

ZOOM - TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE!

Update from NVN President Frankie Armstrong, 8th June 2020

Monday April 13th - My first Zoom. I have to confess I hadn't heard of Zoom till the week before when my partner Darien decided he'd have to find out how to get it happening. So there I was, participating in my dear friend and NVN Trustee, Laura Bradshaw's session for her refugee choir, usually held at the Oasis Centre down the road. The next evening we hosted our first Zoom singing evening (we have held a monthly Acoustic Music evening here in Cardiff, for 12 years), so this was largely our musician friends and local audience with a few friends from other places. I thoroughly enjoyed both experiences. Until then, in self-isolation, all my communications had been on the phone - my usual method of staying in touch with friends and colleagues.

When I told friends of my experience of Zoom they were fascinated. Those first times, I had a distinct sense of being with my Zooming companions in the same space. I sensed us to be in the Oasis Centre with Laura on Monday, and having everyone sitting with us in our living room on the Tuesday evening session. It felt very strange when everyone just disappeared - blank - rather than having tea and cakes, and then letting them out of the house. Of course in my head I knew where we all were, in our own homes, but in my heart and imaginary vision we were transported.

Anyone reading this may not know that I am what is now officially called a VIP - a Visually Impaired Person. I've been registered blind since the early 1970s. So, during my 45 years as a workshop leader, I have never been able to see the faces of the participants. On the computer screen, I could only see flickering movement so I very soon stopped even trying to watch; hence nothing was massively different from how I experience the world anyway - largely through my hearing.

Then, over the next weeks, in conversation with many choir-leading friends, the word "exhausting" kept coming up in relation to Zoom. In part this was due to all the additional sending out of song parts, guide tracks and info, and the additional pressure of hosting a Zoom event. But then I heard of how tiring it was trying to watch participants' faces and judge what was going on.

Then a number of articles and radio programmes started talking about how tiring people were finding Zooming. Research has shown that it is difficult when you can only see faces, as this doesn't give us accurate information - we can mask faces very well and have habitual habits we're not aware of, so sighted zoomers have a challenge.

It became clear to me that they are facing a process that I went through during the 1960s as I lost my ability to see faces, especially when facing an audience when I sang in folk clubs or concerts. At that time, I developed some vocal strain and was referred to a speech therapist. She was a revelation: "Frankie, I understand why you give out so much - it's an invitation for your listener/s to respond in an equally animated fashion. However, you're speaking too loud for my little office. Both here and when you're performing, you're obviously trying too hard because you can no longer see the visual cues to give you feedback about my/the audience's responses. And this is going to be tiring."

Over the decades of my teaching, I've realised that in some situations a lack of sight can be an advantage. Darien and I have zoomed with several singing-teacher friends and it was clear that the temptation is to lean forward and hunch over slightly, attempting to read faces for feedback (especially if you've got a large group), combined with a tendency to "try too hard". This can often involve some jaw tension. Darien also noted that people are often less physically active than in the "normal" shared settings of workshops or choir gatherings. All of these elements can contribute to the sense of vocal strain. In addition, the self-consciousness of seeing yourself on screen/putting on a good front can also be a tiring distraction.

I know that allowing yourself to trust that people are receiving you well enough isn't that easy. Purposefully relaxing your eyes may help, combined with softening your forehead, eyebrows, cheeks and jaw, all of which help to release and relax the throat. And I think that if you can keep focusing internally on yourself, the ground, the breath, the pleasure in feeling your vibrations, and your belief and trust in the energy and power inherent in singing, it may help to reduce the tiring aspects of Zoom.