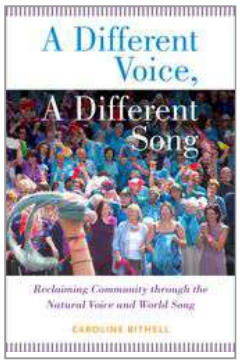

A Different Voice, A Different Song: Reclaiming Community through the Natural Voice and World Song
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The Voice of the Future

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Abstract and Keywords

Chapter 9 takes the form of an extended conclusion that draws together the various threads that have been woven through the book. First, it reviews a set of key themes and concepts that have reappeared in different guises: finding a voice, participation, performance, community, networks, journeys, liberation, transcendence, empowerment, crossing boundaries, opening doors, liminality, *communitas*, transformation, conviviality, and collective joy. It then elaborates on the ways in which certain fallacies, misconceptions, and assumptions have been challenged or reframed in the worlds the reader has entered in the course of his or her journey through the book. The chapter ends by reflecting on the broader impact of the trends and initiatives described and their potential to contribute to a substantial reconfiguring of ideas about vocal identity and musical sounds and values and meanings.

Keywords: voice, participation, performance, community, conviviality, collective joy, vocal identity, musical values, musical meaning

Gathering the Threads

By way of drawing together the many threads that have been woven through my narrative, I first highlight some of the key themes and concepts that have recurred throughout this book.

Finding a Voice

We have seen how, in the context of a natural-voice-style singing group, community choir, or workshop, individuals may find their singing voice for the first time. They may also find their voice at a deeper level in the sense of having

the courage to speak out and be heard. Finding one's voice may then become a metaphor for finding the "true" self. The experience of having one's voice witnessed by others is particularly powerful in the case of individuals who have more usually been excluded or overlooked: those once branded tone-deaf, homeless people, or political asylum seekers, for example. More experienced singers may discover different kinds of voices that display a hitherto unimagined range of qualities and timbres, and they may find ways of embodying some of these voices themselves, thereby enriching their own vocal palette. In a choir, members of a community find a collective voice, and this may be used to raise awareness or funds for causes they believe in.

Participation

The notion of active participation in music making has been at the forefront of this discussion, underpinned by the suggestion that it is participation, rather than consumption, which empowers and transforms individuals and helps to **(p. 295)** build communities. Focusing on the right to participate, and the many rewards that participation brings, casts other values or goals that may, in other contexts, take pride of place in a different light. For a community choir, achieving musical "perfection" may not be the only consideration, and working towards a public performance may not be the prime goal. We have seen that many of the songs favoured by natural-voice-style choirs come from traditions in which participation is a fundamental principle and are structured in ways that maximise their capacity to include all members of the community. Singing can also act as the key that allows people to become participants in lives lived elsewhere and, in the process, to arrive at deeper understandings of other people and cultures that reach far beyond the music.

Performance

Our insights into the kinds of activities in which community choirs (in the United Kingdom, at least) typically engage have taken us far beyond the notion of performance as something that happens on a stage in a specially designed concert hall or theatre. We have encountered a myriad ways of performing (with a small *p*) and of sharing music, and this has aided our understanding of the idea that, as Gary Ansdell puts it, "performing has shifted from being seen as just reproducing musical works to instead creating and sustaining social relationships through musicing" (2010: 168). Performance enables otherwise marginalised individuals to present themselves in a positive light, which puts them in the position of giving rather than receiving, and of doing rather than being "done to".

Community

The notion of community has also been at the heart of my discussion, principally in the guise of the community choir as a structure that may be seen to represent the community from which its members are drawn. In joining a choir, individual singers become part of a more intimate social community that may become a

main source of friendship and support. Through the choir's activities, its members may come to feel more connected to their neighbourhood communities that, in turn, stand to gain from the trickle-down effect of the social capital that the choir generates. Individuals may become part of other communities with a wider catchment area or a different kind of membership when they travel beyond their own locality to attend a summer camp or residential retreat or take part in an overseas tour. These communities may operate at regional or national level, or they may take the form of more fluid transnational formations, and some may also have a virtual dimension. **(p.296)** Members of the NVPN and such organisations as Sound Sense form their own professional communities of practice. Community has also appeared as an aspiration or ideal. It may be imagined as something that has been lost, and its reclamation sought as part of the process of restoring social as well as individual health.

Networks

We encountered the "network" first and foremost in the name of the Natural Voice Practitioners' Network. Phenomena such as weekend workshops or the activities associated with a more discrete interest, such as Georgian singing, present themselves as a more open kind of network, and we have seen how individuals may belong to a series of intersecting networks. We have also seen the decisive part played by key individuals who act as the nuclei around which new networks form or as bridges between networks. In addition, we have seen how particular locations and events play a role as familiar, anchor-like meeting points for network members while also, at some level, appearing to embody core values. Finally, we have met suggestions of the way in which national and transnational networks may add to the sustainability of local networks, and vice versa.

Journeys

Metaphorical as well as literal journeys have featured throughout the book. We have seen how a non-singer or a "terrified" singer, or simply a lone singer looking for a way in, may progress to becoming a confident, happy, fully-fledged member of a choir. We have gained an insight into the different paths that have led individual voice practitioners to the natural voice approach. We have followed singers on their journeys to all manner of meetings, gatherings, festivals, camps, and alternative holiday destinations. We have also considered more epic journeys of self-discovery and journeys towards greater understanding of other people and cultures. Alongside these personal journeys, we have explored the journeys undertaken by different kinds of music that have travelled far beyond the borders of their place of origin.

Liberation and Transcendence

The theme of liberation (or emancipation), together with the related notion of transcendence, has appeared in many guises. We have seen how individuals may overcome personal limitations or the belief that they "can't sing". **(p.297)** Most

significantly, we have seen singers being liberated from the need to read music notation. Emancipated from the world of Western classical and Anglo-American popular music through their discovery of parallel musical worlds, they are no longer limited by its preconceptions about what music is and how it should sound, or by any notion that the rules about music are universal and grounded in scientific certainties. More generally, they have transcended the constraints, conventions, and prejudices of their own society through engaging with other people in other places. Each layer of release has opened up new horizons: musical, social, cultural, and existential.

Empowerment

These different orders of liberation have often gone hand-in-hand with a sense of empowerment. Individuals who discover their singing voices have clearly been empowered in quite profound ways. Performing in congenial surroundings to supportive audiences has also appeared as a source of empowerment. Communities are empowered as more of their members become active participants and find ways of making a difference to the quality of their own lives and the lives of others. Host communities elsewhere in the world may also feel empowered as a result of the interest shown in their musical heritage, and this may encourage them in their efforts to preserve and revitalise their traditions.

Crossing Boundaries

In the emancipation process various boundaries have been crossed: between people of different social and educational backgrounds, between different ethnicities and nationalities, between different musical styles and tastes, and between ways of thinking and modes of operation that may once have been juxtaposed as marginal and mainstream. Central to our orientation has been the insistence that traditions or values that might be viewed as being in competition or ordered according to an established hierarchy may more usefully be construed as being simply different. At the same time, some apparent differences have been seen to mask underlying similarities or sympathies that unite more than they divide.

Opening Doors

As boundaries have been breached, new worlds have opened up. Most importantly, we have seen the doors cast wide open to singers who do not sight-read and to music from all corners of the globe. We have gained an understanding **(p.298)** of the reasons for which people with diverse needs and backgrounds might step through these doors and where that might lead. We have heard how, through their singing activities, people have discovered other new interests, such as world music, circle dance, or camping, and new ways of spending leisure time, such as attending workshops and going on singing

holidays. Some have also become involved with local charities, environmental issues, or political causes.

Liminality

The notion of liminality has lent analytical power to a series of contexts. The act of performance, time away from home, and the different environments in which that time is spent have all emerged as potentially liminal or transitional zones that offer opportunities to experiment with different identities, different ways of being with others, and different ways of living. The initial warm-up session in a choir meeting or workshop has been viewed as a liminal space that marks a transition from one state of mind and mode of activity to another. We have seen how language, too, may represent a liminal zone in which assumptions about intelligibility are suspended and meanings reconfigured. Performance and travel, in their liminal capacity, have also been seen to have transcendental qualities.

Communitas

The notion of *communitas*—which is related to that of community but with a specific overtone of heightened intersubjectivity that typically gives rise to a sense of bonding—has been encountered through the writings of a series of theorists who have drawn inspiration from the work of Victor Turner. The concept has lent itself well to enhancing our understanding of the ritual elements that are inherent in many kinds of performance and journeying and are deliberately incorporated into camps and festivities.

Transformation

We have seen the potential for change or transformation at many levels—not only musical, but also physical, psychological, social, political, and moral. We have encountered ideas from performance studies and ethnomusicology about the transformative potential of performance as a site for integrating and reconfiguring not only one's own subjectivity but also one's relationship with others and with the world. The force of such transformation is reflected **(p.299)** in the frequent assertions of those who have taken this path that joining a choir or discovering a new kind of music, activity, or place has changed their life. In individual narratives, this sense of life-changing experience is often tied to a particular "eureka" or "lightbulb" moment that had the force of a conversion or sudden flash of enlightenment leading to a profound shift of consciousness.

Conviviality and Collective Joy

The worlds we have entered in my ethnographic descriptions have presented us with a profusion of scenes of singing, dancing, and feasting that capture the essence of collective joy, whose reclamation Barbara Ehrenreich sees as being so critical to the health of human society. We have also encountered Ivan Illich's use of the term "conviviality" to refer to a state of collective self-determination ("individual freedom realized in personal interdependence") in which individuals

are brought into autonomous, creative, and harmonious interaction with one another and with their environment. Again, we have had clear glimpses into settings and spaces in which this vision has become tangible.

Fallacies and Other Truths

In the course of our explorations, a number of assumptions about musical values and competencies founded, for the most part, on a limited cultural or historical perspective have been identified. Alternative (and not necessarily incompatible) perspectives have been introduced that suggest greater complexity and open up the field of understanding musical experience to different lived realities as well as different ways of thinking. We have also encountered a series of fallacies or misconceptions about music itself. These include some of the "lies my music teacher told me" (many more of which can be found in Gerald Eskelin's book of that name), together with suggestions of other "lies" (or partial truths) that we may have been told by the media, the music industry, or the "authenticity police". Here, too, responses have been offered that situate "music" in a more clearly defined social and historical context with regard to the development of ideas and practice. For ethnomusicologists these alternative positions are as much a norm as any other and need no further justification. It is, however, the dominant discourse that most influences the establishment and, to some extent, the popular view and that also adopts a protective position when the ground begins to shift. I therefore continue my review of the journey this book has taken us on by revisiting some of these fallacies, misconceptions, and assumptions. **(p. 300)**

"If you can't read music you're not a real musician"

This belief is deeply ingrained in Britain, North America, and other parts of the "modern" world but is, by definition, restricted to times and places where music is written down. The world is full of highly accomplished musicians who do not "read" music, and in societies where musical literacy is the desired norm, there will also be many people who are highly proficient at learning by ear. Sight-reading skills and a pseudo-scientific understanding of music theory do not, in any case, correlate with the degree of musicality with which an individual may be credited. Yet the idea that a musician is someone who has undergone advanced training in Western music theory leads on to the idea that there is a world of difference between "musicians" and "non-musicians". The extent to which this difference is overstated is illustrated by an example given by Rod Paton in a short report (published in the community music magazine *Sounding Board*) about his Lifemusic project. The context is a ten-week training course that attracted equal numbers of self-identified musicians and non-musicians:

> About half way through the course, the non-musicians requested if they might initiate a piece [based on group improvisation] and then compare this with a piece initiated by the musicians. The results were surprisingly (or unsurprisingly) similar with the exception that the musicians took

> longer to get started! But what was most noticeable was the way in which the group developed a remarkable sense of cohesion and togetherness, breaking down the (false) distinctions between those with training and those without.
>
> (Paton 2009: 10)

We may not wish to go as far as to argue that there are no distinctions whatsoever between formally trained musicians and untrained, or self-taught, musicians, but the idea that those who have undergone a particular kind of approved training are the only ones who may rightly claim the identity "musician" is clearly not tenable. Meanwhile, the lack of recognised qualifications remains a stumbling block for many natural voice practitioners who are often ineligible to apply for music-related posts to which they would otherwise bring considerable expertise.

Further normative assumptions about both musical learning and performance conventions were highlighted in questions posed by audience members at a concert given by the Georgian ensemble Sakhioba at St. Ann's Church in Manchester (in November 2011). How, the singers were asked, were they able to perform an entire concert programme without either scores or a conductor? The musicality and proficiency of the singers was not in any way in doubt: on the contrary, audiences across the United Kingdom were in awe of the group's virtuosic performances. **(p.301)**

"The works in the Western classical canon represent the height of musical achievement and a model of the kind of music we should aspire to"

The belief that the Western art music tradition is somehow in the vanguard of an evolutionary progression towards ever-greater refinement has found itself on increasingly shaky ground. World music is moving in from the margins to take its place in the regular programming of major concert halls, and what may once have been dismissed as "folk" (or even "primitive") music is often revealed as a sophisticated form of expression based on a well-established musical grammar and science of sound that has developed over hundreds of years. In some cases, this clearly places the music in question closer to the Western notion of art or classical music, even if it is archived in and transmitted through an oral rather than a written tradition. The story of Western music history is also complicated by theories such as those of Marius Schneider, who built on Siegfried Nadel's ideas in proposing that Georgia might be identified as the cradle of European polyphony and its ancient singing traditions as the direct precursors of medieval art polyphony. The relabelling of the vocal polyphony of contemporary Georgia as "traditional" rather than "folk" goes some way towards rendering this idea more palatable. Meanwhile, Stravinsky referred to Georgian folk polyphony as "a wonderful treasure that can give for performance more than all the attainments of new music" (quoted in Levin 1989: 5).

The assumption that the latest arrivals in the Western art music canon represent the epitome of creative achievement is related to the further assumption that *the work is the music.* As we have established, however, music as work—a notion closely related to the notion of music as art—is just one metaphor among many, albeit the one that has dominated the field of Western music history. Among other metaphors that have emerged in these pages are music as process, music as participation, music as social interaction, music as communication, music as therapy, and music as advocacy. The metaphor of music as work has, in turn, given rise to the notion that meaning resides in the work. Again, we have encountered the idea that, whatever the composer's intention (if a single, identifiable composer even exists), meanings are constructed by performers and listeners in ways that relate to their own experiences, understandings, imaginings, and aspirations. A musical style or repertoire can take on different identities and assume different functions in any new setting in which it finds itself. If we see music as experience or action, rather than a *work*, then it is reasonable to assume that at least some of its meaning will rest with the individual *making* the music in a given time and place. The fact that, as we have seen, musical works are in many cultures somewhat slippery entities that do not exist in one definitive form but are recreated by performers in an infinite series of variations makes this alternative perspective easier to **(p.302)** appreciate, alongside the notion that in the act of performance we enter into dialogue not so much with the work, or the "music itself", as with our fellow performers.

Musicologist Nicholas Cook has vented his exasperation with standard textbooks on music history that continue to equate Western culture with progress as they reiterate what is essentially a story of Western classical music in which all other forms of musical expression are relegated to the sidelines, their makers reduced to extras with, at best, the occasional walk-on part. In *Music: A Short Introduction*, he writes:

> That such thinking was commonplace at the turn of the twentieth century, the time when the sun never set on the British Empire, is only to be expected. That it is still to be encountered at the turn of the twenty-first is astounding, for it offers an entirely inadequate basis for understanding music in today's pluralistic society. It is hard to think of another field in which quite such uncritically ethnocentric and elitist conceptions have held such sway until so recently.
>
> (Cook 1998: 42–43)

"Singing other people's songs is theft"

The accusation that singing other people's songs is theft is based on the trope of cultural appropriation—extended here to the performance of music by someone who is not a direct culture-bearer—as an act of piracy or plunder; if the performer is European or American, they may also be deemed guilty of an

imperialist rip-off. Earlier I introduced the argument that whether or not certain aspects of the tourist experience might be seen to rest on utopian foundations was in many ways beside the point. Similarly, we might argue that if the prospect of British singers learning songs from the African continent, for example, rings postcolonial alarm bells for some, that is in some ways beside the point and should certainly not be allowed to discredit any kind of cultural crossover. There are, of course, fundamental points about cultural imperialism that need to be made, and I do not in any way wish to diminish their moral import. But the politics and poetics at work here are again both complex and fluid, and we are not bound to carry the sins of past generations, like a ball-and-chain, for evermore—particularly if it means turning away from overtures of friendship in the present. The trope of musical appropriation as theft finds its counterpart in the trope of music as a resource for all humanity, and this latter trope is often, as we have seen, advanced by those once positioned as victims. In the stories I have told here, we have seen ample evidence of people behaving in ways that are sensitive and responsive, of mutual engagement rather than one-sided exploitation, of exchange rather than taking. **(p.303)**

We have also seen how the musical choices people make are not simply random appropriations of what Deborah Root has termed “bits and pieces of…floating cultural exotica” (1997: 226). Often, they are part of relationships. The songs in a singer’s repertoire, then, act as a record of human as well as musical encounters. In *Cannibal Culture*, Root makes a distinction between the sharing and borrowing that has always taken place across cultures and the kind of appropriation that involves “the taking up and commodification of aesthetic, cultural, and…spiritual forms of a society”, which are then “neatly packaged for the consumer’s convenience” (1996: 70). A story of appropriation in the latter sense might feature an ill-informed outsider who takes an object or idea from another culture without consulting its rightful owners and turns it to his or her own profit, recycling it in a distorted form. Those who then consume the derivative and exoticised product (as “authentic” artefact or “ancient wisdom”) often know or care little about its place of origin and the lives of the people who created it. By contrast, we have seen how many of the “foreigners” who perform songs from Georgia, South Africa, or Bosnia, for example, have deep-rooted connections with those places and have worked intensively—musically and otherwise—with the primary culture-bearers who have also become their friends. Wider circles of singers in the West who have embraced songs from other parts of the world have become involved with social and humanitarian causes in those countries. Many of the stories I have told in these pages might, then, be better described—in Root’s terms—as stories of sharing and caring.

In singing songs from different parts of the globe, community choirs are also performing the way in which they wish to position themselves in relation to the rest of the world. For Village Harmony director Patty Cuyler, this can be an act

of cultural advocacy that, at the same time, enables listeners to experience music in a way that is revelatory:

> It has to be this channelling and a love, a respect for the music…that it's *not* about those notes. It's about finding that centre of understanding of what it is to be human, and the music is definitely a major voice from that essence of humanness that you need to find to live life properly, and choirs hunger for it.…If you can channel somebody else's [music] so that people feel that and are moved in a way that's almost, you know, almost orgasmic…they go "Woah! What happened?" [When] you get the chords just right and in the right mood, it's so different from reading a 1-4-5 on the paper then singing those notes.
>
> (Cuyler interview 2010)

For Mollie Stone, a conductor with the Chicago Children's Choir as well as a tutor in Village Harmony camps, the motivation is as much educational as musical: **(p.304)**

> I teach world music because I love it and because I think it's the best way to get kids interested in the politics of the world and I want to create global citizens through music, not just global musicians.…We need to be teaching our kids to care about and value other cultures and traditions and the *best* way I have found to do that is through music. So I feel like we have an obligation to teach this music and learn it as authentically [as possible] and be advocates for it as much as possible, because otherwise we're going to produce a generation of people who don't care about other cultures and traditions.
>
> (Stone interview 2010)

These perspectives resonate in interesting ways with Polina Shepherd's reflections on her motivation to teach songs from her native Russian and Jewish traditions to singers in Britain. For her, it is important that other cultures be treated with respect, but beyond that, the songs themselves are "just a tool":

> I don't mind things being slightly stylistically incorrect, if you wish, if you want to judge it from that perspective, because these are Russian and Jewish songs sung in Britain by people who are not native to these cultures. So this is how it is; this is reality. *I* don't need to judge it.…It's about sharing, it's about opening, it's about freedom, it's about expression, about energy.…And it's wonderful, it's great, because we live in the world —we communicate, we exchange, and I think…the more you learn and the further you go from your own culture, the more open [as a] human being you become, the more of a free-thinker you become.…This is probably the

> ultimate goal that I seek, you know, behind that singing….I think it’s about creating good energy in the world ultimately.
>
> (Shepherd interview 2011)

“People should stick to their own traditions”

The notion that people should stick to their own traditions is an obvious corollary to the notion that singing other people’s songs equates to theft or is otherwise suspect (with the caveat that such sensitivities do not necessarily extend to the Western classical canon). It may also relate to a concern about the decline of home-grown traditions and the ignorance of the general public about their own national heritage (a concern that has been shared by composers who were at the vanguard of nationalist movements in classical music). Some answers to the question of why amateur singers in the United Kingdom may not find English folk songs an especially attractive option have already been suggested. For some, this material is associated with the dull and dreary routine of school music lessons, or with the clichéd image of the finger-in-the-ear session singer, or with Ewan MacColl’s overly stringent insistence on authenticity. The discovery of African, Balkan, and other “foreign” material offered a way out of such impasses. The paucity of multipart songs was **(p.305)** another stumbling block and some turned to non-English repertoire in their search for songs with robust harmonies that seemed better to represent the ideal of community.

Questions might also be asked about the relevance of songs from Britain’s past to life in a society that has become not only more modern but also more multicultural. The songs themselves are often rooted in a particular locality and speak of a way of life associated with a particular historical period and class perspective. They cannot therefore be said to embody any kind of universal experience of what it means to be British. Singing songs from a distant part of the British Isles (with which the singer has no direct connection) about a way of life that existed a century ago (and for a relatively short time) is surely no more authentic, or relevant to life in contemporary Britain, than singing songs from, say, Bulgaria unless we define authenticity primarily in terms of language. David Oliver, speaking at a conference at Cecil Sharp House (“Out of This World: English Folk Song in the Community Choir Repertoire”, May 15, 2011), reflected that only a small minority of the members of his community choir in Hexham had been born in Northumberland. By singing the folk songs of the region, he suggested, those who have now adopted the area as their home can “learn what it is to be Northumbrian”. A similar argument has been made about how singing Bulgarian songs can teach us something of what it means to be Bulgarian. Yet one might well question the direct relevance of songs about drowned sailors and forthright fishwives amid a preponderance of tales of country folk who have never strayed far beyond the parish boundary to a generation inhabiting a world that, for the majority, has changed almost beyond recognition. These songs may serve an educational purpose by teaching us something about life as it once was,

or they may offer themselves as a focus for nostalgia. How far they can instil a sense of identity—and, more to the point, whether that identity is a desirable one—is surely debateable. It is also understandable that this identity from the past may appear even more foreign than the present-day identity of a more distant place whose inhabitants one has, in fact, met.

English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, and all manner of regional song traditions do, of course, occupy an important place in the national heritage. My point here is to challenge the argument that, as people who have been born or have chosen to live in present-day Britain, we should be confined to singing songs from Britain's past. Interestingly, though, just as their involvement in the English folk tradition led some singers to Bulgarian and other Eastern European folk traditions in the 1960s and 1970s, for others, a later fascination with music from other parts of the world inspired a renewed interest in their own heritage, together with the sense that they should have something of their own to show to or share with their overseas friends. In some ways this trend parallels a broader resurgence in the performance world, where English folk songs in particular have been recast as "our" contribution to world **(p.306)** music. In addition to material gleaned from close-harmony groups such as Coope Boyes and Simpson, many choir leaders now make their own arrangements of English, Welsh, Scottish, or Irish songs, sometimes also carrying out their own research into the songs from their immediate locality. On the CD *New Songs for Old*, for example, members of Sue Harris's choirs perform her arrangements of songs from the Welsh Border region, which she sourced from the National Library of Wales and Cecil Sharp House, together with new songs ("that gave a sense of place in the area") which her research inspired her to write (Harris interview 2009). Ali Burns has also worked extensively with archives of songs collected in the late nineteenth century and speaks of the pleasure she derives from the project of resuscitating songs that have lain dormant for more than a century. Especially popular with choirs across the country are the Forgotten Carols workshops she offers in the months leading up to Christmas.[1] She describes her method of taking traditional texts and either rewriting existing melodies or inventing new ones as "reconditioning songs". "I think it's all part of reinventing our culture," she says, "re-exploring our culture" (interview 2008).

The appearance of a rapidly growing body of new songs by NVPN members and others composed specifically for community choirs is of particular interest. The NVPN's collection *To Grace the Earth* bears witness to the vibrancy of this new song-writing culture, as does the number of songbook-and-CD sets produced by individual members. The notes that often accompany these songs point to two especially striking features. The first concerns the subject matter chosen for the lyrics. Here, alongside songs that may be seen to have a loosely national identity in terms of the themes they address and the landscape they evoke, we find a significant number inspired by events elsewhere in the world or embodying what may be described as global concerns (such as environmentalism or human

rights). The second point of note is the style of harmonisation: traditional choral-style arrangements take second place to a preference for polyphonic textures and some songs include voice parts and sections that can be combined in a variety of ways. Related to this is the frequency with which we find explanations of how the musical setting was influenced by exposure to rhythms and harmonies found in the music of other cultures. In some cases this was a deliberate choice. Helen Chadwick, for example, describes how she sometimes consciously incorporates patterns and procedures from other musical traditions into her work, explaining: “I just find some of the *forms* of traditional music so beautiful” (interview 2008). The songs that result may have English lyrics (often drawn from the work of Helen’s favourite poets) but in their musical structure or harmonic choices they may be evocative of Corsican or Georgian music, for instance. In other cases the influence was unconscious at the time and recognised only in retrospect. Pauline Down tells of how the song to which she gave the name “Om Shanti” came to her on a visit to Bali, where the ever-present sounds of the gamelan “undoubtedly **(p.307)** influenced the sounds and textures that appear in this little chant and the way that the simple melodic phrases are woven together” (note in *To Grace the Earth*, 2008: 35). For the song text, she adapted three traditional Balinese greetings and partings (giving one to each voice part). Some time after teaching the piece at a dance camp, she was surprised to discover it in a do-it-yourself songbook compiled by a camp participant under the title “Balinese Chant”. When a transcription of a setting she had made of the Hallelujah appeared in a similar camp songbook as “Caribbean Hallelujah”, she says, “it made me aware that I was obviously really influenced by African/Caribbean songs and sounds and the way things fitted—and certainly rhythms” (interview 2007).

What is pertinent here is not only the fact that exposure to a wider musical palette provides a songwriter with more options and that regular exposure to non-Western musical systems is likely to leave its mark. It is also significant that by incorporating musical features that are drawn from participatory traditions, the songs are, in a manner of speaking, predisposed to work well for community choirs. In considering whether there is something in the fabric of the music composed for community choirs that marries with the natural voice ethos, Pauline also points out that, since she has found inspiration in the sounds that already circulate in the natural voice world, the harmonies and rhythms she produces will to some extent appear familiar to the singers she is writing for. She reflects further: “I suspect that unconsciously I was coming up with stuff that had a sort of feel-good factor or was going to be accessible quite quickly—was going to be learnt by ear really easily” (interview 2007). All of this helps to explain the speed with which many of these new songs, and in some cases whole song cycles, such as Helen Chadwick’s *The Blazing Heart*, Ali Burns’s *The Raven*, and Kirsty Martin’s *Four Directions*, have found their way into the repertoires of community choirs across Britain and beyond.

For some, writing new songs is not only a way of boosting the body of repertoire that is suited to natural-voice-style choirs but also a way of replenishing the British tradition. This was central to Ali Burns's motivation as a songwriter and an arranger. "I really started writing," she explains, "as a way of exploring my own culture and trying to put songs back into our culture of singing." At the same time, there were different levels at which she drew on "world music traditions...where singing has traditionally been part of everyday life". Harmony again features here. One of the reasons she never pursued a music degree, she reflects, is that "I just didn't want to end up using those harmony rules. I was much more interested in breaking those rules and looking at the ways that harmony from oral cultures has been organised and designated" (interview 2008). Elsewhere she sums up her overall aim: "I want to recreate the richness of harmony that makes songs of oral traditions around the world so satisfying and joyful to sing but with words that root the work firmly back in my own culture" (http://aliburns.co.uk/what-i-do/, acc. June 15, 2013). In the short introduction to her collection *Always the Singing*, **(p.308)** she explains that many of the songs came to her while she was driving home after leading a workshop in a different part of the country. "This reinforces in my mind," she writes, "that it's the singers and the landscape of Britain that inspire me to write" (2008: 5). Kirsty Martin similarly speaks of being inspired by polyphonic traditions from elsewhere in the world, "but creating our own for the modern singer...we're writing these kind of modern folksongs" (interview 2008). Polly Bolton, herself a prolific songwriter, ventures:

> I'm sure that some of these songs, like Ali Burns' songs and Nick Prater's songs, will become part of the oral tradition in the way that folk music used to be—or already are, to a large extent....One likes to think that they will be sung for a great many years.
>
> (Bolton interview 2009)

If this is the case, then it means that future generations will no longer be faced with the paucity of multipart songs that has forced some to turn to more distant sources.

A Quiet Revolution

In turning the spotlight on the various themes and stances outlined above and contributing to their reframing, the natural voice movement and related endeavours have impact far beyond the field of music. Those who operate in the intersecting worlds of natural voice practice, community choirs, and world song may not articulate the full range and complexity of the underpinnings, potential, and implications of their work in the way that I have treated them here. They are, nonetheless, clearly part of a bigger picture and a more powerful tide. The writings of cultural theorists such as Barbara Ehrenreich, Robert Putnam, Ivan Illich, and Ulf Hannerz have helped us understand how these phenomena can be

be related to broader social visions and global trends and interpreted in the language of social anthropology, cultural studies, or political theory, for example. With specific reference to music, we have been able to situate these same phenomena as part of the kind of fundamental shift of consciousness called for or predicted by such scholars as John Blacking, Christopher Small, John Potter, and Nicholas Cook.

At one level, the kind of singing found in the world of community choirs and other open-access, singing-based activities is of cardinal significance in signalling a return to a "natural", universal, sociobiological norm: "If you can talk, you can sing." This back-to-basics impulse might also be identified in the more general bottom-up, do-it-yourself ethic espoused in natural voice and world song circles as part of the quest for an alternative in a society obsessed with consumption and the cult of the celebrity. This quest is taken a step further in the summer camp scenario and in visits to remote communities where **(p.309)** a different kind of spirit seems to linger, evocative, perhaps, of a simpler past or a more authentic way of being in world. At each stage of the journey, there is a stripping away of assumptions, conventions, and constraints. In its overall trajectory, the natural voice movement may also be seen to mirror the course typically taken by a revival movement. It has its pioneers or burning souls, its message, and a vision of social change that builds to some extent on values from an idealised past. The fashion for community choirs has itself, on occasion, been referred to as a revival in amateur singing. To view the impulses behind such developments as essentially retrospective, however, would be misleading. As in any social movement, the apparent reclamation of beliefs and practices that might be associated with notions of a lost past is balanced by an injection of new energy inspired by visions of the kind of future that might lie ahead—not simply as a utopian ideal but as an achievable reality. In this instance, the greatest inspiration has been drawn from living examples found by taking a sideways rather than a backwards step. What is especially interesting in the natural voice case is the way in which the processes of decentralisation and democratisation have married with a markedly ecumenical and cosmopolitan spirit to make manifest a world in which those so often excluded from the main theme of history—the dispossessed and the colonised—may emerge from the shadows and take their place, side by side, at the feast.

As a translocal and transnational phenomenon, the natural voice movement has been significantly aided by new technologies and modes of communication that have themselves undergone a process of democratisation. With its preference for face-to-face encounters and for the age-old practice of mouth-to-ear musical transmission, the movement operates at the same time in a cutting-edge digital world, where music, as well as messages, is carried on electromagnetic waves and stored in easy-to-access clouds. Interestingly, Helen Chadwick comments that the advent of email was crucial in enabling her to "take the leap" and bring together choirs from across the country for the London Sing for Water

extravaganza.[2] Now, a link in an email gives almost instant access to recordings of voice parts that a singer may learn (by ear) in advance of joining up with fellow members of a mass choir at this or other national events such as the Street Choirs Festival. Calls for help to the global community may result, in a matter of days, in the kind of multi-site manifestation that occurred when, in response to Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, groups of people across the world performed Georgian songs at the same moment, witnessed almost simultaneously by viewers in Georgia itself.

Having observed many aspects of the worlds I have written about in this book at close quarters and, on many occasions, as an active participant, it has been illuminating for me to take a step back and consider, through a different lens, the manner in which the UK natural voice network has evolved since being formalised in the mid-to-late 1990s. It has also been enlightening to try to untangle its multiple lines of descent from loosely knit pockets **(p.310)** of activity scattered across the musical, social, and political landscape of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Certainly, the movement has travelled a phenomenal distance since Frankie Armstrong "wore thin" A. L. Lloyd's *Folk Music of Bulgaria* LP and Joan Mills felt her ears "light up" at the sound of the Aka and Bulgarian voices that had reached her via the recordings of Simha Arom and Marcel Cellier. The network's current growth spurt—not only in terms of direct recruitment to the NVPN but also with regard to the greater visibility of community choirs and an apparent renaissance in vernacular song-writing—is in many ways timely. Combined with increasing media interest in the benefits of singing and the broader embrace of songs from diverse cultures, it suggests that the movement as a whole is poised to realise its potential as a powerful force in contemporary British life.

One of the most pertinent features of the natural voice trend is the extent to which the musical traditions of other cultures not only provide a colourful repertory but also inform the ideological, methodological, and ethical principles on which the movement is founded. World songs may not constitute the majority repertoire for all of the choirs now associated with the NVPN. They may, nonetheless, be seen as the lynchpin that continues to lend coherence to the enterprise. The founding philosophy of the NVPN was inextricably bound up with a turn to songs from outside the national or Anglo-American repertoire, and these songs from the world's oral traditions possessed intrinsic qualities that made them a suitable match for the organisation's social as well as musical goals. Thomas Turino, in his concluding thoughts about the emancipatory potential of participatory music, suggests:

> It is not playing the mbira or panpipes or banjo that makes the difference; it is the *whys* and *hows*, the values and practices underpinning alternative

> modes of performance that are important for devotees and “multicultural educators” to understand, experience, and teach.
>
> (Turino 2008: 227)

These *whys* and *hows*, and the new understandings to which they give rise, may then be carried over into the ways in which other kinds of music are approached and experienced.

In surprisingly similar terms, John Blacking, writing in 1973, expressed his conviction that “ethnomusicology has the power to create a revolution in the world of music and music education, if it follows the implications of its discoveries and develops as a method, and not merely an area, of study” (1973: 5). In this regard, ethnomusicology has long since realised its potential as an academic discipline. Under the guise of “applied ethnomusicology” and “ethnomusicology at home”, it has also taken steps to bring the revolution closer to home and into the streets. Those who are active as practitioners in the natural voice world are well equipped to play a complementary role that reaches into ever-more remote corners of local communities, while also **(p.311)** consolidating a national profile. Their activities may, until now, have remained largely under the radar, but at each stage of the meta-journey I have described there have been signs of a quiet revolution.

In the British context, this pivotal point in the natural voice journey is shared by the wider community music movement, which is likewise undergoing an intriguing act of repositioning itself vis-à-vis the mainstream. Arriving at this juncture has not been without its dilemmas. In a 2011 report produced under the auspices of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)’s Connected Communities initiative, George McKay and Ben Higham reflect on the “essential if sometimes uneasy relation” of community music to various publicly-funded schemes that have been put in place by the British government since the 1980s, related to reducing unemployment, fighting crime, supporting social inclusion, reducing anti-social behaviour, and encouraging health and wellbeing (McKay and Higham 2011: 8–9). The challenge facing the community music world has been to find a way of maintaining its independence from top-down strategies while also gaining the recognition and status it deserves and capitalising on new opportunities that enable more people to benefit. The radical, countercultural identity originally embraced by community music was such that, even twenty years ago, as David Price puts it in a 2010 article in *Sounding Board*, “most of us believed that working in formal education was tantamount to sleeping with the enemy” (2010: 12). A year earlier, Ben Higham (who founded Community Music East in 1985 and served as its director until 2009) had addressed the potential trauma of becoming mainstream, writing:

> The sacred walls of the alternative, revolutionary and community approach are creaking with opportunity and threat.…As we approach the limelight do we retain our revolutionary sheen? As we become increasingly involved in an outcomes-driven, contracting culture are we still delivering alternative experiences and services? Are we prepared to run income-earning businesses rather than purely grant-funded projects?
>
> (Higham 2009: 15)

The answer, he concluded, had to be yes. On the occasion of Sound Sense's twentieth anniversary in 2011, chair Catherine Pestano (also an NVPN member) would go on to write:

> We're no longer the outsiders, and a minority activity. We have gained recognition among a wide range of government departments, and ministers. We've helped to create new models of music education for young people, through our work on the Music Manifesto. Most importantly, I think we've done all that and much more with no loss of the core values that make a community musician: the sense of inclusion, the emphasis on creativity, and the key characteristic that community music tells a story: the story of the participants that make the music that we facilitate. (2011: n.p.)

(p.312)

For the NVPN, too, this balancing act is well within reach, and the future is ripe with opportunity.

A River of Music

We may now recall John Potter's prediction about where the significant future developments in singing were likely to come from: "I would hazard a guess that what we now call world music is the well-spring from which new forms of vocal expression will flow" (2000: 1). As world music continues to assert its presence in the mainstream, it brings with it different voices, different sounds and structures, different ways of thinking about music.

I end my own journey through this book back where I began: in London, on the banks of the River Thames. This time I am here for the BT River of Music festival, the cultural curtain raiser for the 2012 Olympic Games. Spread across six "iconic" sites along the Thames, this "spectacular global summit of rhythm and song" is billed as "arguably the most ambitious musical event ever staged in the capital" (http://www.btriverofmusic.com/, acc. June 22, 2012). As a researcher, I am doing business as usual: casing the joint, taking photographs, making notes, chatting with other festival goers, catching as many of the acts as I can, soaking up the atmosphere. As a singer, I am appearing on the Africa Stage in the newly opened London Pleasure Gardens as part of Beninese

superstar Angélique Kidjo’s backing choir, alongside other amateur singers from Manchester World Voices Choir. As we step our way through the syncopated harmonies of songs like “Agolo” and “Tumba” that have long been part of the soundtrack in my living room while Angélique, in her inimitable style, works an adoring crowd of thousands, it occurs to me that the tables have been well and truly turned—or more appropriately, perhaps, the table has become well and truly round.[3]

Alfred Wolfsohn’s unchained “voice of the future” continues to resonate and, as the kaleidoscope turns, positions shift and new constellations become possible. The voice of the future is also multicoloured and multivalent. It sings of many things, in many registers, and in many tongues. It reminds us that we live in a rich, vibrant, and diverse world. It reminds us of who we are—not only where we have come from but also who we want to be. It reminds us that we can converse across the language divide. And more than that: as a WaterAid volunteer put it in a short trailer made for Sing for Water 2008, “We can’t all talk at the same time, but we *can* all sing at the same time.”[4]

Several community choirs have adopted the creed of the Woodcraft Folk (popularly, if problematically, attributed to William Morris):

> This shall be for a bond between us: that we are of one blood you and I; that we have cried peace to all and claimed kinship with every living thing; that we hate **(p.313)** war, sloth, and greed, and love fellowship; and that we shall go singing to the fashioning of a new world.

If a new world is to be fashioned, then all should have a place in it. If we are to be part of a “big society”, then everyone should be invited to the party. If singing helps to get us there, so much the better.

Notes:

(1.) Some of this material can be found in the collection *Raining Bliss and Benison*.

(2.) Helen refers in particular to the way in which email allowed her to “contact several friends around the country who run choirs with great ease and all at once. I would not have done it if it involved phoning or typing individual letters” (pers. comm. December 11, 2011).

(3.) Our London appearance followed an earlier performance at Manchester’s Royal Northern College of Music, which was documented in a short film produced by Band on the Wall. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qsVvP8DGPE, acc. June 15, 2013.

(4.) See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BEolWXnGKVo, acc. June 15, 2013.