

Update from NVN President Frankie Armstrong, October 2020

The first thing that I want to say is to hope you are all keeping safe and well, and finding some way of keeping singing and hence keeping your spirits up, even if it's on the two-dimensional Zoom. I also have a plea to us all - including myself - at an incredibly difficult time such as this; it's important to be kind, both to ourselves and each other. In times of uncertainty and distress it's tempting to rush towards certainties, which in turn leads to polarisation. We only have to look at the current state of the world to realise that this isn't helpful.

Having mentioned zoom, I'd like to put forward one of its advantages in relation to the Network. As our next Annual Gathering (AG) is to be online, it does mean we can welcome overseas members to join us. And, of course, there are many members in the UK who, for a variety of reasons, haven't been able to join us in Cheltenham in the past. I am so grateful and impressed with how the AG is to be organised in such circumstances, so I encourage everyone to join us and take an active part in your Network. This is the opportunity for those of you who haven't been able to attend NVN events in person, to engage in a more "rounded" way.

As our ethos has always been to be as inclusive and participatory as possible, this pandemic is offering the paradoxical possibility of making this more available than ever before. This extends to participating in our Annual General Meeting too. I can promise you that, far from being dull and procedural, I've found every AGM engaging and stimulating. So please do join us then.

On a quite different but related tack, I'd like to draw your attention to two series of radio programmes. Having been severely visually impaired for most of my life, the radio has been a major source of information and sheer delight. The wonderful Michael Morpurgo (author of *War Horse*) has a new four-part series on journeys in folk song on Monday afternoons at 4pm. I've heard the first two and, as someone with 60 years of involvement with traditional folk song, I thought they were marvellous; I can't recommend them highly enough. I have also heard the first of A L Kennedy's Radio 3 essays on the voice. I'm sure this is going to be a deep and valuable series at 10.45 each night during this week starting Oct 26th.

Returning to my earlier remarks, I feel it's important at a time such as this to reiterate the early foundations of the Network. From its inception, we hoped to open up the joy and energy of singing, the love of song, and the power and communion of sharing these with generosity and without judgement. Having come from a folk and traditional music background and been influenced and taught by song collectors and ethnomusicologists, I wanted to offer the possibility of sharing songs and encouraging people to find their embodied released voice. I was convinced that singing was our human birthright and that we must all be born with the capacity to sing and be musical. This was radical at the time, 45 years ago. Happily it's now "proved", thus vindicating that everyone can participate in singing regardless of past experience - and especially not needing to read written music.

This brings me to an issue that I'm aware has come into sharp focus once again over issues of colour, ethnicity, belonging, identity and authenticity. I welcome this, as we've thought about it over the decades and it's good to have new and further reflections. Indeed, many of the songs that we know and love in the Network have prompted us to

reflect on their origins, how they found their way to us and how they have helped so many of our singers to find their own voice.

I strongly recommend any of you trying to find your way through the complex issues of colonialism, exploitation, intention and authenticity to read Caroline Bithell's book *A Different Voice, A Different Song* (especially Chapter 5 and 6, and the final chapter summary). She has such a wealth of experience and knowledge, both as a practitioner and an academic. We are lucky and privileged to have her as the chair of our Trustees. I can also recommend David Olusoga's *Black and British: A Forgotten History* series, recently repeated on BBC TV.

Where I feel that I have some expertise is in what it means for a song to go "into the public domain"; i.e. in this case, the Oral Tradition. In relatively few cases is it possible to then say that there is a "right" or "authentic" version. Once songs have taken wing, they will get changed, reworked, added and subtracted to, change pitch and pronunciation, change style, and often travel hundreds if not thousands of miles in the process. Of course, if it is known who the "author" of a song is, then they are the person to go to in order to find out how best to perform it (if they are still alive or accessible), but with most orally transmitted songs this is impossible. (This is amply illustrated in relation to the song "Johnny, I hardly knew you" in the first programme of the Michael Morpurgo series.) I belong to a group, largely made up of traditional song researchers and academics, who endlessly attempt to find the origins of songs with hardly any "success".

I have two anecdotes which I hope will help clarify this. I was being interviewed for a radio Folk Programme and, for one of my songs, I sang a powerful version of Barbara Allen, which I had learned from a recording of Sarah Makem from N. Ireland. When I finished, the very knowledgeable presenter announced that he'd had a phone call to say that this wasn't the right version! He must have done some speedy online looking and then said, "So far I've found that there are 70 odd versions of Barbara Allen in the English-speaking world." (And that was probably an underestimate.)

The other tale is about a fragment of a song recorded by the Romany gypsy singer Queen Caroline Hughes. She was recorded by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger on the Wareham bypass in Dorset. She was a singer with a wonderful repertoire of traditional songs such as The Manchester Angel, Sheep Crook and Black Dog, and The Cuckoo (the last is also a song that has massively different variants across the English-speaking world). I was lucky enough to hear the original tapes of Caroline Hughes in the early 60s. Like many other "source" singers, her repertoire wasn't only made up of folk songs. Whether her version of what was originally Clementine was of her making, I don't know; but how it went was "Oh me varmint, Oh me varmint, Oh me varmint clever time"!