

President's Page Update - Dec 2018

I send you all warm wishes now winter is here, and look forward to seeing those of you who are coming to the Annual Gathering.

I'm aware that in my last President's page update, I focused on the value of our Regional Group here in South Wales and this time I'm going to recount the impact of the NVN in just one week towards the end of last month here in Cardiff. It struck me as a fine example of how much variety and richness this Network brings into my life.

The first involvement was a project for an event to mark the 80th year since the Wales Temple of Peace was opened here in Cardiff. Helen Chadwick had been invited to create some of the songs. She wasn't able to be present at the final event; however a community singing group was formed and Laura Bradshaw prepared the singers for the event. I joined the group on the Sunday morning to run a session on voice preparation and awareness. It was great fun and the feedback has resulted in my running a day in early February, developing more explorative ways of warming up body and voice and playing with a range of vocal qualities and styles.

The following Wednesday afternoon the trio Bread and Roses that is made up of Laura, Pauline Down and myself had a rehearsal and then went onto a wonderful hour and a half workshop run by Helen Chadwick. This was followed by a performance of her extraordinary musical theatre piece "Truth".

On the Thursday evening I sang at a gathering at the Temple of Peace arranged by Wales Women for Peace. I sang a new song I have written to honour both the 1924 Wales-wide petition for peace and the women who set off on the walk to Greenham from Cardiff 37 years ago, which resulted in the 19 year Peace camp. Having talked with some of the stimulating and knowledgeable women I met that evening, we held a meeting the next day to look at how, as community artists, we could spread the astonishing story of how over 380,000 signatures were collected from women in Wales. These were sent to Washington to join a massive women's petition pleading for an end to wars and for collaboration between nations. The astonishing thing is that hardly anyone has heard of this inspiring historical event. If our hoped-for plans develop, we will be able to call on all the skills of our large NVN numbers to involve singing, song writing, storytelling and drama throughout Wales. I was very proud to tell the other women of our countrywide Network.

At the end of our meeting we all went to hear the event at the Temple of Peace. The choir with Laura leading was such a powerful and beautiful element.

And this wasn't the last exciting event - far from it. Pauline had invited Caroline Bithell to Cardiff on the Sunday, to give us NVNers a day telling of her travels as an ethnomusicologist. She wove together personal stories along with scholarly information about the context and musical form of the examples she played for us. Some of us have known Caroline and her work for many years, but this was an introduction for some of the more recent members. She played us some of her recordings of the glorious sounds and vocal qualities, especially from Corsica, Georgia and Albania.

I was lucky enough to hear many styles of music from around the world back in the 60s and 70s and my main influences have been from ethnic styles of singing, both from these islands and around the world. Hence I was glad to hear her confirming my "beliefs" that we can get too hung up on sounding "nice" and lose that wild, open, improvisational aspect of most folk cultures. This allows me to get on my high horse again about why I, like Caroline, don't think the fixed Western notion of "soprano, alto, tenor, bass " is helpful in our work. These are very recent categories and tend to have participants' self-identify as one or the other and hence we don't experiment with all the possibilities we each have in relation to our vocal range and variety of expression and timbres.

Having started singing in public when I was 16, professionally when I was 23 and starting workshops when 34, I sometimes surprise myself at how thrilled and excited I still get when teaching or performing, given I'll be 78 soon. If I wasn't always experimenting and finding out what my voice can do and how and why, I'm not sure I would still be so excited about the process. I suppose I'm trying to encourage more experimentation and freedom in how we interpret singing - maybe I prefer the term vocal melodic expression - which leaves the emphasis more on the discovering process and less on any product.

I'll be very happy to chat further either in person or via email if any of you have strong feelings about what I've had to say.

With very best wishes,
Frankie