

The Legacy of the Oral Tradition for the NVN Approach

By Frankie Armstrong

Following Sarah Harman's piece in the newsletter of 7th November, I'd like to share some thoughts on another aspect - the importance of the oral tradition (the transmission of information and culture from voice to ear over generations) in the approach and practice of our Network.

For me, it is not a choice, but it has proved one of the most determining aspects of my life and work. Some of you will be aware of my sight impairment, which means I haven't been able to read either print or music since my teens. This has meant that I have necessarily learned orally - through ears and body - all my repertoire of traditional and contemporary song since I started to perform professionally in 1964, and all the songs that I've taught in workshops since 1975. In fact I'm in a long tradition here - learning songs in this way is how most of our ancestors sang, and much of the world still sings.

Singing is a visceral, sensual activity and this is less so if eyes are relying on written music. Research shows that reading music while singing does inhibit the full freedom and embodiment of voice quality. You are physically much freer when you're not holding a sheet/book.

These days, we need the physical preparation when arriving at a singing event from our mostly sedentary lives compared to people in the past whose lives were their physical 'tuning up' (and often their vocal tuning up too). (See Chris Rowbury's excellent series on Why Warmups - <https://blog.chrisrowbury.com/2009/02/preparing-to-sing-why-bother.html>)

Much traditional singing accompanied work, dance, devotion, rocking cradles and burial processions (i.e. all of life). There was an integral relationship between physicality and singing. The songs of the 'folk' arose from their lives, not from written music. Even the written songs that were printed on broadsides from the 16th-19th centuries, were largely written to be sung to known tunes (either popular tunes of the day or set to a traditional tune) and went into the oral tradition to be spread, tweaked and reshaped as they passed from person to person. Most music making/singing would take place in the home, the pub, the work situation, and community gatherings and events. Singing was a way of *taking part* in the *shared* experience of a joyous or meaningful event. Everyone took part.

Hence, as it says on the NVN website: *"We believe that singing is everybody's birthright. For thousands of years all over the world people have sung — to express joy, celebration and grief, to aid healing, to accompany work, devotion and the rituals of life — without worrying about having a "good" voice or "getting it right". Singing has been a part of life, a way of binding communities...*

Creating an accepting community is an essential element of our approach: a community where singing together is a natural experience that is open and accessible to all."

From the outset of my workshops, I loved the process of opening people's ears to the different possibilities of voice and song from the world's oral traditions - such as the different melodies, 'scales' and modes, and tonal and expressive qualities, techniques, ornamentations and embellishments. Inviting people to play with these in songs, 'exercises' and vocal 'events' opens up the chance to explore and discover unfamiliar and exciting aspects of what the voice can do.

I hope this article illustrates how the oral tradition has provided us with a valuable legacy which has enriched the life and work of the Natural Voice Network.

www.frankiearmstrong.com