

Exploring Cultural Appropriation, Appreciation and Honouring

A Natural Voice Network Resource framework

Welcome, friends and songleaders. We have put together this series of reflections and queries in the hope that it will help us all in our exploration of music and songleading in the context of wider conversations about racism, cultural honouring and appropriation.

These are challenging explorations, and we may feel some discomfort in facing them, but we invite you to let go of judgement and engage with an open and enquiring heart. We are not offering answers, as these are as diverse as our contexts, but we hope to help spark enquiry and conversation that will enrich all of our work as singers, song learners and song teachers.

The songs we sing don't exist in a vacuum; they interact with the world in which we live. Songs and contexts change, just as people and communities change. Our understanding as individuals and as a community is constantly evolving and this document will be periodically updated to reflect this. We welcome your responses, and are hoping to set up an open blog-style mechanism for this on the new NVN website.

We will explore questions such as: How do we learn and teach songs? Who benefitted financially from the sharing of these songs? Who is in the room, and why are some people under-represented? How might we adapt our practice to be more inclusive across the board?

We will all inevitably make mistakes and get things wrong, that's what learning and growing is. If we can remain open whilst supporting and challenging each other, then our teaching, our singers and our network will be all the richer for our efforts.

It's not just a song

Many people who live on lands that have been stolen from indigenous people begin gatherings by acknowledging the traditional owners of that land and their ongoing relationship with it. With this in mind, we will begin this exploration by acknowledging the deep history of the culture of 'taking' that has been perpetuated by colonialism. As singers living in the western world, for generations we have had access to songs and culture from all over the world, often shared without acknowledging or paying the traditional singers. This hasn't been in the context of a reciprocal sharing, it's been in the context of occupation and colonisation of one group of people by another. As there remains a power imbalance in the world, so there is a power imbalance in how songs have been both shared and taken.

Whose Music is this?

Many of us are used to asking the basic questions such as where did this song come from? What does it mean? Who sang it? How are the words pronounced? But we don't always ask what context it was sung in, what the rhythmic foundations are or whether it feels appropriate to sing a song in our own contexts. How much do we know about the broader tradition in which the song sits?

As music is a living tradition, of course songs change as they pass from singer to singer, from community to community. But if we don't know the answer to some of these questions, we need to ask ourselves if we have the right to change them. Some songs are only sung in very particular contexts, for example sacred or ritual gatherings, and remain unchanged, and some are changed a little every time they are sung. If a song is sacred to a culture, have we entered it at enough depth to know it is appropriate and respectful to sing it or modify it? If we change an element such as rhythm or harmony, did we make changes just to make them easier for western singers to sing? If we are not from that cultural tradition, do we have the right to change that song?

Are we preserving and honouring the tradition from which this song comes? Many songs we share were 'collected' from singers in the 20th century. Have the singers who first sang the song ever been compensated for their creative work? How was the music shared? How was it listened to? Were the interactions respectful?

It's easier than ever to seek out information about songs, different contexts and versions. We can even zoom in teachers from all over the world to share their traditions and expertise. How can we connect with people from different cultures to learn directly from them, and pay them appropriately for their time and expertise?

For a real-life situation where cultural appropriation was highlighted and reflected on, watch the 'Vera Hall' video discussion between NVN and Singing Mamas choir leaders: <https://youtu.be/eE3xfellwpk>

Who's in the room?

Global cultural conversation centres the experience of white people. White people are considered the 'norm', and all other people are viewed in comparison to them. This is one of the realities that we are working to challenge in our work. What does it feel like to be the only person with different cultural heritage in a singing group? How can we 'go to' people who don't necessarily feel welcome in our groups, and how can we work alongside other people in our local communities to broaden the range of people who feel able to access community singing spaces? How can we guard against tokenism in the inclusion of diverse groups and individuals?

For a fuller exploration of the experiences of songleaders and singers with diverse heritage in the NVN please watch this video, made by Molará Awen: <https://youtu.be/SNXoZrzlfoc>.

Where are we singing?

Wherever we are singing, we need to take care to describe people in the way they might describe themselves. Some words that have been widely used in the English language are now understood to be incorrect and could cause offence. For example, in English, many indigenous people would now describe themselves as First Nations people.

Calling a song 'Aboriginal' isn't specific enough - there are over 500 different so called 'Aboriginal' peoples in Australia, speaking more than 250 different languages. Calling a song 'African' isn't specific enough - there are over 3,000 different groups of people across the continent, speaking over 2,000 different languages. Calling a song 'Native American' isn't specific enough - there are over 550 different Native peoples in the USA, and about 150 languages have survived to be still spoken and sung today.

We wouldn't describe a song as 'European' without specifying a language and geographical context, and even if we were teaching an English language song, we would likely specify the place where it was sung. We might even be more specific about the region and the context in which it was sung, for example 'sung by farmers in Suffolk' or 'sung by miners in Northumberland'.

Some of us sing in the streets - a very different context to a workshop or static performance, where we can be sure that everyone has heard our explanation of context. If someone hears us singing a bit of a song from their culture which has historically been exploited, that may be a positive experience - a moment of feeling heard and seen - or it may be a negative experience - a moment of feeling re-exploited. We need to be open to this plurality. With this in mind, some songs may feel appropriate to sing in one context but not in another.

The beginning...

Take a moment to reflect on some of what you have read. What have you started to unpick? What felt challenging to you? What adaptations can you begin to integrate into your practice? What regular reflective space can you keep providing for yourself and share with others? *[hint - see ARCHers info below!]*

Don't forget that we're all on this journey together. Keep talking with each other. We'll all get it wrong sometimes. Not shutting down in response to this is the courageous action. And sometimes we won't get it wrong and it will be glorious.

RESOURCES

Link to NVN ARCHers events and resources: <https://naturalvoice.net/members/resources-for-choir-leaders/anti-racism-and-cultural-honouring-arch>

If you'd like to go on the ARCHers mailing list please email co-ordinator (Fran André) on fyandre@gmail.com

NVN philosophy and working principles: <https://naturalvoice.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/NVN-Philosophy-and-Working-Principles-Jan20.pdf>

Vera Hall discussion video: <https://youtu.be/eE3xfellwpk>

Here is a map of Indigenous Australia: <https://saferlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/map.jpg>

Here is a map of Native lands in the USA:

https://media.npr.org/assets/img/2014/06/24/tribal_nation_map_custom-bf305b93f8466d6854ed90b8dde74830e832c736-s800-c85.jpg

and the person who made it: <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/06/24/323665644/the-map-of-native-american-tribes-youve-never-seen-before>

Here is an evolving interactive online map that has good coverage of native land information for the Americas, Australia and New Zealand, and hopefully Africa will be updated in due course: <https://native-land.ca/>

We would like to have included a map of people groups across the continent of Africa, but have been unable to find one. If you know of one, please do let us know.

FOOTNOTES

This document was written by a group of NVN members living in different places, with a range of different cultural roots.

The times they are a changing

To understand a bit more about the historical context in which the NVN was set up, you can hear Frankie Armstrong speaking in this documentary (also referenced above) <https://youtu.be/SNXoZrzlfoc>. Part of Frankie's vision was to bring oral singing traditions to the UK to challenge the other, more dominant western choral singing norms. We are evolving as our contexts do, and this video explores this further.

Touching on intersectionality

We can't do it all all of the time, and in this document we're explicitly exploring race, cultural honouring, appreciation and appropriation. But this work doesn't happen in a vacuum either, so we'd like to encourage you to explore other axes of intersectionality and inclusion, such as class, disability, sex, gender and sexuality.

Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw Defines Intersectionality (7 minute video): <https://youtu.be/sWP92i7JLIQ>