

President's Update - December 2017

Developing good practice

What can "developing good practice" involve for NVN teachers? I want to look at some central elements of the NVN ethos, and what's distinctive about our approach. I want to offer some thoughts about the implications of our ethos in teaching, and outline some of the relevant skills that I think voice leaders need to develop to deliver these. These skills can be addressed through mentoring and CPD, via the community of practice.

Further skills

Further helpful skills, some of which focus on teaching and leading groups and some on our own development, are:

- engaging people at whatever level of musical knowledge and skill they have, by making our language and the sequence of teaching inclusive, regardless of differences in experience, ability, disability, age or confidence;
- understanding the barriers that people have to using their voices freely, and finding methods of helping people to overcome these barriers;
- communication skills, including understanding that people learn differently;
- awareness of group dynamics and processes, including developing skills to deal with challenging situations, and having a willingness to be flexible and, if need be, to change our plans or pre-conceptions;
- developing one's own voice as an instrument for both speaking and singing and learning how to keep our instrument healthy, tuned up, flexible, open and enjoyable.

Within the NVN we have a wealth of experience, expertise and knowledge to offer professional development on these aspects. There are also many other opportunities, including summer schools and conferences such as [Giving Voice](#) and [VASTA international conference](#). I am therefore hopeful that we can all further develop our knowledge and skills to enhance the quality of the work of NVN teachers.

The Future of NVN

The structures of NVN came about when the organisation was much smaller and more homogenous. We need changes to meet the challenge of having grown massively over the past decade. Many of us are concerned to ensure the quality of the work of our members, finding appropriate levels of CPD for the range of members, finding ways of increasing the input from members to the Trustees and of opening up a discussion about who we are, and how we see the future developing.

I feel we need as many of you as possible contributing your thoughts. I'm sure I'll be musing further on these questions while hoping that we hold strongly to our approach and ethos.

Some thoughts prompted by conversations with co-trainer Sarah Harman, as a stimulus for further discussion within the Network:

I'd also like to remind NVN members about the importance of the book by our trustee member Caroline Bithell, "A Different Voice, A Different Song". I'd suggest that this is essential reading for anyone interested in the development of the Network and community music and also for the stimulating academic chapters on approaching songs of diverse cultures. I have no academic or any other formal training in music, but I found Caroline's approach accessible and thought-provoking. At present in the Network we are

emphasising both our ethos and the value of CPD. Caroline's book seems to me to provide the fullest route to the root of both the Network and the what, why and how of song.

Thoughts on reasons for using either invented languages or songs from other cultures to help free the voice and to challenge old habits:

In our groups or choirs it is relatively rare to find people who are confident and comfortable with their singing voices. Depending on the nature of their previous experience, this may or may not mean that they have vocal range, expressive range and flexibility. This results in many participants having quite restricted or non-existent experience with finding out what their voice is capable of - all the possible different timbres, forms of expression and cultural variation. We can use exercises, improvisations, chants and songs to help free the voice and undo old restrictive patterns.

In my first workshop ever in 1975, I taught Balkan songs and found that, with suitable preparation, the group could get something of the strong, earthy, resonant sound appropriate for those songs. The following week I thought a good follow-up would be a Wassail song in English that would have been sung outdoors. To my surprise, the strong sound many had achieved at the first workshop was now much thinner and would not have carried any distance. I realised that most people, especially the women (who were the majority), had slipped back into a thin "schoolgirl" quality of sound. However, once I coached them to sing the tune with the Balkan sound using the sound "hey", the sound emerged with much more strength. Then I added English vowels for them to copy and lastly the words. The sound improved immeasurably.

This led me to creating my "trademark" - making up languages and using call-and-response along with rhythmic movement which simulated work actions - hay making, hoeing, grape treading. It was also clear that using songs from a variety of cultures helped in this process - which helped vocal release and varieties of timbre and expression. It can be exciting feeling how varied languages, differing from the "native tongue" that we're used to, create new resonances and physical sensations. After all, the voice is a very sensual part of ourselves and, when used freely, it gives us the buzz of energy and aliveness that is a large part of the joy of singing.