The Singers

Songs and Singing as Expression

by Frankie Armstrong

When Tim requested this article, he mused that one reason why singing may be the poor cousin of instrumental music in Canada might lie in the difficulty of writing or even talking about the act of singing. Faced with this blank page, I’m only too aware of the truth of his words. So let me jump in at the deep end. What is singing? Why do we sing? And - maybe the easier question - how do we sing?

I’ll begin with a totally unprovable, yet profoundly held assertion, that singing (i.e., extending the speech range into chant or melody) and dancing (i.e., moving in a way that, while it may imitate a function, doesn’t have a utilitarian purpose) are essential parts of what it means to be human. Though unprovable, I’ll call on three supporting arguments. First, babies and young children seem quite uninhibitedly to use a wide range of melodic vocal sounds and to jig about to music with wonderful abandon. Secondly, I haven’t heard of a “primitive” society that doesn’t use chant/song and dance, either for pleasure, magic or ritual. Thirdly, there are a number of myths that tell of how song and dance came to humanity, which talk variously of the time prior to their arrival as being barren and soundless, or as being an age when people were lonely and isolated. I suppose that to a sceptical scientist such evidence would be inadequate. But, most importantly, I rely on my own experiences of singing, and dancing myself and of listening to and witnessing others. The words that often come to me and to others are “a sense of well-being”, “feeling connected up” or “more whole”. And here I can call on the scientist to back me up. Some of the exciting work on brain functioning has speculated that, with logical, linear speech located in the left brain hemisphere and more instinctive and intuitive functions in the right, that it is through poetry, chanting and song that we may integrate these too often separated parts of ourselves. The eastern traditions of mantra chanting are explicitly tailored to this purpose, but only recently has neuro-physiology borne out this ancient knowledge. Oops - I’m already proving the point about how hard it is to write about singing in a way that does justice to the subject. Already
it's sounding turgid and theoretical. Of course were you here standing beside me, I/we could burst into sound or song, burst into laughter and say "It's really true, isn't it?" But, in the absence of that much more intimate means of communication and communion, I must go on.

Having made the above sweeping assertion, now, of course, I have to add the provisos. I suppose they go something like this. I don't believe that any and all singing and dancing fulfills these essential human needs. In our complex, alienating, commodity-specialized society there may be very different reasons for this. People may sing and dance to gain approval and adulation, to make money, to flaunt their "beautiful" voices or bodies, to boost their egos. I'd guess that for anyone brought up in our culture, it's nigh on impossible to get away totally from some of these motives, but I hope that some of us, especially in the folk field, are at least trying. It seems increasingly important to me that some of us are trying to capture this simple yet elusive essence in music and song: its power to regain integrity. Whether listening to a five note chant from Polynesia (on record, sadly), or to the highly ornamented and technically breathtaking singing of Asia Minor, I am stirred to a depth that is rarely engaged by other vocal music. Maria Callas and Billie Holiday can do it, but for the most part it's ethnic vocal sounds and techniques that capture my soul and spirit most powerfully.

I've been wondering recently why ethnic song touches me so, and a couple of thoughts struck me as quite interesting. If you think of our senses, the ways in which we apprehend and engage in the world, then hearing, seeing and smell are essentially passive senses. They bring the outside world of sounds and objects to us. On the other hand, touch and sound are the ways we move from ourselves to the outer world and, of these, sound - our voice comes literally from inside us and forms a bridge to the outer world. In that way, sound is our most personal and intimate interaction. I think that in song, as well as this uniquely personal element, there is also the possibility of tapping into some much more communal and universal part of ourselves. The fact that someone from a totally different culture and language, somewhere on the other side of the world, can sing into a collector's microphone and that I can be moved to tears or joy or exhilaration by his/her song, must mean that there is somewhere inside of me that recognizes and resonates with that sound.

Now I guess I need to tackle the paradoxical fact that, while I hold singing to be a natural, essential activity that everyone potentially can do, not everyone does or can. I maintain that it is societal forces which get us away from our innate, natural musicality, that overlay it with anxieties around the desire to please, to not make fools of ourselves. The next question, therefore, is why don't the adults and music teachers find our natural, playful playground voices acceptable? I know I'm not qualified to answer this. There must be many historical, social, psychological factors affecting the process, so I'll just throw in a few thoughts to start you speculating for yourself.

In England, during the later part of the nineteenth century, there was a drive towards universal education. This was at a time when, according to Groves Musical Dictionary, it was thought doubtful that the
common people of England had any form of musical expression at all.

Such was the divide at that time between the elite and the mass of urban and rural working people. In the present century this changed with the revival of interest in folk music led by Sharp, Vaughan Williams, etc., but by then the forms of music considered proper for educating children were defined as those of the education class. Folk songs were taught, but folk singing styles were ignored. Isn't it strange that, despite the mass consumption of popular song from Bing to the Beatles, most formal school music teaching still stays firmly within the old bourgeois mould. "Correct" singing and playing is from written notation exclusively and has to concentrate on "purity" of tone and, especially for girls, sweetness of sound. And my guess is that even if we don't really like these formal styles of music, and listen to Hoagy Carmichael or the Who, as parents we still reinforce those sounds from our children which conform to the ones drummed into us at school.

This isn't just speculation, I suppose, as in running voice workshop for eight years, I've heard hundreds of people of all ages and classes recounting their experiences of how they were "robbed" of their voices in childhood by adults totally destroying any sense of delight and ownership in them.

It is also eight years and many workshops that have convinced me that inside each one of us is a truly thrilling voice. Now I'm not saying that I believe that everyone can be a fine singer. Anyway, the gifts that make for a fine interpreter of song are many more than a good voice. What I am saying is that everyone can produce musical sounds given the right circumstances. Producing these is always exhilarating, but can also be disturbing, poignant and can put us in touch with parts of ourselves that have to do with our own power and rights - and the loss of these. After all, we talk about "finding our voice." So I don't believe there's any conspiracy, but maybe there are other reasons why a much more refined and controlled sound is what is acceptable within our educational institutions.

Finding, or rediscovering, that unrestricted, "natural" voice certainly helps in the "how" of singing. Though, life being the contradictory thing it is, it's also possible to find great singers with very "restricted" voices. Yet, for all the naturalness of singing (in a way in which you couldn't say that playing the fiddle was "natural"), there has also developed over the centuries, great technique and artistry within the singing of traditional songs. I am not in a position to talk of traditions other than those from the U.K. and Ireland, but, though moribound and dwindling, there are still enough of these vocal styles remaining for us to realize that it isn't simply a matter of mindlessly and heartlessly opening your mouth and putting words and tune together.

There are particular sounds, specific ways of placing the voice. There are distinct ways of phrasing both words and melodies, skills in ornamentation and how and where it can be done. Perhaps most central is the ability to make the song the most important thing. This can be done by a quite "flat" rendition, where the singer steps aside, as it were, and lets the song speak for itself. Or it may be done with a highly dramatic rendition, but one where the singer and his/her imaginative skills become the vehicle for the song. Singers as varied as Harry Cox and Sam Larner honoured this essential element in traditional singing (and in contemporary singing that wishes to keep this essence). Those of us who want to keep alive the integrity, the magic and the power we can draw on in ethnic song, need to acknowledge its artistry. It is a valid musical and vocal form, just as bel canto or leder vocal styles are. This isn't a plea for simply learning tricks or techniques by rote, or for performing artificial vocal feats. It is a plea to listen. To listen to various traditional vocal styles, to experiment with and to experience them. To see which ones feel at home with you. To be willing to sing with your whole self, not just your throat. Above all, to trust that in all of us is that deeper, wider, less ego-filled place to which these songs can be one of the ways of journeying.