



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

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Introduction

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Abstract and Keywords

The introduction briefly introduces the new choral culture that the book sets out to investigate. It outlines the background to the study with reference to the author's personal and professional experience. It explains the research methodology, situating the book as an ethnography based on long-term, multi-locale fieldwork. It further contextualises the work in relation to current concerns in ethnomusicology, cultural studies, and community music. It concludes with chapter synopses.

Keywords: choral culture, research methodology, ethnography, multi-locale fieldwork, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, community music

This book is the result of my investigations into a new choral culture that sits at the intersection of two contemporary developments, neither of which has yet been the subject of a full-length critical study. The first is the natural voice movement, associated in the United Kingdom with a thriving network of open-access community choirs, weekend singing workshops, and summer camps. The second is a growing transnational network of amateur singers who participate in multicultural music activity by performing songs from “other” cultures, often travelling to the music's place of origin to learn directly from singers there. In seeking to locate the roots of these phenomena and to explicate the connections between them, this book uncovers the history of a grassroots scene that has been gathering force since the 1970s, with disparate, largely informal, and to some extent countercultural pathways gradually crystallising into a set of more clearly defined networks and initiatives. These have, to varying degrees, established themselves on a firmer footing as part of a culture that has moved

closer to the mainstream and now enjoys a more visible public presence. While the natural voice community in the United Kingdom, centred around the Natural Voice Practitioners' Network, serves as my principal focus, connections are made with cognate developments elsewhere in the world (most notably in North America and Australia) and with nexuses of local practice in some of the places where more discrete partnerships have been developed (e.g. in South Africa and the Republic of Georgia).

At the heart of the threads I have sought to unravel is the overriding question of how and why songs from non-Western and folk traditions have provided the lynchpin for the natural voice movement. Aspects of the multifaceted answer to this question are woven throughout my analysis. My inquiries have also yielded interesting and sometimes unexpected perspectives relating to the democratisation of the voice, the politics of participation, the liberatory dimensions of harmony singing, the transformative power of **(p.2)** performance, and the potential of music making to sustain community and to contribute to intercultural understanding. At a theoretical level, I engage with topical concerns in ethnomusicology and cultural studies by addressing questions of musical style, identity, and reciprocity in the postcolonial world, offering insights into contemporary cultural processes in which sociopolitical dynamics and musical aesthetics intersect in intriguing ways, and revealing a nuanced web of intersections between the local and global where agency lies with individuals rather than markets. Simultaneously, I offer the book as a contribution to the comparatively sparse scholarly literature in the field of community music. In a recent report compiled for the Arts and Humanities Research Council, George McKay and Ben Higham (2011) identified a dearth of analytical and theoretical work in this field and noted a need for more research into the history and repertoire practice of community music—including authoritative critical overviews and alternative readings—and into relations between community music and cognate practices. In furnishing a full-length ethnography that seeks to marry principles and practice with theoretical insights and interpretations derived from different disciplinary perspectives, as well as to map out a series of intersecting pathways and cross-influences, I hope I have helped to fill this gap. With specific reference to community choirs, Cindy Bell, on the basis of her preliminary investigations in the United States, deduced that “non-auditioned choral groups are prevalent in many churches, but only occasionally found in the community”, noting that listings carried on the Vocal Area Network website included only “a handful” of choirs that did not require an audition. This prompted her to ask: “Are there other choirs like these...that operate ‘under the radar’? What kind of choirs are they? Who directs them, and what is their repertoire? More importantly, how does a non-auditioned choir sound?” (Bell 2008: 233–234). Again, I hope that this book goes some considerable way to providing answers.

It has been intriguing over the course of my research to see a growing interest in the benefits of singing coming from many different quarters, with the emphasis being placed variously on the potential of singing and of choirs to improve individual health and wellbeing, to build social capital and connect communities, and to celebrate diversity. In some cases these interests are linked with government policies and new national agendas. Whether or not we subscribe to the notion of a “Big Society” with its rhetoric of devolving more power to the people (as promoted by British Prime Minister David Cameron), the natural voice movement, alongside other community music initiatives, would seem to have an important role to play in empowering both individuals and communities.

Like many books, this one has emerged from several strands of interest and activity that have threaded through my own personal and professional life. While not wishing to indulge in unnecessary domestic detail, I should arm the reader with at least a few of the facts that inform my positioning in relation **(p.3)** to the material. I grew up in Wales, which, as everyone knew, was “the land of song”, and so (naturally) we sang. We sang at home, at school, in church, at Girl Guide camp, and at the eisteddfod. Sometimes we sang in competitions but mostly we sang because that’s what you did if you were Welsh (even if, like me, you grew up in a part of Wales that was predominantly English-speaking). While I was still at junior school, my hometown of Flint played host to the National Eisteddfod, and it was there that I first experienced the thrill of singing in a mass choir (in Welsh, of course). We also went on school trips to the International Eisteddfod at nearby Llangollen, where I soaked in the colours and sounds of visiting choirs from around the world. At high school, we were lucky to have a music teacher with boundless energy and vision, who set about establishing not one choir but several (including a folk choir) and who introduced us to repertoire in many different styles and languages.

I was always drawn to songs from distant places, in part because they conjured up pictures of other people in other landscapes, and these were the landscapes I inhabited in my imagination. At a sensory level, I revelled in the different timbres and harmonies, the feel of different languages in my ear and mouth. At an international Boy Scout and Girl Guide camp I attended as a teenager, I spent happy hours exchanging songs with a group of Finnish girls. Only later in life did I realise that I could not, in fact, translate every word of the Welsh folk songs that I sang and traded at that time. There were words I loved—words that made me feel a certain way, words that represented something profound, words that were archived deep in the fibres of my being—but my relationship to them was not, it turned out, tied to their literal, lexical meaning. Perhaps it is because I grew up in this not-quite-bilingual world that singing songs in languages other than my mother tongue did not seem at all unusual. Only much later did it strike me as in any way questionable, and ultimately it was my desire to know more about where the different songs that ended up in my personal repertoire came

from and what they “meant”, in a more holistic sense, that led me to a career in ethnomusicology.

When I encountered the circle dance scene in the 1980s, I quickly became involved in the musical side of things, tracking down the words to the Balkan songs that formed the core of the dance tunes circulating at that time, and teaching them to a group of friends, initially as part of the project of providing live music for dancing. This endeavour was to be augmented by a series of Bulgarian song and dance workshops that I attended in Bristol, including a weekend led by members of the Bistritsa Grandmothers. Early on in this stage of my journey I also attended a performance at Theatr Clwyd of a show called *The Woman of Thirteen Shirts* by Pauper’s Carnival, featuring Vanya Constant, Claire Hughes, and Helen Chadwick. The piece was constructed around the stories attached to thirteen shirts, gleaned from women in different parts of the world; these stories were told with the help of a powerful set of songs, sung *a cappella* in styles that also evoked the places from which the stories **(p.4)** (and shirts) came. It was one of those moments when a light turns on and your heart wakes up. Hungry for more, I began to frequent international voice and theatre festivals that offered the opportunity not only to observe performances but also to participate in workshops with the artists. Of particular appeal were the intensive voice workshops, usually spread over several days, that were offered by the Centre for Performance Research and Magdalena Project in Wales and Cirque Divers in Belgium, and it was at these events that I had my first taste of singing Corsican and Georgian songs, for example. By this time I had progressed to leading workshops of my own, as well as coordinating scratch choirs at summer camps. Under the auspices of adult education programmes in my home area, I also ran evening classes with titles like “Sing Out!” and “Songs from Far and Near”.

This was all before the days of the Natural Voice Practitioners’ Network (NVPN). By the time the NVPN was launched, I had taken a step sideways, returning to academia (in 1993) to pursue a doctor of philosophy degree in ethnomusicology and moving for a while to Corsica, the focus of my fieldwork. I was not, therefore, directly involved in the development of the organisation, even though after completing my PhD and being engaged as a lecturer at Bangor University, I continued to run occasional workshops and, with Pauline Down, established a community choir that was hosted by the university and was loosely related to my ethnomusicology teaching. As I emerged from more than a decade of preoccupation with Corsican music that culminated in my book *Transported by Song* (2007), it suddenly struck me that the decidedly niche world I’d been part of in the 1980s had evolved almost beyond recognition. Not only had the singing branch of this world consolidated its identity with the establishment of the NVPN: natural-voice-related activity had snowballed and community choirs, it seemed, had moved into an entirely different league. My academic interests, meanwhile, had led me to explore multipart singing traditions from many

different parts of the world and to consider, from an insider perspective, the social, psychological, and political dimensions of collective singing. I now began to think about how the natural voice approach and the world song impulse fit together. I also realised that I was already in possession of a wealth of materials and contacts that could form the foundation for a new research project—and so this book began to take shape.

Together, the identities and experiences I had accumulated—as insider and outsider, practitioner and academic, advocate and critic—furnished me with the histories, understandings, and questions that underpin this study. The environment in which I grew up fed an enduring fascination with matters of singing and identity, on the one hand, and of language and meaning, on the other. My ethnomusicological training, together with earlier forays into social anthropology and linguistics, provided me with the theoretical and methodological foundations for analysing multipart singing traditions and articulating their significance for both home and adoptive communities. My **(p. 5)** grounding, both practical and theoretical, in the voluntary arts allowed me to fine-tune my interest in matters of democratisation, empowerment, community building, health and wellbeing, and cultural diversity.

This book, then, takes the form of an ethnography based on long-term, multi-locale fieldwork. I should note that my methodology differs in fundamental ways from that typically adopted by music psychologists, whose investigations into the health benefits of singing, for example, have often involved comparatively short-term projects designed according to the scientific method. With its essentially empirical approach and concern for measurable evidence, the emphasis in such work is on the systematic collection of data (often under laboratory conditions) that may then be analysed and quantified using standardised, validated measures. Results are typically reported in terms of project design, methodology, and statistical analysis, with reference to sample sizes, control groups, standardised scores, significant correlations, and statistical significance. The manner in which the investigation proceeded (including the precise methods by which subjects were selected and experiments conducted) is described in a way that allows the investigation to be replicated by other researchers, who may thereby either validate or dispute the findings. If qualitative material derived from interviews is included, then this, too, is usually subjected to content analysis (using, for example, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis), leading to the kinds of results that may again be conveyed using graphs and tables or described in term of percentages, in parallel with direct quotation.¹

My own approach is complementary in being situated firmly within the ethnographic tradition of my home discipline of ethnomusicology (itself closely allied with anthropology). Pride of place, in contemporary ethnography, is given to qualitative data, with a particular interest in the subjective, the experiential, and the insider viewpoint, and with the researcher positioned as alert

participant more than detached observer. The resulting text is expected to convey new perspectives and original insights derived from the material, together with interpretations informed by relevant theoretical work. It may also include substantial passages of something akin to what Clifford Geertz (borrowing from Gilbert Ryle) termed “thick description”—a detailed, multi-layered, quasi-novelistic picture-in-words that, in paying attention to the context in which the action takes place, conveys to the reader the experience of “being there” while also pointing to possible “meanings” of the events described. If we concede that culture is to be found, as Geertz proposed, in the webs of significance that we (humankind) spin around ourselves, then its analysis is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning” (1993: 5). This, essentially, is the nature of my quest.

Throughout my text, then, theoretical discourse and critical analysis is interwoven with thick descriptions of practice, case studies, and quotation **(p.6)** from personal interviews. My field is not a single village or even a single country. My subjects are an identifiable community of people, involved in a particular musical culture, but they are spread across a wide catchment area and many are themselves highly mobile within this terrain. They gather, however, around a set of core principles and practices, events and activities, organisations and locations. My task has been to accompany them as they go about their business in the field thereby defined. My primary data is derived from participant-observation at choir rehearsals, performances, workshops, camps, overseas tours, festivals, and symposia, supplemented by extensive and in-depth surveying—via semi-structured, narrative interviews and questionnaires—of voice teachers, choir and workshop leaders, camp and festival organisers, project leaders, and general participants. Events such as the NVPN annual gathering and the Unicorn Natural Voice Camp provided me with the opportunity to carry out multiple interviews with people from different parts of the British Isles. Village Harmony camps in Georgia, Bosnia, and Corsica, like the Giving Voice festivals I attended in Wales and Poland, allowed me to extend my inquiries to participants from other parts of the world. I also made visits of three-to-four days’ duration to select parts of the United Kingdom, where I visited weekly choir sessions as a participant-observer, conducted interviews with choir leaders, and spoke with choir members. In a variety of locations I took part in a series of residential workshops that had a more specialised focus, such as Georgian singing or song-writing, together with mass choir gatherings and festivals such as the National Street Choirs Festival and the national Sing for Water event in London. Finally, I attended conferences and symposia on singing-related themes, including the Phenomenon of Singing International Symposium in Newfoundland, the International Symposium on Traditional Polyphony in Georgia, a SEMPRES conference (Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research) on the theme of music, health, and wellbeing hosted by the Sidney De Haan Research Centre at Canterbury University, and two one-day conferences

on English folk song and community choirs at Cecil Sharp House in London. Audiovisual illustrations relating to some of these events can be found on the book's companion website.

This brief preamble should have provided a sufficient overall context for the chapters that follow. Chapter 1 takes the form of an extended introduction both to the book's immediate subject matter and to the theoretical perspectives that drive my analysis. I begin by identifying the communities and practices that are that my main focus. I then map out the broader fields within which the histories and practices I describe are positioned, and I familiarise the reader with a set of key concepts and themes that inform my interpretations throughout the book. Reference is made here to pertinent theoretical work in ethnomusicology, social anthropology, political science, and cultural and social theory. **(p.7)**

From chapter 2, the book's organisation may be conceived as a series of concentric circles via which the reader is led to an ever-deepening appreciation of the multifaceted ways in which world songs act as the lynchpin for the natural voice movement. At the centre is the concept of the natural voice, around which is gathered a group of practitioners who exemplify diverse musical and professional backgrounds but are united in their adherence to a set of fundamental principles. In chapter 2, then, I set out to unpack the notion of the "natural voice", aided by an examination of the UK-based NVPN (with particular reference to its statement of philosophy and working principles) and an international body of practice brought together under the umbrella of the Giving Voice festival, an initiative of the Centre for Performance Research (which is based in Wales but works with partners worldwide). I also introduce the English folksinger Frankie Armstrong, the main inspiration and driving force behind the NVPN. Chapter 3 explores the singing journeys that have led individual practitioners to the natural voice fold, beginning with the different experiences and insights that have fed into Frankie's distinctive brand of voice work. With further reference to the musical and professional backgrounds of a representative selection of other practitioners based in the United Kingdom, I show how the movement has incorporated perspectives and values from a variety of musical worlds while also being influenced by the sociopolitical currents with which some of its more established members were associated in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, we make brief forays into the worlds of folk revival, experimental theatre, community music, social work, the women's movement, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, circle dance, summer camps, and alternative therapies.

The next circle features repertoire choices and related issues—ranging from styles of teaching and learning to case studies detailing the ways in which particular musical repertoires have travelled. These are considered in a set of three chapters, in which my perspective moves from the general to the specific. Chapter 4 begins by showing how the principles embraced by the NVPN

translate into practice. First, I examine the function and rationale of the kind of warm-up sequence that typically opens a choir session or workshop. I continue my analysis of methodology by considering the process of teaching and learning by ear, primarily in terms of practicalities. I then go on to explore the match between the natural voice ethos and songs from the world's oral traditions, together with a summary of the kinds of resources available to community choir leaders. In the final part of the chapter, I offer a more theoretical consideration of the politics of participation. In chapter 5, I pursue in greater depth my investigations into the place of world song in natural voice and community choir circles. I seek to explain why these songs-from-elsewhere play such a prominent part in the repertoire and how they help the movement achieve its broader aims. Drawing on interview and questionnaire responses from choir members as well as voice practitioners, I examine the different **(p.8)** orders of attraction associated with songs of varied provenance and the meanings that may be attributed to them in their new environment. Turning to questions of language, I devote the second half of the chapter to an examination of the politics of unintelligibility. Chapter 6 continues this focus on songs from elsewhere through case studies of bodies of repertoire that have proven especially popular: gospel songs, songs from different parts of Africa (in particular, South Africa and the equatorial forest region of central Africa), songs from the Balkans, and Georgian songs. I argue that these more detailed stories of how music travels and how music accomplishes its work invite us to reconsider questions of authenticity, appropriation, and ownership while also attending to the dialogic and transformative potential of intercultural performance.

In the next circle are the singers who perform this repertoire and the contexts—mainly local but also regional and national—in which such performances take place. In Chapter 7, then, I turn to 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 generic considerations of the ways in which singing may be construed in relation to health, happiness, and wellbeing. Particular attention is paid to notions of community and to the ways in which personal rewards intersect with social impact. This part of my discussion includes short, contrasting case studies of Bangor Community Choir (in North Wales) and the London Georgian choir Maspindzeli. I also explore further the dynamics of performance and offer 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-based Good Vibrations choir and its engagement with asylum-seekers at Oakington Immigration Reception Centre.

The final circle extends to the international plane, featuring far-flung destinations to which many singers find their way and from where many of the songs originate. Chapter 8 continues the theme of community but this time in relation to the notion of the global village. The main body of the chapter is

devoted to case studies of the Unicorn Natural Voice Camp (held in the South of England) and the overseas singing tours offered by the organisation Village Harmony (with particular reference to Corsica, Bosnia, and Georgia). My analysis of the latter is framed in part by perspectives derived from the critical literature on travel and tourism. Alongside exploring the dynamics of “being there” for tour participants, I attend to the symbolic meanings that may be attached to their presence by the host community. Turning back from this vantage point to face the centre, the reader is able to appreciate the ways in which national and transnational networks contribute to the sustainability of local communities, and vice versa. I end the chapter by revisiting questions of identity in the contemporary world, together with ideas about how the **(p.9)** performing arts, and more particularly music, offer themselves as a prime site for experimenting with new ways of being.

Finally, chapter 9 takes the form of an extended conclusion in which I draw together the various threads that have been woven through the book. First, I review 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. I then elaborate on the ways in which certain fallacies, misconceptions, and assumptions have been challenged or reframed in the worlds we have entered in the course of our journey. I end by reflecting on the broad impact of the trends and initiatives I have described and their potential to contribute to a substantial reconfiguring of ideas about vocal identity and musical sounds, values, and meanings.

Notes:

(1.) For examples of this approach, see articles in *Psychology of Music*, the journal of the Society for Education, Music and Psychology Research.

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