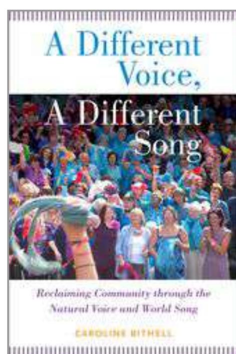

A Different Voice, A Different Song: Reclaiming Community through the Natural Voice and World Song
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Singing Communities

The World of Community Choirs

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Abstract and Keywords

Chapter 7 investigates the world of natural-voice-style community choirs, set within the broader context of amateur choirs and choral singing, both contemporary and historical, and of more generic considerations of the ways in which singing may be construed in relation to happiness, health, and wellbeing. Particular attention is paid to notions of community and to the ways in which personal rewards intersect with social impact. The discussion here includes short, contrasting case studies of Bangor Community Choir and the London Georgian choir Maspindzeli. The chapter further explores the dynamics of performance and offers an overview of the varied locations and settings in which community choirs may share their repertoire with the wider community. Additional short case studies include Cambridge's Good Vibrations choir and its engagement with asylum seekers at Oakington Immigration Reception Centre.

Keywords: community choir, amateur choir, choral singing, community, happiness, health and wellbeing, performance, asylum seeker

Singing in the Streets

It is July 2012 and I am in the small market town of Bury, in the heart of England's North West region, where choirs from as far afield as Aberystwyth, Brighton, and Edinburgh have come together for the annual spectacle that is the National Street Choirs Festival. The singers have spent the morning in the cavernous sports hall of the local leisure centre, running through the songs for the 600-strong mass sing that is to be staged in the town centre at midday. I

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quickly set up my camera as the singers now take their places in the middle of the pedestrianised shopping area and, without pomp or ceremony, launch into action. The bright harmonies and light-footed rhythms of “Jikelele” call to passers-by to join the crowd that begins to form. “All people everywhere, we understand each other; we are all alike,” the Zulu words ring out. “I Want Rosa to Stay”, a new song penned by Alun Parry, has a more urgent message. In the tradition of topical songwriting, it tells of a friend who is threatened with deportation and points to the scaremongering surrounding “illegal immigrants” that, fuelled by the popular press, takes attention away from the failure of the system to address more fundamental social and political malaise. Half an hour later, the “Internationale”, sung with English lyrics by Billy Bragg, brings the set to a close on a more strident note as the singers raise their fists in the air for the final chorus[1] (see web figures 07.01–07.04).

The super-sized pop-up choir dissolves as quickly as it formed as individual choirs set off to take up their busking positions in different locations around the town centre: in front of Barclays Bank, the Royal Bank of Scotland, and the Post Office; in the Market Square; by the Peel Statue; in the Lion Gardens, Kay Gardens, and Gallipoli Gardens; and in the Art Gallery and Mosses Centre. **(p. 207)** Each group offers enthusiastic renditions of three or four songs, sometimes with simple dance steps thrown in, before another takes its place. While some of the singers are in everyday clothes, others have adopted a distinctive colour scheme. Choirs like the Liverpool Socialist Singers, East Lancs Clarion Community Choir, and Red Leicester Choir not surprisingly account for a predominance of red. Some have a brightly coloured banner bearing their name or a slogan: “What we sing is what we are”, declares the banner of East Lancs Clarion Choir, somewhat incongruously positioned in front of branches of Cash Converters and Mr. Simms Olde Sweet Shoppe (Figure 7.1). One of their numbers has the refrain “Here we stand, we shall not be moved” and verses appealing to justice, peace, and freedom; from where the singers are standing, the verse about the greed of city bankers might well be aimed at the ill-fated Royal Bank of Scotland just across the street (which is once more teetering on the brink of collapse despite a £45 billion government bail-out in 2008). Further down the main thoroughfare, Red Leicester are belting out one of their anti-capitalist favourites, with verses criticising the unscrupulous dealings of city bankers and calling for the abolition of the controversial university tuition fees that have tripled under the new Coalition government. This is followed by “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime”, an anthem of the Great Depression in America whose line “Why should I be standing in line just waiting for **(p.208)** bread” has a topical ring in the context of the food banks to which more of the British people are having to turn as unemployment continues to rise and benefits are cut. Members of Côr Gobaith (Choir of Hope), a self-designated peace choir from Aberystwyth, are clad in dark T-shirts imprinted with the image of a white dove. They, too, are suggestively positioned in front of a large McDonald’s billboard

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announcing: “Limited time only. Just like the British summer.” (“Just like the British economy,” many of those gathered here would no doubt like to add as their eye catches the store front of the Yorkshire Building Society just to the left.)

Figure 7.1 Members of East Lancs Clarion Community Choir performing in the town centre during the Street Choirs Festival. Bury, July 2012.

Source: Courtesy of Chloe Grant.

Passers-by look on quizzically, unsure about what exactly is going on. Some hang back on the periphery; others come close and enter into the spirit of the more animated performances, such as that offered by Manchester-based Open Voice, whose members dance their way through “Iqude Wema” in front of Barclays Bank. Exaltation of Larks is another group from Manchester, made up of three choirs and singing groups (usually non-performing) led by Faith Watson. Informally dressed in everyday garb, the singers could just as well be ordinary Saturday shoppers, until they take their positions and burst into song in the more intimate setting of the enclosed Market Square. Their set includes the spiritual “I Stood on the River of Jordan” and the haunting Bengali lullaby “Ami Tomake”. Inside Bury Art Gallery members of Manchester Community Choir, resplendent in shades of green, are arranged on the first-floor gallery around a circular stone balustrade which looks down into the generously proportioned ground-floor foyer. Viewed from below, they are framed—more fittingly this time—by the gallery’s motto, which is emblazoned in bright blue neon around the inner rim of the balustrade: “Different Languages Same Places—Different Places Same Cultures—Different Cultures Same Horizons”. The resonant space is filled with the harmonies of “Kothbiro” by Kenyan singer-songwriter Ayub Ogada, the Croatian song “Plovi Barko”, and Nickomo Clarke’s “I Am a River” as onlookers catch glimpses and echoes of the singers from different parts of the building (see web figures 07.05–07.08).

We reconvene in the leisure centre for a more formal evening concert that features twenty-eight choirs in succession. First, we welcome the WAST Nightingales, a small choir associated with the group Women Asylum Seekers Together and made up, as its name suggests, of asylum seekers from different parts of the world who have found a new home in and around Manchester. The eight women on stage tonight have arrived without their musical director, who

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has just been detained and taken to Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre on the other side of the country. "We Are Here Today", they sing, to palpable encouragement from the packed hall. The feast that follows includes songs from countries as diverse as Palestine, Brazil, New Zealand, and South Africa alongside songs from closer to home: several Chartist and anti-royalist songs, arrangements of regional English folk songs and popular hits, original compositions by choir leaders, and newly penned political songs—one, "The Ballad of **(p.209)** Nick and Dave", memorably accompanied by cardboard mask-like images of the faces of Coalition leaders David Cameron (prime minister) and Nick Clegg (deputy prime minister) waved aloft on sticks (see video tracks 07.01–07.06).

The workshops on offer the following morning include a songwriting workshop with Alun Parry. Two new songs emerge as collective compositions commemorating experiences of the previous day. One tells the story of a group of singers that was, in fact, moved on from their position in front of Barclays Bank. The other draws inspiration from another choir, which, by chance, had launched into a Zimbabwean marriage song just as a Zimbabwean couple were walking past: after recovering from their initial surprise, the couple had joined in the singing along with the choir.

Choirs, Choirs Everywhere

We will return to several of the themes suggested by my opening vignette as this chapter unfolds. In particular, we will examine in greater depth the kinds of performances in which community choirs typically engage and the rewards that such activity brings. First, though, we take another journey. This time we travel through the varied geographical and historical landscape of choral activity, alighting at different points along the way to visit festivals, competitions, and other singing extravaganzas. We linger just long enough to acquaint ourselves with the repertoire of the moment and to understand something of the motivations and concerns that distinguish each of the communities we encounter. In the process, we learn more about the different networks of people who are brought together through a shared belief in the power of song.

Choirs in the British Media

The now well-aired pronouncement that Britain today boasts more choirs than fish and chip shops certainly seems to be borne out by the greatly increased visibility of choir activity and the unflagging promotion of the choir image by the British media. In November 2011, the BBC screened *Military Wives*, the fourth series of *The Choir* featuring choirmaster Gareth Malone. Malone's project on this occasion was to form a choir made up of women living on two British army bases in Devon while their husbands and partners were deployed on a six-month tour of duty in Afghanistan. The project culminated in a high-profile appearance at the 2011 Festival of Remembrance at London's Royal Albert Hall, where the choir performed the Paul Maelor commission "Wherever You Are". Released on

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CD, the song subsequently claimed the coveted place of “Christmas number one” in the UK Singles Chart. Jonathan Freedland, writing in *The Guardian*, praised the series for marking a move away from what he **(p.210)** calls “malice TV”: “There are no withering one-liners, no pantomime villain judges, no losers….The only prize is a sense of camaraderie and communal connectedness, a prize everybody wins” (2011: n.p.). Freedman was especially cheered by the impression that the women had quite genuinely been transformed from “a collection of individuals, each going through her own private hell” to feeling “like sisters”. All of this helped consolidate Malone’s status as a household name —for some of his most enthusiastic advocates, a “singing saviour” and for others, the music world’s equivalent of celebrity chef Jamie Oliver.

Malone’s first steps on the path to becoming national choir guru were less assured. The plot for the series debut (*The Choir*, 2006) saw a surprisingly youthful Malone being given nine months to form a choir in Northolt High School, a comprehensive school in Middlesex, entirely from scratch and to secure a performance at the World Choir Games in China. Here, competition and harsh medicine took precedence over camaraderie and empathy; 160 pupils with no previous singing experience (a few exceptions aside) were put through sometimes painful auditions for only thirty places. Audience responses to the show posted on the television company’s website made interesting reading. While some viewers claimed to find the programme “inspiring”, “motivational”, and “touching”, others were dismayed by Malone’s evident lack of experience. One critic, a professional musician and teacher, lambasted him for his “lack of sensitivity to the children as individuals and his inexperience in pastoral and psychological matters”. Another, who described himself as an experienced choral animateur, was likewise disturbed by the “constant criticism and negativity”, concluding, “All in all, this programme has set back the cause of choral singing, animateur work, and indeed classical music education by about 50 years” (viewer posts, December 2006, http://www.unrealitytv.co.uk/reality-tv/the-choir-bb2/, acc. January 28, 2008). Such criticisms notwithstanding, the series went on to win an award at the 2007 British Academy Televisions Awards (BAFTAs) for Best Feature. Several further awards were won by the second series *The Choir 2: Boys Don’t Sing* (2008), in which Malone was dispatched to the Lancaster School, an all-boys school in Leicester, with the challenge of forming a 100-strong choir to perform in the Schools Prom at the Royal Albert Hall. In *The Choir 3: Unsung Town* (2009), Malone took on the residents of South Oxhey, Watford, where he was tasked with creating a community choir and staging a choral festival at South Oxhey playing fields.

The Choir was not the first series of its kind; it had, in fact, been beaten to the post in 2006 by Channel Five’s *The Singing Estate*, which followed conductor Ivor Setterfield as he set about forming an auditioned choir on Oxford’s Blackbird Leys estate, and prepared them to perform in a Classic FM Live concert at the Royal Albert Hall. Alongside the basic formula, what these early

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enterprises shared was their apparently unquestioning reinforcement of hand-me-down teaching methods and musical values. As NVPN member **(p.211)** Chris Rowbury reflected in an interview with Kevin Stephens for an article that appeared in the community music magazine *Sounding Board*:

> Both [Gareth] Malone and Ivor Setterfield got to a point in their TV series where they seemed to stress the importance of now doing some *proper* music with the choirs so that they could get a sense of pride that they were a *real* choir. This led to teaching classical songs using written scores, the implication being that all the other stuff didn't count!
>
> (Stephens 2009: 9)

This anachronistic view of both music and choirs was all too clearly underscored by the BBC's *How a Choir Works* (2009), again featuring Gareth Malone together with the BBC's in-house professional chamber choir, the BBC Singers.[2] This exploration of "the styles and techniques that create a choir" was extraordinary for its evolutionary conception of musical style and its unqualified assumptions about the Western art tradition serving as the foundation for all music. Ralph Allwood (former Precentor and Director of Music at Eton College) appeared on screen to explain that "many years ago, we started with chant, in monasteries usually, and usually not written down. Then gradually people started singing in harmony." Harmony, the viewer was then informed, is based on a very simple principle: "which notes go most closely with this [a note played on the piano]". The result was a (tempered) major triad, which, we learned, "is the basis of all harmony". Malone stepped in at this point to continue the lesson: "Hundreds of years ago we just had those simple chords. Now we have much more advanced harmony available to us." Sevenths and ninths, among other things, make contemporary music "much more colourful". "What I really love about choral harmony," he confided, "is how its influence has spread far beyond classical music." And so we arrived at a Beach Boys hit that the BBC Singers performed from the score, before moving on to a similarly "professional" rendition of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody". So much for how music works, and the explication of how a choir works was hardly more encouraging. From the perspective of an ethnomusicologist or a community musician, this seemed like an alien world and in educational terms it was surely a retrograde step. It certainly did nothing for the cause of making choirs sexy.

This was one charge, at least, that could not be laid at the door of *Last Choir Standing*, another much-feted choir extravaganza that aired on BBC1 over nine weeks in the summer of 2008. Competition was still the organising principle, however, even if the contest was open to all comers. The format was that of the amateur talent show; members of the public could apply to audition before a panel of celebrity judges and if accepted, would go on to compete in a series of knock-out rounds.[3] Styled as "the ultimate sing-off" (and following on the heels

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of NBC's *Clash of the Choirs*, screened in the United States in December 2007), the series was originally advertised as *Choirs Wars*.[4] **(p.212)** The change of title notwithstanding, the war imagery remained in place with the presenters launching the first instalment by announcing that "all styles of choirs, from all four corners of the country, are about to go into battle…and they're going to fight to the end…because ultimately only one can be—the last choir standing".

The series did nonetheless go a long way towards updating the traditional choir image and, in the process, touched on some of the themes that are the concern of this chapter. Judge Suzi Digby said of the show:

> We're on a cusp of launching into a new era of choral music. Whereas before it's always been associated with churches and cathedrals, now what's happening is that we're getting that same quality coming from this 500 year old tradition of people being able to do anything musically with their voice, but being directed at a mass audience. It's a new era; we couldn't have done this ten years ago.
>
> (http://www.bbc.co.uk/lastchoirstanding/about/suzi_biog.shtml, acc. July 1, 2013)

Fellow judge Sharon D. Clarke emphasised:

> Sometimes it's not just about the singing, it's about the community—about…a team of people coming together, committing to each other, supporting each other and helping to get the best out of each other and enjoying singing as well.
>
> (http://www.bbc.co.uk/lastchoirstanding/about/sharon_biog.shtml, acc. July 1, 2013)

Yet the show was (as viewers were regularly reminded) all about "power, passion, and performance". Much of this power was invested in the judges, who were by no means supportive of the efforts of all the choirs who appeared before them: they reserved some of their most caustic and unkind comments for the highly polished and youthful Amabile Girls Choir, winners of the BBC Radio 3 Youth Choir of the Year award in 2006, who on this occasion did not make it past the first audition.

The variety of choirs on the show was certainly refreshing. Those who made it through to the final fifteen included a range of contemporary *a cappella* choirs (among them Sense of Sound from Liverpool and Alleycats from the University of St Andrews in Scotland), gospel choirs (Revelation from East London, the ACM Gospel Choir from Guildford, and Dreemz from Birmingham), male voice choirs (Bath Male Choir, Hereford Police Male Choir, the slick and youthful Only Men Aloud! from Cardiff, and the Brighton Gay Men's Chorus), and the Open Arts

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Community Choir from Belfast. As some of these names suggest, the focus was not on show choirs. Some of the smaller ensembles had been formed by a group of friends who enjoyed singing together; others had originated as work-related choirs. Dreemz had been started to keep vulnerable young people away from the dangers of the city streets, and Open Arts **(p.213)** Community Choir was made up largely of people with different kinds of disability. The final spread included a preponderance of energetic younger singers who clapped, danced, and beamed their way into the viewer's heart. All the choirs performed their songs from memory. Their repertoires consisted almost entirely of well-known pop songs with English lyrics: of the 112 songs in the full track listing for the televised heats, there were only four exceptions (the Welsh hymn "Cwm Rhondda", Franz Biebl's "Ave Maria", Karl Jenkins's "Adiemus", and "O Fortuna" from Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*). Revealingly, the runners-up—Ysgol Glanaethwy choir from the Welsh-speaking part of North Wales—explained that one of the biggest challenges of the competition for them had been learning to sing in English (it was their set that included "Adiemus" and "O Fortuna").[5]

Last Choir Standing does appear to have been directly responsible for a surge of new members for many choirs, natural voice choirs included. The programme's website, like that of *The Choir*, includes prominent links (in keeping with the "how-do-I-get-involved?" ethos) to choir-related organisations, including the NVPN. Choirs run by NVPN members also feature on other sites, such as that of British Choirs on the Net, which carries listings for almost three thousand British choirs.[6] The upsurge of interest was both remarked upon and fuelled by articles in the press bearing such titles as "Choirs Are Becoming Cool" (Sally Kinnes, *The Sunday Times*, June 22, 2008) and "On Music: Falling for the Human Voice in 2008" (Jude Rogers, *The Guardian*, December 12, 2008). Many of these articles recycled statistics from TONSIL (The Ongoing Singing Liaison Group), an informal association representing fourteen organisations concerned with the promotion of choral singing—ranging from the Royal School of Church Music to the British Association of Barbershop Singers—which, according to the TONSIL website, together support over 25,000 choirs.

The trend continued with BBC Radio 4's mini-series, *Joan Armatrading's Favourite Choirs*, broadcast in May 2009. In this case, two of the five featured choirs were directed by NVPN members: WorldSong in Coventry, whose leadership had recently passed from Chris Rowbury to Una May Olomolaiye, and the London Bulgarian Choir, led by Dessi Stefanova. (The latter already had among its credits the first-place award in the Open Choir category of the BBC Radio 3 Choir of the Year awards in 2006.) Later that same year Robert Wyatt, guest editor of BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, invited amateur choirs in the United Kingdom to send in recordings, a selection of which he would then play on his programme for New Year's Day 2010. Inundated with submissions, the BBC made the 117 audio clips it had received by mid-January available on its website, where they were linked with an annotated map; these recordings were

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still available as of this writing.[7] Meanwhile, the Radio 3 programme *The Choir*, launched in 2006, continues to occupy its ninety-minute slot on Sunday evenings. **(p.214)**

Amateur Choirs in Britain: Social and Political Legacies

This contemporary fashion for choirs builds, however indirectly, on earlier waves of activity which energetically promoted amateur choral singing in Britain, often as part of broader educational, philanthropic, or reformist endeavours. The scale of this activity is indicated in Dave Russell's description of how the "formalised versions of pre-industrial clubs" characteristic of the North of England and larger choirs, such as the Birmingham Festival Choral Society and the Bradford Festival Choral Society—created (in 1845 and 1856, respectively) specifically for local choral festivals—were joined by the end of the nineteenth century by "choirs…from every conceivable organisational background", including those linked to chapels, banks, mills, Pleasant Sunday Afternoon organisations, and political parties (1997: 249). Today's jargon may be novel, but recent government initiatives aimed at social inclusion through the arts are by no means a new invention. Henry Raynor refers to the growth of amateur choirs in nineteenth-century England—outside the main centres of London, Manchester, and Liverpool, at least—as "carefully designed 'social engineering'" (1976: 93). The large choral societies that developed in the industrial towns were linked with the spread of religious nonconformity, particularly, the Methodist enthusiasm for education, and it was the Congregational minister and educationalist John Curwen who promoted the system of Tonic Sol-fa as an accessible alternative to conventional notation. Championing choral singing in part as a distraction from vice, the Tonic Sol-fa movement also had links with the temperance movement, and the annual mass temperance meetings held at the Crystal Palace from the 1860s featured choral contests for temperance choirs (see McGuire 2006). Wales, meanwhile, became renowned for its strong tradition of male voice choirs associated with the coal and slate mines as well as the chapels; many of these are still active today.

Among those of most interest to us here are the Clarion choirs that were linked with the trade union movement. The Clarion movement took its name from the newspaper established in 1891 by Robert Blatchford to advocate socialism in Britain. It soon gave rise to the Clarion Cycling Club, and the cover of an 1895 issue of *The Clarion* bore the slogan "Socialism can only arrive by bicycle" (a reference to the fact that the paper itself was delivered by bicycle). Local cycling clubs multiplied rapidly and were soon joined by ramblers' clubs (known as field clubs), handicraft guilds, dramatic societies, and choirs, or "vocal unions". These recreational activities offered respite from the toil and dreariness of everyday life and sought to embody the William Morris–inspired vision of a better life under socialism. Singsongs were often held in the open air as part of Sunday outings (a report of one such gathering refers to a "forest chat" by Morris himself), and from 1899 until the early 1930s Manchester's Free Trade Hall was

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host to the Clarion Vocal Union United Concert, at which **(p.215)** choirs from across the country competed for the Challenge Baton[8] (see web figures 07.09–07.10).

With the exception of the cycling clubs, the Clarion movement began to lose momentum after the First World War, and its choirs would remain more or less dormant after the Second World War. The Thatcher years, however, spawned a new generation of socialist choirs, some of which took the Clarion name. While in many respects these choirs have a different lineage to that of the natural voice movement, several are, in fact, directed by members of the NVPN (Figure 7.2) (see web figure 07.11). They now come together at festivals such as Raise Your Banners and the National Street Choirs Festival. Raise Your Banners, the national festival of political song, was inaugurated in 1995, and from its present base in Bradford continues to uphold the political traditions most often associated with the North of England.[9] The 2011 festival sported the tagline: "Celebrating the power of political music and campaigning arts; giving voice to struggles for liberation, equality and justice, in defence of the environment, and for a better world." Here we may note—alongside the direct political references to campaigning, struggle, justice, and defence—the interweaving of the key concepts of celebration, liberation, equality, the **(p.216)** power of music, and giving voice, some of which will continue to resonate throughout this chapter.

The 2011 event included two three-hour concerts in Bradford Cathedral featuring a total of twenty-nine choirs. The political orientation of the majority was clear from their names: East Lancs Clarion Community Choir, Bolton Clarion Choir, Nottingham Clarion Choir, Liverpool Socialist Singers, Strawberry Thieves Socialist Choir (named after William Morris's Strawberry Thief design), Red Leicester, Côr Cochion Caerdydd (Cardiff Reds Choir), and Protest in Harmony, for example. The short biographies provided by participating choirs referred to a range of activities, including singing at union rallies and protests against the recent government cuts; performing at

Figure 7.2 Bolton Clarion Choir with East Lancs Clarion Choir performing during an

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fundraising events in support of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Holocaust Memorial Day, Campaign Against the Arms Trade, and Amnesty International; singing at Green Fairs and Fair Trade events; and initiating work with asylum seekers and refugees. Like natural voice choirs, these are open-access choirs, but for most members, the primary motivation is political; they use their singing in the service of activism. They also differ in their choice of repertoire. While some include world songs, most give pride of place to newly penned lyrics in English sung to well-known tunes. The practice of setting verses on topical issues to popular melodies—ranging in this case from Beatles songs, Christmas carols, and children's rhymes to the "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony—is central to the political choir tradition because it means that new songs can be sung instantly without the need to learn the music. As in the long history of protest song, the focus on the message as a tool for raising awareness also means that words are more important than either harmonies or original melodies. Revolutionary standards such as "The Internationale", "Bandiera Rossa", and "Bella Ciao", alongside a few South African favourites, put in frequent appearances as well, again often acquiring new verses in English.[10] In the contemporary British scene, prominent players like Frankie Armstrong and Janet Russell provide a direct bridge between the folk-inspired world of political song, on the one hand, and that of the more eclectic community choirs and the natural voice ethos, on the other.

exhibition about the Clarion movement, with NVPN member Moira Hill conducting. Working Class Movement Library, Salford, March 2012.

Source: Courtesy of Chloe Grant.

Many of the choirs that frequent Raise Your Banners can also be found at the National Street Choirs Festival (the event featured in my opening vignette). This festival had its origins in the National Street Band Festival, first held in Sheffield in 1983. It has existed as a separate event since 1997, staged in a different host town or city each year. Initially created "to promote the development—through song—of a society free from all forms of oppression, exploitation, exclusion and violence", the festival's ongoing aim is "to create a connection and sense of community between choirs nationwide" (http://streetchoirwhitby2011.wordpress.com/about/, acc. November 21, 2011). Over the years, the festival has grown to embrace not only choirs with a political agenda but also "those community choirs who sing a wide repertoire, **(p.217)** for the love of singing (itself a political act!)", and this is reflected in a varied musical palette that now encompasses world music, folk, pop, soul, and rap as well as protest song. In addition to performances by individual choirs, as we saw earlier, the programme includes a mass sing featuring a selection of songs that all participants have learnt in advance (MP3 files of the vocal parts, plus scores, are made available via the festival website). The selection for the 2012 festival, hosted by the Bury AcaPeelers choir, offers an interesting insight into the

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marriage between political song and world song that has taken place: a traditional South African song (arranged by Mandla Sibanda) and a Korean song (arranged by Bury AcaPeelers's director, NVPN member Eleanor Hill) are complemented by Alun Parry's "I Want Rosa to Stay" (a contemporary song about the case of an asylum seeker, again arranged by Eleanor), Eleanor's own song "We Join Together", Ali Burns's song "Always the Singing", and "Billy Bragg's Internationale" (featuring English lyrics by Billy Bragg set to the original melody by Pierre De Geyter).

Meanwhile, other British cathedrals have (occasionally, at least) resonated with diverse voices singing different kinds of songs. England's Three Choirs Festival was first held in 1715 and continues to be staged annually, alternating between the cathedrals of Hereford, Gloucester, and Worcester. The 2007 festival included a performance in Gloucester Cathedral of "Song of the Earth", a programme of "sacred choral music from all around the world" conceived and directed by Michael Deason-Barrow. This included traditional songs from Japan, India, Georgia, Israel, and Ireland; a Native American "Song to the Four Directions" (attributed to the Alabama-Coushatta tribe); a piece entitled simply "Baka Chant"; and the "Sanctus" from the Congolese Missa Luba, together with John Tavener's "O Do Not Move" and Deason-Barrow's "Come Holy Spirit". These works were performed by the Three Choirs Plus Community Choir, put together specially for the occasion and featuring 246 singers from community, gospel, and male voice choirs; barbershop groups; choral societies; and folk groups. With the singers clad in bright rainbow colours and accompanied for some of the pieces on a range of non-Western instruments, including African drums and Indonesian gamelan, the performance was both visually and acoustically arresting. Events such as this—occupying prominent public spaces that are normally reserved for more conventional programmes—challenge the primacy of the Western art music canon and the trained bel canto voice and make another important contribution to the democratisation of singing.[11]

International Perspectives: Building Bridges through Song

The Second World War may have marked the end of an era for the Clarion Vocal Unions, but it provided the impetus for fresh initiatives with the **(p.218)** vision of building a new world in which communities would be united by choral singing. The Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod—a gem of the summer festival season that brings thousands of visitors to the small town of Llangollen in North Wales—was established in 1947 to help counteract the trauma of the war by bringing together people from all over the world in a spirit of peace and harmony.[12] The "international language" of music and dance was seen as the ideal vehicle for promoting co-operation and the Eisteddfod took as its motto "Byd gwyn fydd byd a gano; gwaraidd fydd ei gerddi fo" (Blessed is a world that sings; gentle are its songs). The first event attracted forty choirs from fourteen countries, and the prizewinners included the Hungarian workers' choir, whose members had hitchhiked across France when their onward trains from Basel

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were cancelled due to a rail strike. Today, the event draws over 4,000 performers and 50,000 spectators to partake in a colourful weeklong programme that culminates in the Choir of the World final. In this case, the competition framework may provide the motivation, but the event is above all a joyful celebration of cultural diversity and common humanity in which the battlefield imagery found in *Last Choir Standing* certainly has no place.[13]

Llangollen sits within a far larger international network of choral activity and, as we entered the new millennium, this world, too, was undergoing interesting transformations. In 2011, the two leading associations for the promotion of choral singing in Europe, Europa Cantat and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Europäischer Chorverbände, merged to form the European Choral Association—Europa Cantat.[14] Like the Llangollen Eisteddfod, both organisations had their origins in the impulse to promote peace and solidarity between nations in the wake of the Second World War, using music as a tool to bring people together across political, cultural, and linguistic divides. Early initiatives included international youth camps and festivals at which participants shared their repertoire as well as their company. In recent decades, the choir image has been refreshed by an injection of new compositions designed to appeal to younger singers, and social inclusion has now joined cultural inclusion as a priority area for development. These trends were highlighted in the January 2011 issue of the new organisation's *European Choral Magazine*, which took as its overall theme "transformation". Among the new projects instigated by Europa Cantat prior to the merger were Hearts in Harmony, which brought together young people with physical and mental disabilities, and Singing the Bridge, which used music to bridge divides within societies. The success of Hearts in Harmony inspired another new annual event, the Inclusion and Choral Singing Conference, the first of which took place in 2010. With the goal of exploring "the potential of choral practice to transform individuals and society; an inclusive society...where everyone will have secured the right to sing" (*European Choral Magazine*, January 2011: 16), the meeting typically includes workshops and concerts alongside lecture presentations and round **(p.219)** tables. Each year, it focuses on a different theme, the themes for 2010 to 2014 being physical disabilities, immigrants, older people, mental disabilities, and prison inmates.

The kinds of new choral works and newly choreographed arrangements of national folk songs that have become popular with youth choirs in particular were very much in evidence at the 2011 Festival 500: Sharing the Voices. This biennial festival of choral music has, since 1997, been hosted by the small town of St. John's in Newfoundland, in tandem with the Phenomenon of Singing International Symposium. Conceived around the ethos of "singing as community", the festival prides itself on being non-competitive, although participation is by invitation and choirs have to audition.[15] A more recent arrival on the international scene—and a return to the competition format—is the biennial World Choir Games. The first Games took place in Austria in 2000. (The

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fourth, held in China in 2006, was the destination of Gareth Malone's fledging choir from Northolt High School.) Operating under the auspices of Interkultur (established in 1988 by Günter Titsch as a means of "building bridges between people") and inspired by "the Olympic ideals", the Games aim to "peacefully unify singing people and nations connected by song in a fair competition" (http://www.interkultur.com/world-choir-games/, acc. July 1, 2013). The Sixth World Choir Games, held in China in 2010, featured 472 choirs from 83 nations, totalling over 20,000 active participants, in addition to more than 220,000 spectators. Here again, the popularity of the event, together with its predominantly youthful contestants, is presented as evidence of the fact that "choral song, one of the world's oldest musical traditions, is enjoying a modern-day renaissance" (http://www.interkultur.com/, acc. January 11, 2010).

Locating the Community Choir: Worlds within Worlds

Natural-voice-style choirs and singing groups take their place within this kaleidoscope of choir-related activity. The foregoing tour of choral worlds also offers ample evidence of a wealth of non-competitive amateur singing that takes place beyond the confines of the natural voice network while sharing at least some of the same values. The notion that singing is everyone's birthright and a belief in the power of music to change the world for the better underpin many of these endeavours. The themes of social harmony, community building, and intercultural cooperation are prominent and move beyond a broad humanitarian rhetoric to more local concerns for justice and equality. Some of the choirs we have encountered use their voices to convey an explicitly political and sometimes revolutionary message. For others, singing is in itself a political act because it enables ordinary citizens to lay claim to public spaces and to have their personal voice witnessed. The recent focus on music **(p.220)** and health and wellbeing (itself not unique to the UK) has further shifted the emphasis away from the correlation of "music" with the classical, professional world, and from the expectation that assumptions about "talent", "quality", and "high standards" that belong to the classical world should carry over into the amateur world as the sole concern of any respectable musical undertaking. More people are now alert to the many other dimensions of voluntary music making and its impact on the social worlds of which it is a part.

One thing that stands out from our survey is the extent to which different networks are characterised by different bodies of repertoire. Viewers of *Last Choir Standing* were treated to a whirlwind tour of the back catalogue of chart-toppers such as Elton John, Celine Dion, Beyonce, Take That, George Michael, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder, and Queen, interspersed with songs from musicals like *Chicago* and *The Lion King*.[16] At the Raise Your Banners concerts in Bradford Cathedral, by contrast, the tone was set by numbers like "Ode to Privatisation", "Rosa's Lovely Daughters", "Avanti Popolo", and "In Gaza Tonight", while favourites from the contemporary (published) choral repertoire on display at Festival 500 included "Butterfly" by Mia Makaroff and "Can You

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Hear Me?" by composer-in-residence Bob Chilcott. This throws into sharp relief the distinctiveness of the kinds of community choirs that are my main concern in this book—especially, but not only, those that identify themselves as world music choirs or natural voice choirs—with regard to repertoire. The dividing line is, of course, by no means clear-cut. *A cappella* arrangements of popular songs find a place in the programmes of many community choirs, and NVPN-listed choirs singing predominantly pop arrangements or gospel music are, on the surface, similar to some of those featured in *Last Choir Standing*. In this case, they are distinguished less by their chosen repertoire and more by the ideology they embrace and the contexts in which they perform, although here, too, there is some crossover. Choirs whose repertoire includes songs from the oral traditions in many different parts of the world remain the most distinctive and, often, the most elusive as far as public awareness is concerned; the songs are little known outside the network, in large part because they are not available as published scores. This points to another fundamental difference, namely the ubiquity in the NVPN world of weekend workshops that give choir members easy access to primary culture bearers from whom they learn the songs directly and, in the process, build up a repertoire that they share with other like-minded choirs. Finally, like the choirs represented by Europa Cantat, natural voice choirs have their own new repertoire in the form of songs by NVPN members and associates. Usually composed specifically with open-access choirs in mind, these new songs range from the quick-and-easy songs brought together in the collection *To Grace the Earth: Short and Easy Warm Up Songs by the Natural Voice Practitioners' Network* to more complex but popular compositions by Helen Chadwick, Ali Burns, Kirsty Martin, and others that are also disseminated through the workshop and camp scenes. **(p.221)**

Very few of the choirs we have just encountered on our tour of choral worlds, past and present, match the cliched image of the amateur classical choir with its uniform appearance and reserved body language, its singers arranged in orderly rows and partly shielded by their music folders. Everywhere we went, we found colour, movement, passion, more varied voices, and many very different kinds of songs. A brief foray into the world described by Ruth Finnegan in *The Hidden Musicians* throws into sharp relief just how much things have changed. Finnegan describes the choirs she encountered in Milton Keynes in the early 1980s as being very much part of the classical world, "a natural outgrowth of the strong choral tradition in the area" (2007: 38). She estimates that around one hundred choirs were active in the town at that time. These included a plethora of church and school choirs, together with a number of independent choirs equipped with a musical director or conductor (usually with formal classical training) and a piano accompanist. An essential requirement was that members should possess "long-practised skills in sight-reading from written music" (39). Standard choral repertoire by Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bach, Vivaldi, and Fauré was supplemented by modern works by English composers, such as Vaughan

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Williams and Britten, and “light classics” by Bizet or Sullivan. For their public performances, the larger and more established choirs, such as the Milton Keynes Chorale, Danesborough Chorus, and Sherwood Choral Society, would often secure orchestral accompaniment and visiting soloists. Smaller choirs also sang at churches, fetes, or clubs to raise money for local charitable causes and provided entertainment at hospitals and old people’s homes. While these smaller choirs placed less emphasis on classical training, they still put a premium on maintaining “high standards”. Choral singing provided a striking contrast with many of the other forms of music making that Finnegan documents—folk, country and western, jazz, rock, and pop bands, for example—where “full participation” was possible without musical literacy and it was far more common for those involved to be self-taught, often learning on the job, from recordings, or via direct apprenticeship to peers (139).

Finnegan’s account would seem to offer a fair reflection of the fact that choirs have taken somewhat longer to move away from the classical mould, in part because, unlike aspiring teenage rock bands, they lack alternative role models. It is interesting to note that none of the choirs and singing groups listed by Finnegan includes “community” in its name. While the larger choirs designated themselves as choruses or choral societies, “singers” was the preferred stylisation for smaller choirs, as in the Orphean Singers, Guild Singers, Canzonetta Singers, and St. Martin’s Singers. The names adopted by contemporary community choirs provide the first indication of the major sea change in the choir world. Variations on “The X Singers” still exist but they are overshadowed by more inviting upbeat or light-hearted appellations, such as Sing for Joy, Sounds Lively, Sing Owt!, People of Note, Hullabaloo Quire, Global **(p.222)** Harmony, Kaleidoscope Community Choir, Patchwork Choir, VocalAntics Community Choir, The Morning Glories, and Purple Cats Community Choir. Behind these and other names we find many different kinds of choir, and these now offer a wide choice of role model. Each opens a door for someone—and more often than before, it is likely to be someone who would not have been able to audition successfully for one of the older-style classical choirs.

While I do not wish to detain us at this point by making an exhaustive attempt to establish a definition for a “community choir”, some comment is nonetheless called for. The American Choral Directors’ Association offers what is perhaps the broadest, and therefore least satisfactory, definition:

> A community choir is a choir that draws its membership from a community at large, not restricted to a single institution. This means that community children’s choirs, symphony choruses, professional, semi-professional and amateur choirs, can all fall under the genre of community choir. All of these choirs are unique yet all are the same for they share the goals of

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advancing the choral art through rehearsal and performance and the production of beautiful vocal music.

(http://acda.org/repertoire/community_choir, acc. April 16, 2012)

This is one of the definitions that lies behind Cindy Bell's assessment of the state of community choir activity in the United States and her conclusion (in a short paper entitled "Toward a Definition of a Community Choir") that many have now evolved into "semi-elite performance machines that are no longer characteristic of the community", thanks in large part to their auditioning practices (2008: 229). Usage differs in the United Kingdom, where it is more common to view community choirs as a parallel tradition to amateur (and certainly professional) choral societies, with sight-reading requirements serving as the critical dividing line, together with repertoire. In crude terms, choral societies generally expect sight-reading skills, are more likely to hold auditions, and draw their material mainly from the Western classical canon, while community choirs do not audition or require sight-reading but are open to all, including those with no previous musical experience, and gravitate more towards popular music, gospel, and world music.[17] Alongside the more imaginative choir names listed earlier, many community choirs in the United Kingdom (NVPN-related or otherwise) simply refer to themselves as, for example, Winchester Community Choir, Salisbury Community Choir, and so on, "community choir" in this case indicating "open-access choir". Other choirs that, according to the above distinction, fall under the community choir umbrella but are targeted at specific groups of people (e.g. the lesbian and gay community) or promote a quite specific repertoire (e.g. barbershop) often reflect this orientation in their choice of name.

There does, then, appear to be a genuine renaissance in the world of singing, reflected in a new generation of choirs of all shapes, sizes, colours, and tastes. **(p.223)** Having established that natural-voice-style choirs do not have a monopoly on the term community choir, that choirs that explicitly identify themselves as world music choirs are not the only ones who sing "world" repertoire, and that some choirs led by NVPN members are by no means averse to singing rousing renditions of popular hits, I wish to return now to my central focus as I take a closer look at the activities of a selection of NVPN-related community choirs and probe more deeply into the nature of the rewards that individual singers derive from belonging to choirs of this kind.

The Choir in the Community and the Community in the Choir

Choirs have long been associated with local communities, and promoters and participants alike have intuitively recognised the way in which communal singing enriches both communities and individuals. Questions about the role of music in society have been central to ethnomusicology for much of its history; more recently, the nature of the individual's experience has become a productive focus for investigation as well. These themes relate to broader processes or

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phenomena that have also been the subject of extensive theorisation in other disciplines, and in some cases this has had a clear impact not only on public awareness but also on government policy.

Social capital has been embraced as a key concept in sociology and political science and has extended its reach outside the academy to exert a significant influence at governmental level, in the United States and Britain in particular. Now associated principally with Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, “social capital” refers to the preconditions for social life as distinct from “physical capital” (tangible assets, or the material conditions of social existence) and “human capital” (skills, knowledge, and competencies, or the attributes of individual social actors). Joseph Lewandowski offers a generic definition of social capital as “consist[ing] of those networks of trust and social norms that facilitate human actions of various kinds” and proposes that “social capital is best understood as the harnessing or ‘capitalizing’ of a distinct form of social interaction or human association that Georg Simmel called ‘sociability’ (*Geselligkeit*)” (2007: 14–15). Putnam’s slant builds on Alexis de Tocqueville’s vision in that he argues for “a *causal* link between networks of trust and social norms and the practical realisation of the political ideals of democracy” (17). According to this logic, a climate of generalised trust, mutual obligation, and cooperative action ensures that communities remain vital and healthy and allows democracy to flourish. Most significantly for our present purposes, networks are viewed as fundamental to the nurturing of social capital, and successful networks not only benefit their immediate members but also have a positive trickle-down effect in the communities and neighbourhoods in which **(p.224)** they operate. Based on their accumulated evidence, Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein state confidently in their conclusion to *Better Together*:

> A child born in a state whose residents volunteer, vote, and spend time with friends is less likely to be born underweight, less likely to drop out of school, and less likely to kill or be killed than the same child—no richer or poorer—born in another state whose residents do not.
>
> (Putnam and Feldstein 2003: 269)

It is for this reason that governments in recent times have been persuaded to increase their investment in community arts and other recreational activities, alongside concrete regeneration projects focused on the built environment.

Clearly, the more inclusive a choir is in bringing in members, the more people will reap the full panoply of rewards associated with singing on the one hand and group belonging on the other. At the same time, if we follow the logic of the social capital thesis, those to whom the choir reaches out via its performances will also benefit. By extension, the nature of a choir’s performing activities and the manner in which it engages its audience—including the places and contexts

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in which it performs—are another indicator of its inclusivity and the degree to which it may be seen as truly representative of the local community.

A choir is, of course, a community in its own right, often imagined as an extended family, or what Gregory Barz, in his study of a Tanzanian *kwaya*, terms “a microcosm of an idealized social system” (2006: 21). Choir leaders and members regularly speak of the way in which their choir comes to represent a kind of family, one where members can experience a strong sense of togetherness and find friendship and support without needing to know a great deal about one another. As Kate O’Connell (co-director, with Bill Henderson, of the Forres Big Choir in Scotland) puts it:

> I think when you sing with people you get to know them at a very deep level without necessarily ever talking to them, because we open up some part of ourselves and there’s a very deep connection.
>
> (O’Connell interview 2008)

Choir members often share important life moments when they sing at one another’s weddings and funerals, and their bonds are further strengthened when they travel together to workshops, festivals, or singing retreats. Kate goes on to speak of how members of the Forres choir, for example, spend a week together each year on the island of Iona and during the rest of the year, hold monthly singing suppers. Many now count the people they have met though the choir as their closest friends and refer to the choir sessions as the highlight of their week. Dessi Stefanova speaks in a similar vein of her London Bulgarian Choir:

> We’re each other’s best friends and whenever we get together there’s singing, there’s going to the pub and so on, parties. You could have a very full schedule [even] if you didn’t know anybody else!
>
> (Stefanova interview 2008)

(p.225)

Anna, filling out a version of my questionnaire for choir members, responds to the question “In what ways do you find your participation in the choir rewarding?”:

> The feeling of community—no, I can put that more strongly—they are “family”—the first people after blood relations I would take any problems or joys to. We have built up an incredibly strong bond over the years and are not afraid to voice any differences of opinion. I think a huge amount of trust in each other builds up over years of close harmony singing.
>
> (Anna, Unicorn questionnaire 2007)

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Being in sympathy with a choir’s underlying ethos and being drawn to particular types of repertoire are also crucial factors in explaining why many singers feel so much “at home” with their community choir. Gill, another of my questionnaire respondents, writes:

> My local community choir has proved to be an emotional/spiritual and friendship lifeline. Access to Nick Prater workshops and Nickomo and Rasullah’s Harmonic Temple have led to some of the most profound spiritual experiences I have ever had. Singing in a choir of what are broadly like-minded people regarding values/philosophy has been a wonderful experience, creating a place of safety to release emotion and to feel connected to a community as well as something larger.
>
> (Gill, Unicorn questionnaire 2007)

At a deeper level, then, these comments would seem to reinforce the association between musical harmony and social and spiritual harmony (recalling the notion of being “in accord” encountered in chapter 4).

Others refer to the way in which each individual becomes part of a greater whole. Sue Harris, who runs three community choirs in the Welsh Borders region, reflects:

> One of the things that has always struck me about choirs…is that everybody is a cog in this big machine. In a choir, everybody plays a vital part and when they come together and work together it’s the most beautifully honed machine you can imagine, and I think that is just an amazing reflection on life, really—well, the perfect ideal life. I suppose that’s an important part of what choirs hold for me.
>
> (Harris interview 2009)

Pursuing a similar line of thought, Kirsty Martin, the director of Brighton’s Hullabaloo Quire, comments on how much she cherishes the “ego-less state” that can be achieved through singing with others:

> The best *a cappella* experience is totally ego-less because of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. So you’ve got all these kind of broken down **(p.226)** parts but the magic that is interwoven into all the parts is just something far bigger than you could anticipate.
>
> (Martin interview 2008)

This resonates with Brian Eno’s more public pronouncement on America’s National Public Radio, inspired by his newfound passion for communal singing. Here, he also makes explicit reference to the notion of empathy:

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> *A cappella* singing is all about the immersion of the self into the community. That's one of the great feelings—to stop being me for a little while, and to become us. That way lies empathy, the great social virtue.
>
> (Eno 2008)

Ann Chamberlayne, who sings with Bangor Community Choir in North Wales, draws on similar imagery in describing at greater length what the choir means to her:

> It's connecting, for me, on a very deep elemental level, a thread which draws us all in. You can forget about the individualities.…It's a deep connectedness…so that sense of community.…Everything else goes out of the window. We are all human together and we all share very deep, essential feelings and connectedness with the earth and with each other. Sometimes you go out to work and it just isn't there. There's a lot of things that get in the way and, for me, it's nice to get back to that.…It's like individual droplets of water: you join them all together, they start to merge and then they become a deep ocean, and then suddenly the individual drops have dissipated and all become one and merged. So that really has been the most important thing about singing and expressing myself, that connection.
>
> (Chamberlayne interview 2007)

Ann's use of "connection", "connecting", and "connectedness" (a concept already encountered in some of the earlier interviews) is especially striking. The link between "becoming one" and self-expression also seems to point to the sense that one's own identity is strengthened rather than diluted by the "merging" that takes place.

Some of these benefits, of course, may in principle be derived from any choir. What, then, is different about a natural-voice-style community choir? Ann, who at the time of our interview had been a member of Bangor Community Choir for four years, offered detailed and vivid answers to this question as well. She began by explaining how for many years she had sung with an operatic society and other choral groups that allowed her to hone her singing skills while exposing her to a variety of performance contexts. This was followed, however, by a fallow period when she no longer belonged to a choir. Her immediate response on discovering the community choir, as she relates it, was: "Yeah, this is me!" She goes on to talk about the sense she had had at that time of an "enormous gap" in her life: **(p.227)**

> It wasn't just a gap of singing—it was an emotional and spiritual gap, not being able to sing with other people.…It filled me with a lot of hope again

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> and a sense of joy, which I think had been missing for a while. So it was very, very important for me when I first joined it.

Asked if she can identify which aspects of that particular choir made her feel so immediately at home, Ann reflects:

> Particularly the fact that we were singing in a circle…felt very special. It felt far more connected than standing in rows and holding your music. It was non-judgemental….The pressure was off. It really was just a sense of: "This is for joy, this isn't about competition and getting somewhere—it's just being in the moment."

She also refers to "the freedom to actually move with the music—with the choral groups that was lacking". It was because of the movement, combined with a sense of "the deep connectedness with the earth", that she was especially drawn to African songs. The opportunity to explore different aspects of her voice through improvisation also opened up new realms of experience. She talks about how she has always enjoyed free expression—listening to something, getting into the swing of it, and then starting to harmonise in her own way (singing along to the radio, for example). This had always been something she did just on her own, however, until, together with fellow members of her choir, she attended a residential singing weekend co-led by the choir's leader, Pauline Down. One of the other tutors on that occasion was Zimbabwean singer and mbira player, Chartwell Dutiro. Ann describes how Chartwell began one session by teaching "a very, very simple song":

> And he spent about twenty minutes keeping us on this very simple song and then he was saying, "and now let yourselves go off wherever you want to". And that was a wonderful experience. Suddenly I was going wherever I wanted to go and I was doing it *with* other people, but I was doing it with other people going where *they* wanted to go, which wasn't necessarily where *I* was, and it was all *working*. It was like a waterfall which you were standing a distance from and you could see it as a whole and then suddenly you'd draw near and you'd see little bits of it and other bits were coming down to join it and then you'd kind of draw back and just have the whole again. And for me I think that was a kind of breakthrough from: this isn't just about community singing, this is about finding *my voice*, and using it and feeling confident about using it with other people around, where *I* want to go not where other people want me to go. What do *I* want to express, what does this song bring up in *me*?
>
> (Chamberlayne interview 2007)

Here, then, we have a more nuanced image of the interplay between the individual and the collective, together with obvious suggestions of personal **(p. 228)** empowerment and self-realisation in connection with the "finding my

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voice” trope. We are also offered a fascinating window onto the ways in which being part of a choir of this kind is about far more than simply learning repertoire.

My interview with Ann was among a series of interviews I carried out in the summer of 2007 with members of Bangor Community Choir (Figure 7.3) (see web figure 07.12). It was especially interesting for me to journey back into the history of a choir that I had initially launched, back in 2000, in partnership with Pauline Down, under whose leadership it continued to grow and diversify after I had left in 2005. A joint interview with Margaret Walton and Lynn Yule highlighted a number of additional dimensions that I now wish to pursue. Lynn related how she had come to join the choir in the early days, when I was still co-directing it, following our initial meeting at an Irish session:

> I was just looking for *somewhere* to sing….And I just thought: “Ooh, yes! Just to be able to go and sing in a relaxed atmosphere, that’s definitely for me.” And it didn’t bother me whether it was going to be British songs or Welsh or anything, that didn’t bother me in the slightest. And then when I started I remember thinking, coming from there, “Ooh, I really like the way that’s structured”—because of how relaxed it was and the fact that, at that time, it was songs like “O Signore” [a three-part setting of words from the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi] **(p.229)** and “Ja Helo” [a Czech barley-reaping holler], which were quite quick to learn. And I thought, “Gosh! Here I am, I’ve sort of just arrived and by the end of the evening I’m singing a song, you know, and it sounds fantastic.” Because it is a fantastic sound, isn’t it? And that’s what I liked about it. I didn’t sort of set out thinking “I want to find a choir that sings world music”.
>
> (Yule interview 2007)

Margaret, one of the original members of the choir, who had previously attended a series of evening classes I had run as part of the university’s Continuing Education programme, had a similar reaction:

> I think you sort of expect the first time you go to something like that, that you’re going to be struggling for a bit and it’s all going to be awful and you’re going to

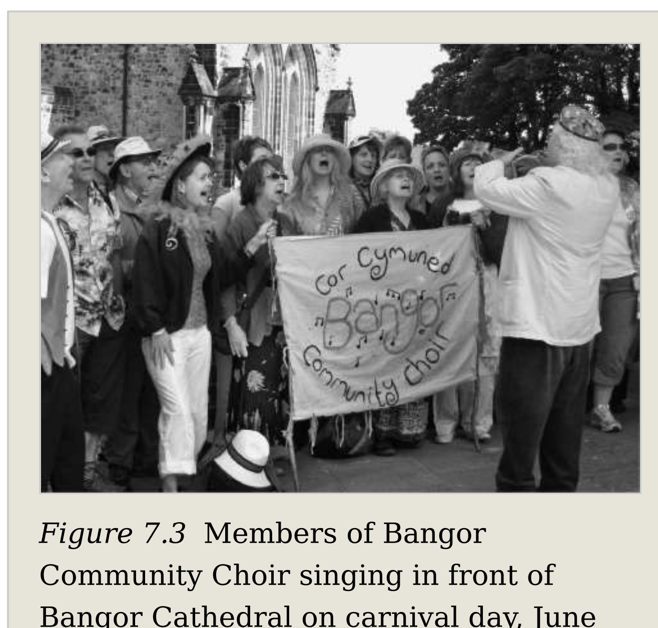

Figure 7.3 Members of Bangor Community Choir singing in front of Bangor Cathedral on carnival day, June

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have to sort of make a big effort—and it wasn't like that at all.

(Walton interview 2007)

2010. Choir member Colin Douglas leads a song. Choir director Pauline Down is fifth from left (wearing white trousers).

Source: Courtesy of Caroline Bithell.

Lynn went on to reflect on her experiences with another choir that she still sang with when she first joined the community choir. This was a more formal ladies choir where she struggled to learn classical repertoire from the score. The director was excellent, she says, and she learned a lot from him, but:

> People used to come to watch me in that choir and watch me in the community choir and they used to say that ours sounded so much better because with his choir we were all so wound up about the music and we weren't really listening to each other.…And I don't think we sang well at all.

The audience members in question had attended the different concerts primarily to support their friend, without being predisposed to prefer one kind of singing over the other. What they appear to have picked up on is the greater sense of ease and security among the community choir singers during the performance, and this in turn prompted a positive evaluation from the perspective of the listener.

Lynn and Margaret also talked about other new interests to which they had been introduced through the choir. Lynn confessed:

> Until I joined the community choir I knew nothing—seriously nothing—about world music...and it's got me into a whole new scene—you know, the WOMAD thing—and I've got loads and loads of world music CDs now because of different things we've done in community choir that I've thought: I *really* like that.[18]

Margaret added:

> The only thing I knew about this—and I didn't think of it as world music—was just Paul Simon and the Black Mambazo backing, and I thought they were great.…But no, I knew nothing about these songs at all. It was quite a revelation.

(p.230)

Lynn also learned about circle dance through the choir, and she became an enthusiastic member of a local salsa club, which, she said, had "the same sort of ethos as the community choir because it's run by people who are not

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professional dance teachers or anything like that, just people who love dancing salsa and are willing to teach it to other people”.

When I asked about their best memories of being in the choir, Margaret immediately alighted on a concert and workshop with *a cappella* ensemble Black Voices that we had organised at Bangor University:

> I was really, really impressed by those five women, the Black Voices. I was amazed by them. They did the workshop in the afternoon and...I was just sort of fascinated by them.

She and Lynn also spoke with great enthusiasm (as did every other member of the choir I interviewed) about a “magical” weekend in Machynlleth, where they had stayed in a youth hostel with other community choirs and they had all taken part in a concert together. Continuing the theme of memorable moments, Lynn reflected:

> There are some nights when we’ll be singing a song and somebody will say, “when I hear this song I think of somebody or something”, and there’s something particularly personal. And we’re all together in that—everybody is behind everybody and there’s this great sense of community....You can go into all that with the community choir. There’s enough room for improvisation. You wouldn’t ever get that with barbershop. It’s the freedom of just being able to all sing together in whatever way you want and it all comes together in a particular way, but you’d never get that in barbershop, no.

The comparison with barbershop relates to the fact that she and Margaret joined a local barbershop group—which they love singing with for different reasons—following an encounter at a Christmas event, at which the community choir and the barbershop singers had both performed. Interestingly, Lynn concluded her comparison with a formulation that has become one of the catchphrases of this book: “It’s not better or worse. It’s just different.”

Some members of Bangor Community Choir also attended a drop-in-style choir, Côr Ysbyty Gwynedd (Gwynedd Hospital Choir), run by Pauline Down for patients and staff at the local hospital. Pauline described this venture as “tak[ing] the choir to the patients”. Her approach was to hold the sessions for several weeks at a time in different long-stay units, such as the Psychiatric Unit and the Cancer Unit. Sometimes the choir might practise in one of the main hospital reception areas, where people waited for blood tests. “This is great fun,” Pauline commented, “as often a small crowd gathers and sometimes hospital staff passing through stop to find out who we are or if they can **(p.231)** join.” The core members of the group (including those who came in from the local community) did occasional participatory performances in other settings as well, including the Dementia Care Unit, Medium Secure Unit, Learning

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Disability Unit, a day hospice, and residential nursing and care homes. Pauline noted that the choir also had

> the wonderful opportunity of singing in the cathedral—once at a special service for nursing staff and once at an incredibly moving service for parents whose children had died. I shall never forget that experience; the choir sang so beautifully and many people in the congregation came up to share how much they'd appreciated the singing afterwards.
>
> (Down, pers. comm. 2012)

Here, then, is a clear example of the ways in which a choir can be of service to different sectors of the community. (Further examples will be considered later in this chapter.)

Interviews with members of the London Georgian choir Maspindzeli revealed further variations on the choir-as-community theme. Maspindzeli differs from the average community choir in several respects. First and foremost, it specialises in the music of a single culture and so attracts members with a clearly defined musical taste. The fact that, instead of holding a weekly evening rehearsal, it meets on one Saturday afternoon a month for a four-hour session means that it can include members from a much wider catchment area (one member travels from as far away as Leeds, for example). Geoff Burton, one of the choir's former directors, echoed the sentiments of some of my other interviewees as quoted earlier:

> I definitely see this choir as a community, this group of people as a community first and a choir second. If you look at what people think of as a choir, it's a group of people who meet up regularly, rehearse and perform. And on one level we appear to do that but actually—for me, at least—it's not the rehearsing and the performance that makes it what it is. There's a very strong sense of a family.
>
> (Burton interview 2009)

The Georgian word *maspindzeli* translates as "host", Geoff explained, "and I think we've grown into it". They have frequent visits from teachers and choirs from Georgia "and suddenly there we are in this hosting position, which is a very Georgian place to be". It is perhaps pertinent to note here that "hospitality" is identified by Lee Higgins, in his foreword to *Community Music Today*, as a core value that is deeply embedded in community music practice (2013: viii). Geoff continued: "There's a lot of things that we take from Georgian culture into how we do things together that gives it all a lot more meaning." He explained, for example, that the choir's performances often involve shared meals in the style of a traditional Georgian feast (*supra*), complete with toasting rituals. **(p.232)**

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Bernard Burns, who was also present at the interview, commented on the significance of eating together outside a formal *supra* as well:

> Because our rehearsals are on a Saturday afternoon, often after the rehearsal a group of people will go out for a meal, and eating a meal together with people that you've just sung with is a very community building type of thing.
>
> (Burns interview 2009)

Because members of the choir often travel together to different parts of the country, and to Georgia itself, to take part in residential workshops and to perform, they also feel very much part of a wider national and transnational community (Figure 7.4) (see web figures 07.13–07.14).

Figure 7.4 Proposing a toast at a *supra* hosted by Michael Bloom and Eliso Tsiklauri, with members of Maspindzeli. Tirdznisi, Georgia, October 2010.

Source: Courtesy of Caroline Bithell.

In choirs made up of people belonging to minority groups or those who share the same health challenges, the choir's function as a safe haven and supportive community is especially prominent. The notion of the choir as a surrogate family takes on a particular poignancy for refugees and asylum seekers. Woven Gold is a London-based choir made up of refugees from Algeria, Burma, Chechnya, Congo, Guinea, Iran, Kenya, Kurdistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, **(p.233)** and Uganda. Part of the Creative Arts Programme run by the Helen Bamber Foundation, a charity that supports victims of human rights violations, the choir meets each Saturday at the foundation's headquarters to work with a volunteer team of professional musicians. As well as sharing songs from their home cultures, some members also write songs. Helen Bamber emphasises that those who have suffered deep trauma and are unable to talk about their experiences can be helped by music in a way that traditional therapies cannot

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replicate. Individual members say that the choir represents happiness, stability, safety, and support, and that it gives them the freedom to express themselves, helping to rebuild their confidence. Through their public performances, they can also make a positive contribution to British cultural life and can interact in contexts where they are not—as they are so much of the time in the British asylum system—required to give an account of who they are, why they are here, and what happened to them in the place they were forced to flee.[19] A young woman from Pakistan, speaking on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, encapsulates what the choir means to her:

> It just completely changed my life. I've got something to look forward to. I feel much more integrated in the society. I feel I'm not just a refugee; I'm not just a number any more.…We look forward to every Saturday to come and just be happy.
>
> (*Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio 4, December 13, 2011)

Singing, Health, and Happiness

The trope of the choir as a life-changing experience, as well as a source of everyday happiness, figures prominently in the accounts of many individual choir members. There are also initiatives to promote singing or joining a choir as a way to improve overall health and fitness or, in some cases, to ameliorate specific chronic medical conditions. Some of these potential beneficial effects might be derived from any choral experience, whereas others apply particularly to open-access community choirs and natural-voice-style singing groups. At this juncture, then, I propose a short detour to examine, from a variety of historical and disciplinary perspectives, the ways in which music and its affordances have been construed in relation to health and wellbeing.[20]

Over the past decade, the health benefits of singing have come under increasing scrutiny by researchers in the fields of psychology and public health. At the time of writing, large-scale research projects are being carried out in the United Kingdom by research teams associated with the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, based at Canterbury Christ Church University, which bring together researchers from the areas of health, social care, music, and psychology. "Enhancement of health and well-being through singing" is one of three research themes of AIRS: Advancing Interdisciplinary **(p.234)** Research in Singing, a project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada which includes more than seventy scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, working in sixteen countries.[21] Recently published surveys include *Choral Singing, Wellbeing and Health: Findings from a Cross-National Survey*, and *Singing and Health: A Systematic Mapping and Review of Non-Clinical Research*, both by the Sidney De Haan team (Clift et al. 2008a and 2008b); *The Chorus Impact Study: How Children, Adults, and Communities Benefit from Choruses* (Chorus America 2009); and *Benefits of Group Singing for*

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Community Mental Health and Wellbeing: Survey and Literature Review, a report produced by a research team at Victoria University in Australia on behalf of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (Gridley et al. 2011). A wealth of further information, including reports, literature reviews, and bibliographies, can be found on the websites of these research centres and organisations.

This renewed interest in the health benefits of singing, like the more established and formalised practice of music therapy, grows out of a long tradition that recognises music's efficacy on the social and psychological planes. A detailed treatment of scientific research on music and the brain or on music and medicine is beyond the scope of the present discussion. My primary purpose, rather, is to survey some of the key principles and proposals that have become part of a popular or lay understanding of music's effect on the mind and body. These same principles inform uses of music that are related to, but go beyond, concerns with "the music itself" and underpin the promotion of music-related activity for non-musical ends.

In many accounts of music's therapeutic qualities, the figure of Pythagoras looms large—a seminal figure in the history of the Western world for his discovery not only of the Pythagorean theorem but also of the arithmetic ratios of the consonant harmonic intervals. Clustered around this early philosopher-scientist, the astronomers and mathematicians of the Ancient Greek world mapped out complex relationships between the relative positions and movements of the celestial bodies and musical intervals and harmonics, believing each to be governed by the same mathematical laws. Each known planet in the solar system was thought to emit a sound, and the intervals between the different pitches were believed to correspond to the distances between the paths traced by the planets in orbit. Music was at the heart of cosmology, not merely as part of the natural order of things but as a primordial force in the creation of the physical universe.

Music was believed to exert no less an influence on human affairs in the temporal, sublunary world. Pythagoras' *musica mundana*, from which the notion of the music of the spheres derives, sat alongside *musica instrumentalis* and *musica humana* to form the trio of classes into which he divided music as a whole. *Musica humana* was conceived as the music made by the human organism, including the resonance between the body and soul. Being in harmony indicated a healthy organism, whereas being out of tune indicated disease or **(p. 235)** imbalance. Music, then, also had the power to heal the individual, and musical harmony held the key to social harmony by bringing people to a state of accord.

As well as getting even more deeply (and, ultimately, inconclusively) embroiled in the supposed workings of the planetary scale, Plato took up the notion of *musica humana* with a vengeance. The different musical modes, he believed,

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stirred different emotions and impulses and so induced people to act in certain ways. Particular modes were necessary to keep the cogs of a peaceful and democratic society well oiled, while others must be banished. Used judiciously, music could help build and sustain the ideal republic. Conversely, exposing people to the wrong kind of music would lead to anarchy. Here, then, we have an additional lens through which to view my earlier exploration of the choir as a “microcosm of an idealized social system”.

Music can also oil the cogs of the brain. Due in part to its positive effect on mental alertness but more importantly to the way in which it modifies neural pathways and processes in the brain, listening to or making music can lead to improved cognitive functioning that carries over into other activities. The so-called Mozart effect has become part of popular belief in the benefits of exposure to classical music, thanks to its commercialisation and promotion by sound healer Don Campbell, who trademarked the term. The claims made by Campbell and others for the almost magical powers of Mozart’s music had rather more modest roots in a study by Frances Rauscher and colleagues at the University of California, Irvine. The study results seemed to show a short-term enhancement of abstract spatial reasoning in subjects who had listened to a Mozart piano sonata for ten minutes, when compared with a second group who had listened to taped self-hypnosis instructions and a third that had remained in silence (Rauscher et al. 1993). While this work remains controversial, more recent research has suggested that singing in the classroom can improve memory and strengthen literacy and numeracy skills, as well as build self-confidence and enhance a sense of community (see Sing Up 2011). Music’s impact on both cognitive and motor skills is most startlingly revealed, however, in studies of individuals with impaired brain function. For one of Oliver Sacks’s patients, famously dubbed “the man who mistook his wife for a hat” (and immortalised as such in the title of one of Sacks’s books), singing literally kick-started his world. Only when he was singing was he able to eat, take a bath, and dress himself. Sacks’s “prescription” for this patient was “a life that consisted entirely of music and singing” (2008: 379). Elsewhere, Sacks elaborates on the power of music to awaken post-encephalitic patients “to alertness when they were lethargic, to normal movements when they were frozen, and, most uncannily, to vivid emotions and memories, fantasies, whole identities which were, for the most part, unavailable for them”. Here, as Sacks explains it, music re-joins the neural circuits and acts like “a ‘prothesis’ for the damaged basal ganglia” (283).[22] **(p.236)**

Dramatic demonstrations of people being animated in similar ways through music can be seen in the documentary film *Alive Inside: A Story of Music and Memory*. Film-maker Michael Rossato-Bennet followed social worker Dan Cohen as he awakened dementia-afflicted residents of nursing homes by playing highlights from the music that had been the soundtrack to their youth. Cohen created a personalised playlist for each patient using an iPod. After distributing

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200 iPods to patients in four facilities in New York, he received a flood of stories about the increased sociability in the patients who had used them. A preview of the film shows an elderly man, Henry, slumped over in his chair; he is unresponsive, virtually inarticulate, and apparently unable to recognise his daughter. Headphones are placed on his head and he hears a much-loved song from his younger days. Immediately, he becomes animated: he sits up straighter and his eyes become brighter, and he begins to sing along with and move to the music. When the headphones are removed, he is able to answer questions, talk coherently about his musical preferences, and sing extracts of old favourites. When asked, “What does music do to you?” Henry replies, without a moment’s hesitation: “It gives me the feeling of love and romance. I feel right now the world needs to come into music, singing. You’ve got beautiful music here—beautiful, oh lovely. And I feel a band of love and dreams” (http://www.musicandmemory.org/, acc. July 1, 2013). Here, music’s direct effect on the human organism is to induce a sense of wellbeing that is as much existential as it is physical.

The association of music and medicine or healing also has a long history, albeit one that is often more philosophical or intuitive than scientific. The Greek god Apollo was revered as the god of both music and medicine, and Pythagoras is said to have spoken of “musical medicine” with regard to using music in the treatment of mental conditions (Alvin 1991: 39). In the medieval period, music was one ingredient in recipes designed to prevent melancholia and avoid disease: here, music was conceived as a means of maintaining the resistance of the physical organism primarily by keeping the spirits high. It is in this context that we find a host of writers confidently prescribing wine, women, and song to cure afflictions of the mind (prescriptions made, of course, by men for men; see Horden 2000). Closer to our own time, the eighteenth-century English writer Richard Browne recommended regular doses of singing and dancing to combat melancholy. Dancing, Browne advised, should be undertaken for “an Hour or more at a convenient time after every Meal” (1729: 65). And on singing, he had this to say:

> Thus we may see what a vast Influence Singing has over the Mind of Man, and with Pleasure reflect on its joyful Consequences, and at the same time be amaz’d that it should be a Diversion or Exercise so little practis’d, since the Advantages that may be reap’d from it are so very numerous.
>
> (Browne 1729: 16)

(p.237)

Meanwhile, the eighteenth-century German Romantic writer Novalis contributed the much-quoted dictum: “Every disease is a musical problem—every cure a musical solution.”[23]

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The broader contemporary interest in music and health is reflected in volumes such as *Music, Health, and Wellbeing* (MacDonald, Kreutz, and Mitchell 2012). A growing body of research has explored specific applications of music in medical contexts.[24] In considering the health benefits of singing for the general public we are, of course, in a very different non-clinical realm. Some of the same principles apply nonetheless as we consider how music works on the body as well as the mind. As numerous studies have shown, indicators of the state of physiological arousal caused by music may include a rise in blood pressure and heart rate, an increase in muscle tone, a decrease in the electrical resistance of the skin, and changes in the respiratory rate (all functions controlled by the involuntary, autonomic nervous system). Biological research has also identified links between music and hormone release.[25] Of particular interest to us here is the fact that a number of the studies reviewed by Clift et al. (2008b) found an increase in oxytocin, a hormone generally associated with feelings of wellbeing and the processes of interpersonal intimacy and bonding: in the context of choirs, this would suggest a direct link with the feelings of “connectedness” described by many singers. Altenmüller and Schlaug (2012) report on music’s effect on the release of the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine—associated with feelings of satisfaction and pleasure—and how this may also lead to transfer effects that result in improved cognitive function. At the same time, some kinds of music may reduce testosterone levels, which are linked with aggressive and competitive tendencies, with the result of further enhancing group cohesion (Clarke et al. 2010: 104–105). Studies of singing in particular have indicated an increase in the singer’s secretion of immunoglobulin A, a substance released by the immune system that is associated with positive or relaxing experiences, and a decrease in cortisol, a hormone linked with emotional stress (see e.g. Beck et al. 2000; and Kreutz et al. 2004). Alzheimer’s patients undergoing music therapy have also exhibited increased levels of melatonin, which helps regulate other hormones and maintains the body’s circadian rhythm.

For these and other reasons, singing in a choir may be presented as a form of workout, not far removed from a visit to the gym: it exercises the lungs and heart, tones the abdominal and intercostal muscles, increases oxygenation of the blood which in turn increases mental alertness, improves stamina and posture, and produces the much sought after feel-good factor, popularly related to the release of endorphins. These benefits, again, may be derived from any kind of singing. But there is an added twist, as Ruth Rosselon writes in an article in *The Mirror*, in that “even if you hit the wrong notes, you’ll still get all the physical benefits” (2000: n.p.). Combined with the social benefits indicated earlier, this perspective helps explain the existence of choirs **(p.238)** where the criteria for selection have nothing to do with musical competence. Mercédès Pavlicevic, for example, describes a children’s choir in South Africa for which children are auditioned not to determine their singing ability but to identify those who might

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benefit the most from the choir experience—“those who seem most alone, most lonely, and in need of friendship” (2010: 233–234). A study of choirs in Sweden by Dorota Lindström (2006) includes choirs referred to specifically as “health choirs” or “rehabilitation choirs”. New initiatives in the United Kingdom have also been launched under the banner of the health benefits of singing. In 2010, for example, Arts Council England, in partnership with Choir of the Year and the British Association of Barbershop Singers, offered funding for seven choirs to run free six-week courses to teach people to sing. Participants were promised that they would “not only learn to sing with confidence and discover the joy of group singing, but also secure the huge health benefits that singing provides and meet new people” (http://makingmusic.org.uk/html/703.shtml, accessed January 16, 2010).[26]

A survey of choirs and singing groups run by NVNP members reveals several with health references in their names, including Parkinsongs (led by Janet Stansfeld in Oxford for people with Parkinson’s disease and their friends, family, and carers, in partnership with the Oxfordshire branch of Parkinson’s UK), aMaSing (led by Pauline Down in Bangor for people living with multiple sclerosis), Sing for your Lungs (led by Phoene Cave at Whittington Hospital, North London, for people with lung conditions), and Singing for Breathing (led by Maya Waldman, Jo Frost, Judith Silver, and Angela Reith at the Royal Brampton and Harefield hospitals). Several other practitioners run Singing for the Brain groups in association with the Alzheimer’s Society. Some NVPN members are also engaged in research. Alise Ojay, for example, is the creator of Singing for Snorers, a singing-based throat exercise programme that has also been shown to benefit people with sleep apnoea and has been the subject of a clinical trial at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital (see Milton et al. 2013 and http://www.singingforsnorers.com/, acc. July 19, 2013). Andrea Small (another founder-member of the NVPN) was, at the time of writing, completing a master of science degree in Dementia Studies with a focus on singing, alongside running seven Singing for the Brain groups. The Sidney De Haan Centre has also, to date, produced a series of four guides: *Singing and Mental Health* (Morrison and Clift 2012a), *Singing and People with COPD* (Morrison and Clift 2012b), *Singing and People with Dementia* (Vella-Burrows 2012), and *Singing and People with Parkinson’s* (Vella-Burrows and Hancox 2012). These guides (to which several NVPN members have contributed) include summaries of research evidence, case studies, practical guidance for setting up and running singing groups, and links to further resources.

Adherents of the arts-in-health movement have long been aware of the way in which social benefits may themselves contribute to health benefits. As described by Mike White, the field of arts-in-health (which, in the United **(p.239)** Kingdom, has gained significant ground since the mid-1990s) encompasses work in hospital acute services, primary care, respite care and rehabilitation, community health and public health, and social services (2009: 2). It builds on

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the fundamental premise that creative self-expression can enhance social relationships, and that a rewarding social life can have a direct impact on physical as well as emotional health. It also is based on the belief that many of the complaints that are presented in the general practitioner's surgery have their roots, at least in part, in social or emotional factors as opposed to being purely medical issues with a strictly physical basis (21). Referring to research cited by Putnam that shows that "the extent of a person's civil connections rival marriage and affluence as predictors of life happiness", White notes that the degree of integration with the local community also correlates inversely with the incidence of colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature death (58). It follows, then, that a prescription of community arts activity may be just as, if not more, efficacious when compared with a course of drug treatment, while also being free of potentially harmful side affects. In the longer term, it may also prove more cost-effective—hence the growing number of Primary Care Trusts across England offering Arts on Prescription schemes. Community arts projects can also lead to positive material changes in the lives of their beneficiaries, thereby further reducing the burden on social services. In their study of a choir for homeless men in Montreal, Canada, for example, Betty Bailey and Jane Davidson (2002) reported quite dramatic changes in the lives of its members. Not only did the men who took part in the study show increased self-esteem, improved concentration, and the ability to structure thought processes and to cooperate with others more effectively; during their time with the choir, all moved to permanent housing and some found part-time work.[27]

One of the most moving things about Henry and other dementia sufferers portrayed in *Alive Inside* is the way in which music evokes in each such visible pleasure, joy, and happiness. To further aid our reflection on music's power to induce a deep sense of contentment, transcendence, and personal transformation, we turn to the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his concept of "flow". Csikszentmihalyi uses "flow" to designate a peak or optimal experience that is akin to a state of bliss, euphoria, or ecstasy and involves both deep absorption and expanded consciousness. The terms Csikszentmihalyi uses in writing about flow are frequently evocative of the kind of imagery used by my interviewees and questionnaire respondents, and throw more light on the case of Henry and others like him.

Csikszentmihalyi speaks of how negative emotions such as sadness, fear, anxiety, or boredom produce psychic entropy—"a state in which we cannot use attention effectively to deal with external tasks, because we need it to restore an inner subjective order". By contrast, positive emotions like happiness, strength, or alertness represent a state of psychic negentropy in which "psychic **(p.240)** energy can flow freely into whatever thought or task we choose to invest it in" (1997: 22). "A typical day is full of anxiety and boredom," Csikszentmihalyi says later. "Flow experiences provide the flashes of intense living against this dull background" (30–31). He harnesses Durkheim's notion of collective

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effervescence and Turner's notion of *communitas* when he writes of the "oceanic feeling" of infancy persisting in adulthood "as the 'collective effervescence' that takes over in ritualized social situations, or as the sense of 'communitas' that is so enjoyable when social roles are temporarily suspended". The activity that prompts this oceanic feeling may assume an addictive quality since "to replicate such negentropic experiences, the self may direct consciousness to seek out conditions of this type again and again" (1988: 27).

When a person is in flow, feelings of self-consciousness and external distractions are both held at bay. Flow, then, also relates to the kind of intimations of elemental oneness and loss of ego reported earlier. The experience of flow can also have a lasting effect once the flow episode itself is over. When all the necessary elements are present, Csikszentmihalyi explains, "consciousness is in harmony, and the self—invisible during the flow episode—emerges strengthened" (1988: 33). He points to the empowering nature of flow when he makes a distinction between the happiness we might derive from "the passive pleasure of a rested body, warm sunshine, the contentment of a serene relationship"—a kind of happiness that is fundamentally vulnerable because of its dependence on favourable external circumstances—and the happiness that follows flow, which, by contrast, is "of our own making, and…leads to increasing complexity and growth in consciousness" (1997: 32).

The idea that happiness is contagious as well as addictive may be a popular truism, but it is borne out by scientific research. A report published in a 2009 issue of the *British Medical Journal* entitled "Dynamic Spread of Happiness in a Large Social Network: Longitudinal Analysis of the Framingham Heart Study Social Network" concludes:

> People who are surrounded by many happy people and those who are central in the network are more likely to become happy in the future. Longitudinal statistical models suggest that clusters of happiness result from the spread of happiness and not just a tendency for people to associate with similar individuals.…People's happiness depends on the happiness of others with whom they are connected. This provides further justification for seeing happiness, like health, as a collective phenomenon.
>
> (Fowler and Christakis 2009: 23)

In an editorial piece in the same issue, "Happiness, Health, and Social Networks", Andrew Steptoe and Ana Diez Roux remark that "if…happiness is transmitted through social connections, it could indirectly contribute to the social transmission of health" (2009: 1). If we think of happiness as occupying a series of concentric circles, then at the centre is individual happiness. **(p.241)** This both contributes to, and is fed by, the collective happiness of those with whom the individual engages in happiness-generating activity, represented by a

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second circle. Beyond this again, we may surely posit a third circle representing the wider community to which the happiness produced by the second circle also spreads by a further process of trickle-down, akin to that described by Putnam as part of his social capital thesis. Such a model would certainly seem to be supported by the responses of audience members and onlookers who witness something like the Sing for Water performance which opened chapter 1.

The Place of Performance

To round off our foray into the world of community choirs, I wish to delve further into the nature of the performances such a choir might give and the kinds of community events in which it might take part. As we have already established, formal performances are not the main goal of natural-voice-style or open-access choirs and weekly rehearsals are not, in general, construed simply as rehearsals for a forthcoming concert. In keeping with the underlying ethos of the NVPN, some members are uncomfortable with, if not opposed to, the model whereby a comparatively small group occupying an (often literally) elevated position on stage is exposed to the judgement of a much larger group of mostly impersonal observers, especially when a choir includes less confident singers who may have been negatively affected by previous experience of criticism. A formal concert in front of a seated, paying audience in a conventional concert venue is not the only possible performance format, however. We might make a distinction here between Performance with a capital *P* and performance with a small *p*. There are many ways of conceiving of and structuring the latter. A choir might present a selection of its repertoire in the spirit of a sharing or showing, intended primarily for family and friends and perhaps construed as an end-of-term party or celebration. It might take part in charity fundraising events that the audience attends for reasons other than expecting to witness a first-class performance, often appearing alongside other community music groups (another kind of sharing). It might present its set not as a polished end product but as a demonstration of a working process into which members of the audience are drawn as active participants. It might provide animation at a community event where other activities or diversions are on offer, and attention is not solely on the choir. It might sing for a particular group of people—the residents of a care home or a detention centre, for example—where the focus is again on aspects other than a virtuoso musical performance and where interaction of some kind may be part of the goal. Finally, it might sing at the birthday parties, weddings, and funerals of its own members. In many of these contexts, the choir’s performance functions **(p.242)** as—and is usually appreciated as—a voluntary contribution as opposed to a saleable product.

The sheer range of opportunities to perform in these kinds of settings means that many choirs have busy diaries. Such opportunities readily present themselves, often via a connection with a choir member—a notable feature of many community choirs is that they tend to attract people who are also involved with local charities or other community organisations. Awareness of the

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potential of a choir to serve or interact with its local community (as opposed to serving the performers themselves) is especially strong among natural voice and community music practitioners and many are keen to give their choirs a variety of performing experiences in different environments. As suggested earlier, the choice of places in which the choir encounters its public becomes another dimension of its inclusivity. By helping to animate community events it opens up new spaces of conviviality in which the usual barriers between artists and audience are broken down and singers who appear as ordinary members of the public can be seen in action away from the media spotlight. In this respect, community choirs are replicating what is in most parts of the world a natural state of affairs, where music making has a far more visible presence in the day-to-day life of the local community and fulfils many functions other than pure entertainment. Choirs that operate in this way resemble folk ensembles in oral cultures more than choral societies, and when they learn songs from, for example, a visiting Georgian group, it is this kind of ensemble that serves as their role model. Many of the songs they sing are, of course, far more “at home” in these settings than on a stage, and listeners might be imagined as an outer circle gathered around the periphery of a traditional village dancing ground more than a modern concert hall audience.

Chris Rowbury brings several of these threads together in his explanation of his approach to performance. He writes of his fundamental belief that “we are not here to serve the music, but to use it as a vehicle for human expression.…Enjoyment and fun come first.” This will be communicated to the audience, who will respond with “lots of happy and (naturally) smiling faces”. He continues:

> My thinking…is that we’re a community of human beings often singing songs from folk traditions where people are not “singers” in any formal sense.…I like to hear the humanity of a choir shine through, with all its human imperfections and mistakes. I’d rather hear guts and passion than note perfection.
>
> (Rowbury 2004: 9)

Chris Hoskins, writing about the Singing for the Terrified groups that she runs in the English Midlands, likewise emphasises the combination of humanity and community spirit at the heart of the enterprise, in this case with reference to forging cross-cultural connections as well: **(p.243)**

> The joy of running a community group for me is about acting as a facilitator to enable others to make a journey of self-discovery.…We support one another on a weekly basis through the trials and tribulations of life, and we also reach out to the wider community, making links with people from countries whose songs we sing, as we did earlier this year during the

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> Kenya crisis to raise funds for projects in that country. Our Solstice celebration this year will raise funds for the Homeless Centre here in Coventry and for the soup kitchens in Nuneaton to provide meals for the homeless on Christmas Day. That's the kind of spirit that's developed in our groups.
>
> (Hoskins 2008: 11)

For Rowena Whitehead, too, the question of whom or what the choir is there to serve, over and above the music, is of fundamental importance. When, in December 2007, I paid a visit to Cambridge's Good Vibrations Community Choir (at that time under the joint leadership of Rowena and Sue Parlby), I browsed through the posters for the recent events in which the choir had been involved. Themes of peace, solidarity, and change were prominent. One poster was for a concert entitled Peace in Our Time, featuring Good Vibrations with the Helen Chadwick Group. Described as "a concert of songs inspired by those who work for peace", the event was sponsored by the Baha'i Community of Cambridge and the community music charity Talking in Tune (founded by Rowena), and profits were being donated to the Mines Advisory Group. A poster for another event, Singing for Change, supporting the Pakistan Earthquake Appeal, invited the public to "Join Good Vibrations and Friends for an inspiring and uplifting evening singing songs that changed the world (or should have done!)". A third poster advertised an event called Stand With Me, supported by Cambridge City Council as part of the commemoration of National Holocaust Remembrance Day, which it described as:

> An evening of songs and stories of resistance, life, hope and solidarity from different cultures. Moving, stirring and uplifting, these songs and the people who created and sang them have amazing stories to tell. The stories we will share give voice to the inspiring bravery and courage of ordinary people who have been prepared to stand up for others against tyranny and genocide.

In an interview I conducted as part of this visit, Rowena explained that for the past two years, the choir had also made termly visits to Oakington Immigration Reception Centre, where asylum-seekers and illegal immigrants were held in prison-like conditions while awaiting their fate (which, in most cases, was deportation).[28] Taking up to half an hour to get through security, the singers would then gather in the cafe, where they would sing two or three simple songs before asking the (all male) inmates if anyone would like to share a song from his own culture—the response being such that, once the ice was broken, there was barely enough time to hear all the songs that people wanted **(p.244)** to offer.[29] Rowena reflects: "I'm very humbled by the fact that these people are prepared to share their songs and dances.…They really go for it." By using music in this way, she says, "you can connect with people at quite a heart level. We

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greet them in their own languages and we say things like, ‘we’re really sorry about what’s happening to you,’ and you think, ‘well, at least when they go they’ve got some memory of people being friendly’.” She recalls the choir’s very first visit, when the centre still housed entire families:

> You could just feel this energy swirling up. We had a fantastic party!…There were kids as well and everybody danced.…For me, that is the heart of what I do. I spent eight years working in community development and I think this is the best community work I’ve ever done.
>
> (Whitehead interview 2007)

Later in the interview, Rowena elaborated on the connection she sees between people using their voice in the service of causes they believe in and finding personal fulfilment. Reflecting on the kinds of happenings she has nurtured in Cambridge, she says:

> One of the things I feel proudest about is that there is now a sense of people feeling that they’ve got a voice, and that they will go and sing together, with confidence and passion, in different situations.…There’s a real groundswell now of folk who are happy to get together to share their voices at social events and for good causes.…It’s a Zeitgeist, a real hunger that people have, to be part of a creative community.…It’s a hunger to belong, to connect with people, in a way that goes deeper than words and I know it feeds the soul.
>
> (Whitehead interview 2007)

One dimension of “feeding the soul”, then, is the sense of fulfilment derived from playing an activist role or, in more modest terms, feeling that one is doing something that makes a difference and so contributes in some small way to making the world a better place. The more politically engaged community choirs are ideally placed to provide their members with this kind of opportunity.

For those who prefer to maintain an apolitical stance, there is ample opportunity to perform at neutral events such as craft fairs, summer fetes, National Trust open days, barn dances and ceilidhs, or simply to busk. The biography for Newcastle-based Heaton Voices included in the programme for the 2012 National Street Choirs Festival captures the apparently limitless possibilities:

> We’ve sung at a range of venues, from shopping centres to churches, Christmas markets, to concerts at the Sage at Gateshead. We’ve sung at train stations, Metro stations and on buses. We’ve sung in heat waves, monsoons (usually at street choir festivals!) and blizzards. We’ve startled small children, bemused **(p.245)** teenagers and had pensioners sing along with us at various “busks” throughout the North East.…Most of all, we’ve

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made true friendships through singing and (generally!) raised a smile wherever we go.

(National Street Choirs Festival programme, 2012)

Semi-spontaneous performances (with a very small *p*) also have their place. In this case, there may be no public announcement that the singing is going to take place: as in a flash mob event, any audience will be made up of people who happen to be in the vicinity at the time. Also on offer are weekend workshops and singing weeks that bring singers together to share and learn new songs and to experience singing in different environments, and these may sometimes include or culminate in relatively informal concerts. David Burbidge specialises in organising events of this kind under the auspices of his Lakeland Voice initiative, which, as he describes it, “grew out of a purely selfish need to combine the best of what is natural in the environment with the best of what is natural in the voice” (2004: 7). David’s events range from singing walks and cycle rides “when we take our songs out into the landscape, singing by waterfalls and rivers, in caves, woods and fellside chapels and round the open fires of country inns” to longer singing holidays (http://www.lakelandvoice.co.uk/, acc. April 24, 2012). One of his more ambitious undertakings was a month-long Singing Cyclists Land’s End to John O’Groats fundraising tour, punctuated by joint concerts with local choirs along the way. Tours for which David was taking bookings at the time of this writing included Hadrian’s Harmony, structured around a walk along the section of Hadrian’s Wall between Brampton and Hexham and featuring meetings with local singers and pub singing and concerts along the way. Singing Settle Carlisle, another of David’s regular programmes, offers singing on trains, in stations, and on walks through the Pennine fells, as well as a visit to the Ingleton festival. On this trip, participants are also given an insight into local history, learning songs about the men who built the railway line and visiting the remote chapel that, for many, became their final resting place. Other trips have included concerts on the passenger boats that ply the waters of the area’s many lakes. (Participants on tours that include concerts are provided with recordings in advance so that they may make a start on learning their parts.)

David also hosts an annual International Choirs Meet where singers from British choirs are able to sing with visiting choirs from different parts of Europe. Regional choir gatherings held in other parts of the United Kingdom have become a regular feature of the annual cycle of activity for many choirs. These include the Community Choirs Festival in Stratford-on-Avon (“A Fabulous Day of Mass Choir Singing, Socialising, Performing and Fun”), which provides a platform for choirs to perform for one another as well as offering the opportunity to “learn and sing new songs together as a 600 strong mass choir” (http://www.communitychoirsfestival.co.uk/, acc. April 24, 2012). **(p.246)**

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Unplanned, spontaneous performances are made possible by the fact that songs that have been learnt by ear are totally portable: in principle, a choir that has learnt and retained its repertoire in this way can sing anywhere. Jane Wells, an experienced community musician with a classical background whom we met in chapter 3, speaks of her immediate attraction to this way of working:

> Though it was quite contrary to my training and reading dots and so on, what I really like is that you can go somewhere and you've got a song…and you can all do it and you don't need any bits of paper.…That really appealed to me, and the fact it was accessible to everyone…And also it sounds better—the song's just in your head and you sing it and that's it!
>
> (Wells interview 2008)

Even in the case of planned performances, it will have become clear that many of the more conventional choirs would not be able to perform in some of the settings I have described here because of their need for a piano. Performing outdoors in inclement weather or in a place with limited light would also be difficult because of their need to sing from scores. Further, in the case of songs learnt by ear the repertoire is cumulative: this is another major difference between a community choir and a choral society that, having performed **(p.247)** a work, may never sing it again, not least because the hired scores have been returned and most singers will not be able to perform without them.

I end this section with a snapshot from a trip I took in October 2011 to attend a weekend workshop led by Tony Backhouse that drew voice practitioners and community choir leaders from across the country to Cheltenham, where the annual literature festival was also in full swing (Figure 7.5) (see web figure 07.15). At the end of the first day, around half of us adjourned to a local Italian restaurant where we occupied a long table at the end of the room. Inevitably, we broke into song and, encouraged by the positive response from the staff and other diners, we ran through some of the new items we had learnt that day. As we got up to leave, people at other tables stopped us, saying: "Are you one of the choirs performing at the festival?" They were incredulous to learn that, not only were we not a choir: some of us had met for the first time only that morning (and we didn't have any "music").

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Opening Doors

Figure 7.5 Tony Backhouse leading a gospel-singing workshop in Toddington, October 2011.

Source: Courtesy of Caroline Bithell.

Participation in a community choir, then, brings rewards of many different orders and can be transformative at many levels—physical, psychological, emotional, social, and moral, as well as musical. While many of these benefits might be obtained from a more conventional choir, they would normally be available only to those who already possessed sight-reading skills and had prior singing experience.[30] A large majority of those catered for by open-access choirs would clearly not have made it into the more hallowed ranks of an auditioned choir, and, for many of them, that type of choir in any case holds little appeal. Further, some orders of transformation derive specifically from the kinds of activities that take place outside the concert hall and would probably not be sought by many of those who identify with the conventional performance model. Finally, often the greatest transformation occurs in those who have furthest to travel or have been most traumatised by past experiences.

The generally buoyant state of the choir world, combined with the popularity of talent shows and karaoke, might suggest that such trauma is overstated. In almost every choir I visited for the purposes of this research, however, people voluntarily related stories of having not sung for thirty years or more after being told by a schoolteacher that they “couldn’t sing”. Some had been excluded from the school choir; others had been required to stand at the back of the choir and mouth the words. This phenomenon is by no means confined to Britain. Susan Knight, in drawing up what she refers to as a non-singer experiential profile based on an investigation carried out in Newfoundland, Canada, also encountered people with very clear memories of being prevented from singing or told they couldn’t sing (2011a; see also Knight 2011b).[31] Amanda Lohrey, writing about the rise of the *a cappella* movement in Australia, says **(p.248)** that she has heard variants of this tale so many times that she now thinks of it “almost as a kind of urban myth” (1998: 185). In the context of a discussion of psychoanalyst Alice Miller’s notion of the true self and the false self, Lohrey goes on to reflect: “For the stifled, the voice of the true self has to find a way of speaking out and being heard, and it occurs to me that singing might be one of those ways” (197). Thoughts such as this underline the profound significance of

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the kind of work that is done by open-access choirs and singing groups, not only in opening musical doors that may have seemed closed forever but in offering individual participants a way of better integrating the psyche.

Once the door to musical participation through singing has been reopened, progress can be remarkable. I have also been told stories by several choir leaders and those who run Singing for the Terrified groups of individuals who, when they first found their way to a session, had been unable to make a sound but had turned out to have “fantastic” voices and in some cases had gone on to sing solos, write songs, start a choir, or even earn a university music degree. Some groups, of course, remain resolutely non-performing, often eschewing the “choir” label in favour of “singing group” or “song circle” and holding a weekly drop-in session, rather than require members to commit to a whole term. Yet, once they find their feet and gain confidence, even the most tentative singers may be eager to share what they have learnt with a supportive audience of friends and family. A group may therefore progress from being a non-performing beginners group, meeting simply to explore the voice, to performing (with a small *p*) at the kinds of events I have described here.

Widening our perspective again for a moment, we might see any choir as an ideal candidate for the type of community for which Etienne Wenger proposed the descriptor “community of practice”. But if we then focus on the choir’s choice of repertoire and the manner in which it goes about its business (including characteristic performing contexts and locations) as a central part of its “practice”, again it immediately becomes clear that community choirs and choral societies represent two very different kinds of community. And if, as Simon Frith puts it, music is “especially important for our sense of ourselves because of its unique emotional intensity” as “we absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our own bodies” (1996b: 273), then again the sense of self that is constituted through membership of a community choir is quite different from the sense of self derived from being part of a choral society. The lines of inheritance or ancestry—who creates and transmits the songs, and who establishes the stylistic conventions—are also different. Here, we might recall the legendary Bantu greeting which functions as a way of asking “Where do you come from? To which village or tribe do you belong?” but is phrased as “What do you dance?” The answers given by amateur choir members to the question “What do you sing?” will reveal something of the very different paths along which their singing journeys have led them and the very different kinds of tribes to which they now belong. **(p.249)**

The extent to which a choir might serve as a point of entry to other new experiences, as opposed to presenting itself primarily as an opportunity for participants to hone existing skills, also warrants greater emphasis. At the very least, the “openness” that lies at the heart of the kind of community choir described in this chapter—openness to all members of the community, to

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exploring the voice in new ways, to other cultures and their music, to performing in a range of less conventional settings and for a variety of causes, and to responding to calls for help—becomes a positive force and places such choirs beyond the reach of the kinds of charitable sentiments that often attach to “amateur” activity or to projects designed to make particular aspects of life more “accessible” to those considered less able or less privileged. Beyond that, the new social and cultural worlds to which the choir acts as a doorway may themselves prove to be life-changing in quite profound ways.

Perhaps one of the most striking trends to have emerged in this chapter is the way in which choir membership has not only introduced people to cultures elsewhere in the world but also brought them face-to-face with representatives of those cultures. Also noteworthy is the way in which such contact often involved a mutual exchange. “We” have done far more than acquire some nice new songs to spice up our collection. The stories I have related here are just a few examples of the way choirs and their members feel a sense of responsibility towards those whose lives have touched theirs and seek out ways to use their singing to help improve aspects of those lives. In the process, they contribute to raising public awareness not only of victims of disaster, injustice, and oppression in distant parts of the globe but also of cases of material hardship, suffering, and discrimination closer to home. Meanwhile, the personal connections that are forged point to other realms beyond the local community. In the next chapter, then, we follow some choir members as they step through a further set of doors, this time opening onto worlds far removed from their own locality and their normal day-to-day lives.

Notes:

(1.) On this occasion, for the wordier songs the singers have recourse to the specially produced songbooks included in their festival packs.

(2.) Available online at http://www.bbc.co.uk/sing/learning/howachoirworks.shtml, acc. July 1, 2013.

(3.) The judges on this occasion were Russell Watson (the so-called people’s tenor), Sharon D. Clarke (best known for her part in the television soap *Holby City*, alongside her West End stage roles), and Suzi Digby, OBE (choral director, conductor, and founder of the Voices Foundation).

(4.) When the NVPN committee was asked by the BBC to advertise the project to its membership, it initially declined but subsequently agreed (with some reluctance) to include the basic call in its newsletter. In her reply to the BBC, the chair noted: “The term ‘wars’, especially as this country is currently engaged in wars, is extremely distasteful and not likely to increase community harmony and cohesion” (Hill 2008: 4). One choir led by NVPN member Helen Yeomans was

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shortlisted for the programme but withdrew when they were told they would not be permitted to perform any of their own (original) material.

(5.) At the time of writing, a full track list for all the shows was still available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/lastchoirstanding/news/songs/track_list.shtml, acc. July 1, 2013.

(6.) See http://www.choirs.org.uk/, acc. April 12, 2012.

(7.) See “The United Kingdom in Song,” http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8436000/8436192.stm, acc. April 12, 2012.

(8.) This paragraph draws on materials held in the Working Class Education Library in Salford and information carried on the library’s website, which in turn draws on the work of Denis Pye (see http://www.wcml.org.uk/, acc. April 14, 2012). I am also grateful to Denis Pye for providing me with a copy of the script for his informative and entertaining talk given at the library on March 17, 2012.

(9.) See http://raiseyourbanners.org/, acc. July 1, 2013

(10.) A large collection of songsheets and lyrics for temporary political songs is available from the website of the Liverpool Socialist Singers: http://liverpoolsocialistsingers.net/, acc. July 1, 2013.

(11.) In this case, Michael Deason-Barrow had been approached by the festival with the specific aim of achieving a greater sense of community participation by including aural learners in an event that normally focuses on learning through conventional music notation.

(12.) Llangollen models itself on Wales’s annual National Eisteddfod, which in its present form dates back to 1880 but is part of a tradition stretching back to medieval times. The first eisteddfod is believed to have taken place in Cardigan in 1176.

(13.) For further details, see http://www.international-eisteddfod.co.uk/, acc. April 13, 2012.

(14.) See http://www.europeanchoralassociation.org/, acc. April 15, 2012.

(15.) For further information, see http://www.festival500.com/, acc. April 15, 2012.

(16.) It should be noted, of course, that this choice of repertoire was a dictate of the programme makers and that many of the participating choirs have other kinds of music in their normal working repertoire.

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(17.) The distinction is still not entirely clear-cut, however. Preston Community Choir, for instance, promotes itself as being “for anyone and everyone who wants to sing but has never found anywhere to do it before!” It goes on to describe its repertoire as encompassing “some of the most current classical composers like Bob Chilcott and Eric Whitacre” and “some of the choral greats of the past”, alongside “everything from Musical Theatre to Pop and Rock” (http://www.prestoncommunitychoir.com/, acc. July 8, 2013).

(18.) WOMAD is the now legendary world music festival founded in the early 1980s by Peter Gabriel, Thomas Brooman, and Bob Hooton. See http://womad.org/, acc. July 1, 2013.

(19.) Comments made in a profile of the choir made for SOAS Radio: “Refugee Week Radio 2011—Woven Gold—Finding Happiness in a Refugee Choir”. http://soasradio.org/content/refugee-week-radio-2011-woven-gold-finding-happiness-refugee-choir, acc. April 19, 2012.

(20.) The definition of “health” most widely adopted comes from the World Health Organization, as formulated in 1948: “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization 1948).

(21.) See https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/Research/Centres/SDHR/ and http://www.airsplace.ca/, acc. July 4, 2013.

(22.) In illuminating case studies in *Musicophilia* and other books, Sacks provides moving and often dramatic evidence of the therapeutic effect of music and its ability to elicit powerful responses in patients with a variety of neurological conditions—those afflicted by strokes, Alzheimer’s disease or other forms of dementia, by autism or by parkinsonism and other movement disorders. For further research into the therapeutic effects of singing on stuttering, Parkinson’s, aphasia, and autism, see the extensive bibliography in Wan et al. 2010

(23.) The original is in *Das allgemeine Brouillon*, 36 (1798/99).

(24.) For overviews of recent research into the positive application of music in clinical settings to alleviate pain and anxiety, speed up recovery time, and reduce drug dosages, including specific applications before, during, and after surgery, see e.g. Bernatzky et al. 2012; and Spintge 2012.

(25.) For a survey of a range of biomarkers included in the studies reviewed by Clift et al.—oxytoin, cortisol, TNF-alpha, prolactin, heart rate, blood pressure, elecromyographic tension, peripheral finger temperature, and skin conductance—see table 17 in Clift et al. 2008b: 72. The report includes further tables summarising research findings in the areas of physical health and mental health.

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Kreutz et al. (2012) survey work in the new branch of psychoneuroendocrinology, concerned with the interactions between psychological and behavioural process, on the one hand, and neurohumoral and somatic processes in the brain and body, on the other. This study also refers to research relating specifically to cortisol, oxytocin, testosterone, ß-endorphin, secretory innumoglobulin A, and other neuroendocrine and immunological markers such as prolactin, serotonin, and norepinephrine, with a useful summary of empirical studies published between 1993 and 2009 presented in table form.

(26.) At the time of writing, the scheme was inviting a new round of applications.

(27.) Of the choir’s twenty-seven active members at the time, seven participated directly in the study.

(28.) In all but name a Home Office detention centre and rated the second-worst in the country, the Oakington facility has since been closed down.

(29.) I was interested to find the following comment in one of my questionnaire returns: “Talking to choir leaders, I’ve been impressed by how many songs from other countries are collected in places like immigration and detention centres” (Susanne, Unicorn questionnaire 2007).

(30.) For an account of the rewards of participation in an auditioned, sight-reading choir specialising in classical choral repertoire, see Horn 2013.

(31.) Knight uses the term “non-singer” to designate a person who believes they cannot sing rather than someone who is incapable of singing.

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