

President's update – 17th June 2019

Firstly I'd like to thank our Chair Jules Gibb for such a heartwarming letter in last week's newsletter. As somebody who has witnessed the growth of the Network from its very beginnings, I'm aware of how much energy, work and yes, love has gone in over the years to make the Network into the vibrant, active organisation that we are today. And yes, it was all done by "volunteers". The people who I know put in an enormous amount of their time and skills to make us a viable set-up are too numerous to name, but I would like to mention a few because some members will not know their names.

It was Colin Harrison (who has since changed direction - though still in parallel) who set up our first website, in the early days of websites, and it was Colin along with a dedicated group of helpers who organised our first big fundraiser. This was in November 2000 and we made £4,260 over the weekend, hence we had to set up a bank account! This made it possible to employ a part-time administrator and set up our constitutional status. I still recall it as a thrilling event with wonderful workshops and "concerts" - Rowena Whitehead, Jenny Goodman, Nick Petts, Ali Burns and many more ran events, and it was our introduction to Dessislava Stefanova who now runs the London Bulgarian Choir. I'd just like to back Jules' sentiments up with a thanks to those, both past and present, who give/gave of their time and extraordinary range of abilities to make the Network what it is today.

I'd also like to reiterate the request for us all to re-read the Code of Practice - it contains clearly our ethos and hence the nature of our practice and the inclusivity at its core. It's well worth re-reading even for those of us who were the initiators.

I would like to tell a salutary story I heard recently. A singing group had been formed especially for older people who believed they couldn't sing. It ran well for over a decade until the leader moved away. The new leader started off by saying, "You're going to be the first pitch-perfect community choir." A year later the leader was asked to leave - they had stopped enjoying what they were doing and their numbers were dwindling.

Over my 44 years of running workshops and 31 years of running training courses I've had many a discussion and debate around that word "excellence". Surely there are different kinds of excellence depending on different criteria. Of course I'd hold different criteria for Bach's St Mathew Passion than for a community choir singing for the sheer pleasure of doing so, BUT at one level I'd hold them to the same account, the wish to feel I'm being communicated to with passion and meaning. I've certainly been to classical concerts where every note is in pitch and the right order but it's lacking that desire to communicate through one of the most magical forms of expression - shared song. So back to the point of my salutary tale - a community choir may not have every note perfect, but any time I hear one of the local choirs, as I did a couple

of weeks ago, I'm moved by the sense of the sharing with each other and the communal sharing with us the audience. Surely this is excellence.

I'd also like to share an extract from the citation when I was awarded the Gold Badge from the English Folk Dance and Society in 2018 that appears in their Journal, given by Shan and Martin Graebe; Shan is a speech and language therapist as well as a singer and voice teacher:

"Her unshakeable conviction that singing is for everyone has subsequently underpinned all aspects of her practice. She became one of the founders, and the President, of the Natural Voice Network, an organisation that embraces the belief that singing is not an exclusive activity reserved for those who see themselves as singers, but is fully inclusive, whatever people's previous experience has been. The ubiquity of community choirs as well as other communal music making, where people find acceptance, a sense of belonging and sheer joy in singing, is testament to the pioneering work of Frankie and her colleagues. A very strong strand in Frankie's teaching is the strong connection between body, breath and voice. In her workshops where her partner Darien Pritchard is often a fellow teacher, people learn to use their bodies and their voices safely and freely. A mention must be made of Frankie's hoeing (now hay making) swinging and moving rhythmically while she leads a call and response sequence of vocal sounds - a perfect example of the fun, coupled with good technique, that Frankie had brought to thousands of people throughout her life."

- Frankie Armstrong