ever aspire to a professional singing career. **(p.54)**

In one sense, then, the natural voice movement sets out to revive the way things used to be. Frankie recalls being told by A. L. Lloyd (singer, folklorist, and leading figure in the second wave of the British folk revival in the 1950s and 1960s) that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “we English were known on the continent as the ‘singing English’”. The manner in which she developed her voice workshops was informed by her understanding of how this sea change in attitudes towards the voice and the teaching of singing came about, and by an explicit desire to “encourage people to reclaim this natural and spontaneous form of expression” (Armstrong 1997: 43). Viewed from this perspective, democratising singing becomes a sociopolitical act that makes a stand for an alternative value system while simultaneously offering the possibility of a cure to individuals who, burdened with negative judgements of themselves as would-be singers, have come to hate, fear, or disown their voices. The profound personal transformations many natural voice practitioners bear witness to are proof of the importance of such work. Kirsty Martin, founder of Brighton’s Hullabaloo Quire, who describes herself as a “choral activist”, refers more generally to “this feeling and this look on people’s faces when they finally

realise that they're allowed to do it and they don't have to read it or be trained" (interview 2008).

Overcoming barriers and constraints, be they physical, psychological, or social, is crucial if the voice itself is to be freed to realise its full expressive potential. For Frankie, "it's about release":

> Most people's voices are limited by tensions and some of them are physical habits, so that you have to help them release physical tensions; some of them are to do with emotional, psychological, fears, anxieties, embarrassments—because of having been told they can't, or that they should be a certain way—but it's always, in my experience, to do with actually getting people to let go, to let go of the things that get in the way in order to release. And once you've found that *authentic* voice, you can then place it in all kinds of different ways.
>
> (Armstrong interview 2008)

The process of releasing the voice is very different from the process of training it: "It's not training in the formal sense of layering," Frankie explains, "it's actually shedding." Singers trained in the Western classical idiom can also achieve a state of vocal release, but this stands in opposition to an aesthetic that concerns itself only with the technical aspects of voice production:

> It's "nothing getting in the way" singing…nothing getting in the way between you and the audience. Not: "Am I singing correctly? Have I got a beautiful voice? Is my technique correct?"
>
> (Armstrong interview 2008)

This does not mean that there should be no attempt to shape the voice or cultivate a particular quality of sound. Frankie herself encourages the use of **(p. 55)** the open-throated singing style "found in cultures that sing in the open air, singing as naturally and spontaneously as they speak" (Armstrong 1997: 107). When an individual has established a voice that is "grounded, centred, well-supported…and open-throated", he or she "can then do all kinds of things, in terms of more subtle placements, according to which kind of cultural style [he or she is trying to emulate]" (interview 2008). As well as freeing the voice itself, then, the singer is also freeing him or herself from an ethnocentric conception of what music is and how it should sound.

The Giving Voice Project, Theatrical Roots, and the Natural Voice in Performance

Pursuit of the "natural" voice is, of course, by no means the sole prerogative of the Natural Voice Practitioners' Network. The term has currency in other contexts, times, and places, together with related concepts such as the "authentic" or "naked" voice. Much pioneering work on the voice has also

emerged from the world of contemporary theatre, particularly from the schools that subscribe to what Kristin Linklater refers to as an “inside-out” approach to actor training (see http://www.kristinlinklater.com/, acc. July 6, 2013).

A unique forum for engaging with the voice in a way that bridges artistic, scientific, and therapeutic modes is the Giving Voice Festival, an international voice and theatre initiative directed by Joan Mills which is part of a portfolio of projects curated by the Centre for Performance Research (CPR). Building on the work of its predecessor, the Cardiff Laboratory Theatre, the CPR was established in 1988 by Richard Gough and Judie Christie, and in 1995 it relocated from Cardiff to its new base at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.[4] Although Giving Voice is not a formal membership organisation, it does, like the NVPN, have an identifiable ethos to which its core associates subscribe and to which its more casual delegates are exposed. Giving Voice is informed by a fundamental belief in the ability of voice to communicate beyond language differences; it aims “to advance the appreciation and understanding of the expressive voice and celebrate its many and varied manifestations across time and culture” (http://www.thecpr.org.uk/, acc. June 12, 2013). First staged in 1990, the festival brings together an extraordinary assortment of performers, teachers, scholars, healers, and therapists—both world famous and lesser known—for an action-packed programme of workshops, performances, presentations, and lectures taking place over a period of up to sixteen days. The event was held in Wales until Arts Council Wales withdrew its regular funding in 2008, forcing the CPR to make major changes in its operation. Since 2009, the Giving Voice festival has taken place outside the United Kingdom in collaboration with overseas partners. **(p. 56)**

Some of the questions posed by Joan Mills in the brochure for the first Giving Voice Festival would certainly strike a chord with many natural voice practitioners. Can the voice be trained by purely scientific and formal technique? What part does the psyche play in vocal development? What part may be played by body awareness techniques in the development of a performer’s voice? What is the relationship between speaking and singing? What can we learn from other cultures’ vocal expressions? The booking information for the inaugural festival noted that, while the workshops included in the programme were aimed particularly at those working with the voice and performance in a professional capacity and as such would be challenging and hard work, they were also open to anyone with a love of using the voice and would not normally require an ability to read music.

From the outset, Giving Voice has sought out leading practitioners from across the globe whose work resonates with its ethos and aspirations and those practitioners, in turn, have contributed to its evolution and identity. At one end of the continuum are those whose artistic practices are grounded in their own ancestral heritage. At the other are those who engage in pioneering reflexive or

experimental practice, often built on a philosophy and methodology that they have developed as part of their life's work. A brief introduction to a some of those in this latter category will help to elucidate the nature of what is to some extent a shared vision, and will also allow the reader to discern points of contact with the philosophy of the NVPN as presented in the first half of this chapter.

Kristin Linklater and Michele George

A regular presence at Giving Voice festivals and a member of its international advisory board, Kristin Linklater is author of the seminal *Freeing the Natural Voice*—first published in 1976 and in 2006 appearing in a revised and expanded edition that incorporates new material developed during the intervening three decades. Kristin now occupies a central place in the history of voice training in the United States, alongside such other luminaries as Edith Skinner, Arthur Lessac, and Evangeline Machlin. Born in Scotland, Kristin trained as an actress at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA), where her voice teacher was Iris Warren. Warren, in Kristin's words, "moved the science of voice production for British actors into a new phase…by adding psychological understanding to physiological knowledge". In her exercises for actors suffering strained voices, Warren worked by "shifting the controls from external, physical muscles to internal, psychological impulses" (Linklater 2006: 5–6). After being taken on by Warren as a teacher trainee, Kristin taught for six years at LAMDA before relocating to the United States in 1963 to set up her own private studio in New York. She later held the **(p.57)** posts of Professor of Theatre at Emerson College in Boston and Professor of Theatre Arts at Columbia University in New York City.

Kristin's approach—sometimes referred to as "Linklater Voice" or "Linklater Method", and sometimes as "Freeing the Natural Voice"—is "designed to liberate the natural voice and thereby develop a vocal technique that serves the freedom of human expression" (2006: 7). Several aspects of the philosophy informing her method have direct parallels in the NVPN's "Philosophy and Working Principles". "The basic assumption of the work," she writes, "is that everyone possesses a voice capable of expressing, through a two- to four-octave natural pitch range, whatever gamut of emotion, complexity of mood, and subtlety of thought he or she experiences." She goes on to describe the tensions, defences, and inhibitions, which may be physical, emotional, intellectual, aural, or psychological, that "diminish the efficiency of the natural voice to the point of distorted communication". The goal of her work is not only "the development of a skillful musical instrument" but also "the removal of the blocks that inhibit the human instrument", with the ultimate objective being "to produce a voice that is in direct contact with emotional impulses, shaped by the intellect but not inhibited by it" (2006: 7–8). The description of her work included in the brochure for the 2009 Giving Voice Festival notes that "emphasis is placed on freedom and release rather than control". Bodywork also plays a central role, since "to free

the voice is to free the person, and each person is indivisibly mind and body" (2006: 8).

The theme of liberation from constraints is equally central to the philosophy and life work of Toronto-based singer, actress, and self-styled "therapeutic voice specialist" Michele George, another veteran of Giving Voice.[5] In her private practice, Michele aims to help her clients "find and express the most profound levels of their being through the voice", and to "rediscover the power and beauty of the voice [they] were born with" (http://michelegeorge.com/, acc. June 12, 2013). Freedom of expression, however extreme the results may sound to the more guarded ear, lies at the heart of Michele's mission. On her website she elaborates:

> There is a general notion that a loud or fully resounding voice is a negative one.... We have lost the right to whoop for joy, to grieve through wailing, to call out loud in love or need, to sing our own true song.

Her work is therefore underpinned by a commitment to enabling participants

> to examine and acknowledge the right of each one of us to have our say in this world, to re-member the voice we were born with as a prime instrument of communication, to recognize that this voice has been denied and suppressed; and then to begin to explore the practical possibilities available to support the recognition and repair the self.
>
> (http://michelegeorge.com/)

(p.58)

In a personal interview, Michele explained further the relationship she perceives between liberation on the one hand and, on the other, artistic creativity and individual choice:

> It is my firm belief that we all have an absolutely unique story that is about when we were silenced and we had our voices stolen from us and, as artistic people, to get a hold of that story and to claim it is a gateway to unlimited creativity because it's a way of knowing what I'm made of, where the habits and patterns got put in place that shut me down and that limited my creativity.... If I break these patterns and habits that limit me, I have choice.
>
> (George interview 2008)

Material drawn from the vocal traditions of different cultures also plays a central part in Michele's work. She was a founding member of Peter Brook's groundbreaking International Centre for Theatre Research (established in Paris in the late 1960s), and it was through her extensive travels and world-wide

performances with the company that she was able to accumulate “much of her multicultural understanding of musical and vocal possibilities” (http://michelegeorge.com/).

Alfred Wolfsohn and Roy Hart

Giving Voice and its associates also honour and build on the legacy of an earlier generation of pioneers who are no longer with us, but in whose work we find the antecedents of many of the natural voice principles. In her initial statement in 1990 about the raison d’être of the fledgling Giving Voice project, Joan Mills evoked Alfred Wolfsohn’s characterisation of the voice as “the muscle of the soul”—an image that has been a constant presence throughout the life of Giving Voice. Wolfsohn (1896–1962) devoted his career to exploring the nature and possibilities of the voice, particularly “the potential of the voice as not only an instrument of artistic expression but also of human development, psychology, and therapy” (http://www.roy-hart-theatre.com/site/, acc. June 12, 2013). He is credited by his followers as being “among the first people in the West to recognize the profound value of ‘unacceptable’ human sound” (Kalo 1997: 185). If Wolfsohn had written *Lies My Music Teacher Told Me*, close to the top of *his* list would have been: “The normal human voice has a register of up to two-and-a-half octaves.” Wolfsohn insisted that “the natural human voice, freed from all artificial restrictions...is able to go much further”, and he trained his pupils to “break their vocal and personal psychological barriers” by developing a vocal range of between four and eight octaves (ibid.). His ultimate aim was to to develop an “unchained” voice, which he called “the voice of the future”. **(p.59)**

German-born and of Jewish descent, Wolfsohn was conscripted into the German army at the age of eighteen to fight in World War I. Later, in 1939, he escaped from Berlin to London. Suffering from shellshock, Wolfsohn was haunted for the remainder of his life by his experiences in the trenches. And it was his vivid memories of the norm-shattering and almost superhuman cries of injured and dying soldiers that propelled his explorations into the potential of the human voice. He learned his craft largely by giving singing lessons to people who had lost their voice or were struggling with other vocal difficulties. Wolfsohn’s fundamental insight was that their problems most often lay not in a physical malfunctioning of the larynx but in the depths of the soul or psyche. Vocal improvement in such cases was predicated on the healing of psychological damage, and he therefore immersed himself in the literature of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Wolfsohn was particularly drawn to the work of the Swiss analytical pyshologist Carl Gustav Jung, in which he recognised many principles that were confirmed by his own observations. Wolfsohn believed that the integration of the personality could be demonstrated in the human voice and that Jung’s archetypes “exist in the body of every person and can be reached...through sound” (Kalo 1997: 187). In his own writings, Wolfsohn stressed that he did not consider singing to be only “an artistic exercise” but

also to create “the possibility and the means to recognize oneself and to transform this recognition into conscious life” (cited in Günther 1990: 70).

Wolfsohn’s legacy is most forcibly felt in the work of the Roy Hart Theatre. Roy Hart (1926–1975) was born in South Africa, where he originally studied psychology and English before winning a scholarship to London’s Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in 1946. His life was transformed as a result of meeting Wolfsohn—a meeting that led him to abandon a promising career in the West End to become Wolfsohn’s pupil. Hart was Wolfsohn’s protégé for sixteen years and continued his mentor’s work after his death, referring to his own work as an “eight-octave approach to life”. Hart gradually resumed his performing career; it was for Hart, whose vocal range and virtuosity were admired by many contemporary composers, that Peter Maxwell Davies composed *Eight Songs for a Mad King* (1968). The group of actors Hart worked with in London began to call themselves the Roy Hart Theatre, and in 1968, they performed their first full-length production (a preverbal interpretation of Euripides’ *The Bacchae*). In 1974 the group relocated to the South of France and took up residence at the twelfth-century Château de Malérargues, which remained their headquarters following Hart’s untimely demise in a car accident in 1975. Using words that are by now familiar, Hart once described the voice as “at once the most intimate and naked revelation of our essential self” (http://www.roy-hart.com/, acc. June 12, 2013). Like Wolfsohn, he viewed both psychological work and physical preparation as vital prerequisites to vocal development, and this led him to observe: “It is not surprising…that the mental and physical demands of our work caused our meeting **(p.60)** place gradually to be regarded as a combined Church/Theatre/Gymnasium/Clinic” (Hart 1967: n.p.). Today the Roy Hart Theatre maintains its centre at Malérargues, although some of its practitioners now operate from other bases across the globe.

Jerzy Grotowski and Włodzimierz Staniewski

Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), together with contemporary companies who continue his work, also warrants a special mention as a member of the CPR’s international extended family. Celebrated as the father of experimental theatre, Grotowski established his Laboratory Theatre in the city of Wrocław in 1965; in 1986 he was invited to relocate to Pontedera, Italy, where he founded the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski. Grotowski travelled widely, seeking in the different cultures he encountered elements of traditional practice and technique that, combined with a re-injection of ritual, would facilitate a heightened communion between actor and spectator, with the potential for both personal and social transformation. He dubbed the approach that informed his work in the 1960s “poor theatre”, the guiding principles of which are outlined in his book *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968). In the productions of the Laboratory Theatre, conventional props were more or less dispensed with, allowing the focus to shift to the physicality of the performer, who also created his or her own music using the voice alone. During the final phase of his work,

referred to as “art as vehicle” or “ritual arts”, Grotowski developed performances that incorporated “actions related to very ancient songs which traditionally served ritual purposes and so can have a direct impact on—so to say—the head, the heart, and the body of the doers, songs which can allow the passage from a vital energy to a more subtle one” (cited in Thibaudat 1995: 29). Like the members of the Roy Hart Theatre, Grotowski’s actors were required to commit to rigorous training regimes and became, in the words of the *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*, “disciplined masters of bodily and vocal contortions” (http://www.britannica.com/, acc. June 12, 2013).

Grotowski’s legacy lives on in the work of such companies as Theatre Zar and Teatr Pieśń Kozła (Song of the Goat), both based in Wrocław, as well as others outside Poland, such as the Odin Teatret in Denmark, founded by Grotowski’s one-time apprentice Eugenio Barba. These companies have a strong presence at CPR events. Poland’s Gardzienice Theatre, directed by Włodzimierz Staniewski (at one time a close associate of Grotowski), is also part of the jigsaw. Again, the company accords a prime place in its performances to music, which Staniewski describes as “a key which opens heart and soul” (http://www.gardzienice.art.pl/, acc. June 12, 2013), and company members undertake regular expeditions to work with indigenous communities in rural **(p.61)** regions of Poland and elsewhere in the world (part of the culture of theatre anthropology). The relevance of the Grotowski and Staniewski strand for our present purposes lies not only in its focus on exploratory voicework but also in the incorporation of songs from living oral traditions into theatrical productions and in the intercultural encounters that lie behind such endeavours.[6]

Giving Voice as Culture and Community

Initiatives like Giving Voice, then, owe much of their impact to their ability to gather so many world-class experts and iconic figures together in one place for a concentrated period of time. In so doing, they bring these different specialists into dialogue with one another and make their work accessible to a large and varied cohort of international delegates who are thus exposed to new ways of thinking while also developing their own practice. Since many of the core associates and delegates return on a regular basis, the project has come to represent a kind of culture or community in its own right where friendships are made and professional relationships strengthened. In this respect, Giving Voice festivals are similar to the annual gatherings of the NVPN and the Unicorn Natural Voice Camp (see chapters 3 and 8, respectively). The cumulative list of practitioners and scholars who have been part of the faculty for past festivals (a list that often appears in the brochure for a new edition) further reinforces the sense that Giving Voice is a professional body and, in some ways at least, a community of practice.

The line-up at the first Giving Voice Festival and Symposium in 1990 featured Kristin Linklater, together with several other practitioners bringing influences from the above lineages. These included Zygmunt Molik, a founder member of Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory; Roberta Carreri of Odin Teatret; Kozana Lucca, an Argentinian actress, teacher, and director who played an instrumental role in the development of the Roy Hart Theatre; and Derek Gale, a drama therapist and psychotherapist whose work is based on Wolfsohn's philosophy and techniques (Gale's voice teacher, Emmanuel Klein, had been a pupil of both Wolfsohn and Hart). Also present as both speaker and workshop leader was Frankie Armstrong, who referenced Wolfsohn's now legendary designation of the voice as "the muscle of the soul" in her symposium presentation. And in the programme notes for this inaugural festival, director Joan Mills acknowledged her personal debt to many of the invited teachers in assisting her on her own vocal journey.

Subsequent festivals were constructed around themes reflected in their titles, such as A Geography of the Voice (1994 and 1995), An Archaeology of the Voice (1996 and 1997), A Divinity of the Voice (1999), and The Voice Politic (2002). The roll call of contributors shows the net being cast ever wider in terms of both geographical and disciplinary spread. Among the artists **(p.62)** present, some already have an established reputation in world music circles; others are rare finds and have never before appeared in a public venue. Several ethnomusicologists serve as symposium presenters, often attending alongside artists from their research field for whom they act as interpreters. Notably, Helen Chadwick, who is a member of the Giving Voice advisory board, also emerges as a key player.[7]

In 2009, almost twenty years after its inception, Giving Voice left Wales for the first time and was hosted by the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław as part of the Grotowski anniversary celebrations. In tribute, the festival proposed to "take inspiration from Grotowski's profound and pioneering work on song and the voice in action" (Giving Voice programme 2009). Kristin Linklater was again on the programme; so, too, was Jonathan Hart Makwaia, stepson of Roy Hart. Among the workshops devoted to studying songs from a particular culture and their associated vocal techniques were Polyphonic Singing from the Ukraine, led by Maryana Sadovska, and The Voice of the Performer, led by Ukrainian singer and actress Natalia Polovynka. Both women specialise in teaching songs from their own country—Ukraine—but do so in a way that has been strongly influenced by the work of Grotowski and Staniewski. Maryana was part of Grotowski's Slavic Pilgrim Project, based in Pontedera, Italy, and was subsequently invited to join the Gardzienice Theatre Association, with which she remained for ten years as an actress and a musical director. It was this work that inspired her to develop "a system of exercises enabling the discovery of the bonds between singing, gesture and voice, rhythm and breath" (Giving Voice programme 2009). Natalia's experience with the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski

in Pontedera likewise was “a key turning point in her artistic exploration” (ibid.). These histories and kinships are important to note, not least because, through attending workshops such as these, amateur participants whose primary desire is to learn new songs are at the same time introduced to methods developed in professional theatre contexts.

Traditional singers from different parts of the world who still sing as part of their everyday lives and who have not undertaken any formal training in either singing or teaching (even if some also tour in semi-professional performing groups) may also be introduced to both natural voice and experimental theatre networks through events such as Giving Voice. Featured in the 2009 workshop programme, for example, were the Corsican group Tempus Fugit, members of the Cuncordu de Orosei and Tenores Antoni Milia from Sardinia, and the Pilpani family from Svaneti (Republic of Georgia), each of which taught material from the polyphonic singing traditions of their own region. Here, cross-influences are at work in both directions; the workshop leaders are introduced—through observing the work of other artists and attending more theoretical presentations—to new ideas and methodologies that they may later incorporate into their own teaching. Other “ethnic” performers, some of whom led workshops as well as giving concerts, included **(p.63)** N’Faly Kouyate (Guinea), Hasmik Harutyunyan (Armenia), Mahsa and Marjan Vahdat (Iran), Svetlana Spajić (Serbia), La Kaita (Spain), Bente Kahan (Norway), and Jawaher Shofani (Palestine). Also on the bill were Meredith Monk (USA), the ensemble Kitka (USA), Bragod (Wales), Michael Ormiston (UK) and his khöömii teacher Tserendaava (Mongolia), Lalish Theater Labor (Kurdistan/Austria), and Teatro delle Albe (Italy). Finally, the performances of Theatre Zar (*Gospels of Childhood* and *Caesarean Section*) and Pieśń Kozła (*Macbeth*) included songs from Corsica, Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Georgia, Chechnya, and Iceland. These artists showcased a staggering range of vocal qualities and colours and—even when not confining themselves to indigenous songs from their own heritage (as in the case of Theatre Zar, Pieśń Kozła, and Kitka, for example)—offered rare, first-hand insights into the functions and meanings of these expressive forms in their cultural context.[8]

A Meeting of Worlds: Giving Voice and the Natural Voice Network

On the surface, the two “cultures” examined in this chapter might appear to enjoy parallel but largely separate lives. The one manifests itself in the type of professional voicework engaged in by actors as well as singers which is showcased in international events such as the Giving Voice Festival; the other, in the comparatively localised activities associated with the NVPN, whose membership is predominantly British and whose primary focus is on amateur and emerging singers. Certainly, the prospect of working on the voice (and the psyche) at the intense, personal level demanded of acolytes of Roy Hart or Grotowski, for example, would appear daunting to the average community-choir member. For other reasons, too, Giving Voice festivals are likely to attract more theatre practitioners and singers who are committed to performance than

amateur, recreational singers. There are, nonetheless, several ways in which bridges are built between the two environments.

For many NVPN practitioners, Giving Voice has been seminal in providing them with opportunities to work alongside outstanding teachers and performers from across the globe, not only to learn new musical material, vocal styles, and teaching techniques, but also to gain a window onto the worlds from which the songs come and a deeper understanding of the part played by music in lives lived elsewhere. It is through Giving Voice that many were introduced to Georgian, Corsican, Ukranian, and Mongolian vocal traditions, for example. Others who may never have attended the festival in person are aware of Giving Voice as a significant keystone in the natural voice edifice, not least for what one speaker refers to as its “cascade effect”. Many more benefit—often unconsciously—as they are introduced at second or third hand to ideas, exercises, or songs first shared in workshops led by Kristin Linklater, Michele **(p.64)** George, Maryana Sadovska, and others. As the foregoing survey of artists and activities assembled under the Giving Voice umbrella demonstrates, the potential for cross-influence is considerable and it is through this wider web of connections and spin-offs, as well as through direct participation, that Giving Voice makes its influence felt. Of particular note is the fact that the CPR was responsible for bringing Georgian singer and ethnomusicologist Edisher Garakanidze to the United Kingdom, initially in connection with a theatre project and later as part of Giving Voice (a story I pursue in greater detail in chapter 6). Edisher’s influence spread rapidly as he was invited to lead workshops across the British Isles by choir leaders who first encountered his work at these events and it was Joan Mills and other CPR colleagues who helped nurture his collection *99 Georgian Songs*, subsequently published on the CPR’s Black Mountain Press label. The CPR thus paved the way for the thriving network of Georgian singing enthusiasts and dedicated Georgian choirs found in Britain today.

A regular presence at Giving Voice since its inception, Frankie Armstrong pays homage to the extraordinary teachers and performers she has met there who have contributed to the evolution of her work. Her association with the CPR, and more particularly her close friendship and professional collaboration with Joan Mills, in fact dates back to the early 1980s and the days of Cardiff Laboratory Theatre. It should therefore come as no great surprise that, looking back on this joint journey in 2006, she should describe the NVPN as having “a rich symbiotic relationship” with Giving Voice (Armstrong 2006: 35). It is also no accident that her collection *Well-Tuned Women* (Armstrong and Pearson 2000) includes chapters by Kristin Linklater, Michele George, and others who have appeared at Giving Voice, as well as Joan herself.

This perception of a common quest is shared by Joan Mills, even if (as she was keen to establish during the final plenary session of the 2009 festival) Giving Voice “really comes from performance”. In engaging with different vocal forms, she explains, she and her fellow practitioners are not motivated by any desire to revive or preserve them as such but rather to use them as inspiration for their own creative work. Yet for her, there are at the same time obvious links between the community choir world and the type of work showcased at Giving Voice. As an adjunct to the festivals already described that sit at the centre of the Giving Voice project, she has also invested considerable resources in promoting community choir activity in Wales under the banner of Local Voices, Worlds of Song. This initiative has embraced a range of activities, including (in 2002 and 2003) short residential gatherings at the CPR’s base in Aberystwyth, where choir members could take part in a series of half-day workshops and also join together for an evening of performance. The overlap with the interests, convictions, and methods that characterise the NVPN world is clear from the description of the workshop programme in the promotional material for the first such event: **(p. 65)**

> The workshops aim to provide a range of stimulating teaching: some offer a particular singing style to which participants may not often have access; some are about working on *how* we sing, the quality of the voice, issues of confidence, better listening; some particularly focus on the co-ordination of body and voice […]; some are to encourage a free exploration of each voice in an enjoyable, easy atmosphere.
>
> (Unpublished information sheet, 2001)

Having had a taster of the kind of workshops typically on offer at a full Giving Voice festival, many participants were inspired to return in order to attend more intensive sessions with a chosen artist or to sample a wider range of offerings. A parallel initiative was the launch of a programme of weekend workshops led by artists associated with Giving Voice which took place in different parts of Wales. This made the work accessible to a far greater number of local choir members on their home ground. The sense (for participating choirs) of being part of a wider network was further strengthened by projects such as Traveller, centred on a new work—*Travels with My Uncle*—commissioned from the composer Karl Jenkins. With a preparation period of several months that included regional workshops led by a team of tutors (including NVPN members Roxane Smith, already encountered in her role as conductor at Sing for Water, and Pauline Down, director of Bangor Community Choir), this project culminated in another mass choir performance, this time at St. Donat’s Castle in South Wales.

The Natural Voice in Perspective

Where, then, does all of this leave us in our quest for the natural voice? Certainly there is ample evidence of multiple networks of individuals from

different cultural backgrounds and walks of life who come together around a commitment to something they call the natural voice or who are attracted to the kind of activity that is labelled as such by others. But is there such a thing as a universal “natural” voice? The considered answer has to be no. Clearly, voices in different parts of the world have quite distinctive sounds (even if they can be modified). The glossary entry for “natural voice” from the booklet in the *Voix du Monde/Voices of the World* compact disc set produced by the CNRS/Musée de l’Homme begins by stating that “a ‘natural’ sung voice is when its timbre is closest to the spoken voice”, but immediately adds: “In so far as spoken voices are themselves dependent on large cultural variations...the notion of ‘natural voice’ is therefore of a strictly relative value” (Léothaud, Lortat-Jacob, and Zemp 1996: 180).

In some ways, the “natural” qualifier says more about what a voice is *not* than what it is. In a Euro-American context, one might say that the natural voice is not a classically trained voice. But this is unsatisfactory too. Frankie **(p.66)** Armstrong makes it clear that she does not view the natural voice as a straightforward gloss for the non-professional or untrained voice: “I think Maria Callas used the natural voice. It was highly trained but it’s absolutely up from the soles of the floor [*sic*]” (interview 2008). A “natural” voice in this sense might be better described as a voice that is “released” and “unrestrained” and that communicates a depth of feeling that listeners experience as “authentic”.

“Natural voice” seems to be more useful, then, as a designator of a broader approach to working with the voice. It may be helpful here to draw an analogy with another movement using the “natural” label, the natural childbirth movement. The National Childbirth Trust (NCT) was founded in 1956 as the Natural Childbirth Association. It found its inspiration in the writings of British obstetrician Grantly Dick-Read, author of *Natural Childbirth* and the international bestseller *Childbirth Without Fear* (initially published under the title *Revelation of Childbirth*), whose mission was to help mothers to give birth naturally, with as little medical interference as possible. The organisation’s fundamental aim was to challenge the medicalisation of childbirth that had accompanied what was then a relatively recent shift from home births to hospital births, to question the routine use of drugs and other interventions during labour and delivery, and to keep open the option of a more natural alternative. Tidy, technologised births, like the classical voice, might be viewed as a modern, Western, middle-class invention. No one would deny that vital progress has been made in reducing birth trauma where medical intervention is necessary; the problem, again, lies in the imposition of the new norm on those who do not require a high-tech approach and where the dividing line between assistance and constraint is more thinly drawn. Above all, the NCT is concerned with the quality of individual experience, and with the emotional and spiritual—as well as physical—wellbeing of mother and child. Interestingly, Sheila Kitzinger, who occupies a mentor position not unlike that of Frankie Armstrong (she was once

referred to by *The Independent* as “the high priestess of the childbirth movement”), was also inspired initially by insights she gained as a social anthropologist by observing the way in which childbirth is managed in other parts of the world (see Kitzinger 1978).

What has become abundantly clear is that the concept of the natural voice does not refer only to one type of voice or voice production, or to the voice alone. For the professional performer, it indicates a search for authenticity in the sense of an expressive power and creative capacity that is unencumbered by artificial constraints. The voice that emerges is individual and unique, in direct contact with the emotions but not bound by them. In amateur contexts, it signifies a concern with rediscovering the joy of singing. For some individuals, it has a therapeutic dimension. In the more specific context of the NVPN, it denotes a shared philosophy and methodology that continue to be negotiated. It also serves in part as an indicator of the type of repertory one might expect from a natural voice choir or workshop (broadly speaking, songs from **(p.67)** oral traditions rather than the classical standards favoured by more conventional amateur choirs). As David Burbidge puts it, members of the NVPN use “natural voice” as a kind of shorthand “to show that we express certain core beliefs in our way of working” (http://www.lakelandvoice.co.uk/, acc. June 12, 2013). Frankie Armstrong reflects:

> What I would hope [is that] the baseline of the natural voice is still to create a place—an accepting, non-judgmental place—where people can come and sing, as indeed they did in the past,…at harvest suppers and singing rounds in the pub and whatever—where they can have that experience of social singing.
>
> (Armstrong interview 2008)

She sums up: “For me it’s a whole thing to do with both the kind of historical, social, political, cultural development of the voice in the way that we use it and the contexts in which we choose to use it, and the actual physicality of how the voice is formed” (ibid.).

Critics will be quick to point out that the natural voice movement itself isn’t free and unfettered. It has an ideology; it promotes a methodology; there are expectations that anyone using the natural voice label will adhere to a set of agreed principles and a code of practice. Practitioners might talk about the natural voice in terms of liberation from rules and norms, but they tend to undertake a particular kind of training and use particular types of exercises (see chapter 4). Again, an analogy with the natural childbirth movement may be helpful. It also promotes a specific philosophy, method, and approach; teachers are trained and certified (in this case, the training is more formal); participants in classes learn a particular set of exercises. This does not diminish in any way

the underlying ethic or objective, which is to empower the individual and to offer an alternative to the industry standard. Even in societies where people supposedly “live close to nature”, there is always some degree of guidance, conditioning, or training. Children learn through stories, songs, and rituals; they learn by imitation and example. They are not simply left to their own devices.

In the same way that natural childbirth principles have increasingly made inroads into the mainstream (many hospital maternity units now provide a more homelike environment and offer birthing pools, for example), so the causes embraced by the natural voice movement appear to be on the brink of achieving wider currency. Members of the NVPN would no doubt be heartened to know that, more than a decade ago, John Potter wrote on the first page of his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*:

> If I had to predict where significant developments in singing will come from in the future, I would hazard a guess that what we now call world music is the well-spring from which new forms of vocal expression will flow.…At almost **(p.68)** any other time in recent history a singing Companion would probably have meant an anthology of writing about fairly narrowly defined “classical” singing. Looking backwards to the latter part of the twentieth century and forwards to the twenty-first, it is possible to see a major and continuing change in our perception of what singing is, to the extent that it is no longer possible to come up with any single meaningful definition.
>
> (Potter 2000: 1–2)

Those active in the natural voice world are contributing significantly to this shift of consciousness, whilst also putting theory into practice in a way that brings the promise of vocal liberation within the reach of an ever-widening constituency of amateur and aspiring singers.

Notes:

(1.) Mithen goes on to outline his vision of a “sophisticated communication system” used by Neanderthals, to which he gives the name “Hmmmmm”, an acronym for Holistic, Manipulative, Multi-Modal, Musical, and Mimetic.

(2.) Banks in the neoclassical style—as well as concert halls, galleries, museums, libraries, and churches—were, of course, modelled architecturally on ancient Greek and Roman temples as post-Enlightenment shrines to civilisation.

(3.) See also Blacking’s reference to the “aura of morality” that adheres to “the diligent practice of scales and arpeggios” (1973: 109).

(4.) Cardiff Laboratory Theatre was founded in 1974, and Richard Gough served as its director from 1981.

(5.) Michele holds a Diploma from the Central School of Speech and Drama in London and a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in speech and dramatic arts.

(6.) Space does not allow a more extensive appraisal of the many complexities, ambiguities, and controversies surrounding Grotowski's work. A wealth of material, including a substantial encyclopedia and bibliography, can be found on the website http://www.grotowski.net/en. See also the website and other outcomes of The British Grotowski Project, directed by Paul Allain: http://www.britishgrotowski.co.uk/. For a critical history and evaluation of Gardzienice, see Paul Allain's *Gardzienice: Polish Theatre in Transition* (1997, reprinted 2004).

(7.) Documentation relating to past festivals (and to many other CPR events) can be found in the Projects section of the CPR website: see http://thecpr.org.uk, acc. April 21, 2014.

(8.) Erik Hillestad of KKV Records (like myself, an invited speaker at the 2009 festival) said that he was struck by the fact that all the voices presented during the week were "authentic" (pers. comm. 2009). There was a marked absence of bel canto traditions, stage divas, and the more conventional "choral" sound of Western choirs.