

Free your mind

Imagine a childhood moment when you were told to shut up. Perhaps the command was delivered forcefully by a teacher or family member. It could have been triggered by your creative play or an attempt to express strong emotions. Most of us will recall something of the kind. I remember being struck with a missile hurled by a particularly sadistic head-teacher who objected to my laughing and joking instead of queuing silently to enter class after a play break. The experience left me more with a temporary sense of injustice and a sore left ear than any lasting damage to my self-expression. Yet it took decades for me to find the courage to challenge authority, at least not without first apologising profusely for standing up for my rights.

In our more enlightened times, my slaphappy primary teacher would no doubt be imprisoned for common assault and I would receive months of trauma counselling. There is, however, no want of verbal violence of the dictatorial, thou-shalt-not-speak variety in evidence today. The phenomenon has become a potent substitute for corporal punishment. It stands alongside more subtle social conventions for closing people's voices, for limiting the grounds for self-expression to bars and clubs, and suspecting anyone who unlocks their singing voice at the 'wrong' moment of being crazy. To sing and dance should come as naturally as breathing; it still does in societies unburdened by western consumerism and modish stereotypes of cool behaviour. Anyone who sings for a living, for pleasure or for both will know how liberating the experience can be, even if the joys of performance have been paid for with years of hard work and setbacks.

I would not be the first to suggest that joyful, communicative singing can all too easily be suppressed by the pursuit of technical excellence in singing. The idea is at least as old as the debate about words before music versus music before words. When it comes to training choirs, I've agonised over technical matters and obsessed about surface details. It was only when I came to work with a remarkable community choir, one limited in technique but always determined to deliver the maximum share of expression in performance, that I gained the chance to explore unfamiliar approaches to developing vocal expression.

Three years ago, I was invited to work with the Blackbird Leys Choir. The group began life as an initiative funded by Arts Council England and promoted by broadcasters Five as part of its FiveArts Cities project. Choir members were recruited from the Blackbird Leys estate in east Oxford, nationally infamous in the late 1980s as a place blighted by car crime and anti-social behaviour. The area has changed almost beyond recognition since, improved by regeneration schemes and some visionary leadership from within the local community. It would be fair to say, though, that Oxford's great choral tradition had not made much of a mark on the Leys.

Five hatched the idea of *The Singing Estate*, recruited Ivor Setterfield

Andrew Stewart begins a new series looking at the benefits of workshops and approaches from the world of the healing arts that can help choirs and individual singers unlock their full potential of self-expression

to audition and raise a choir from scratch, and filmed the results for a six-part television series. Cameras followed the group's creation and progress from choral novices to a date at the Royal Albert Hall. Like all reality telly, *The Singing Estate* made the most of tears and tantrums; the show spotlighted colourful characters, and presented Setterfield as a man engaged in messianic musical missionary work. The choir's development, for all that, was both remarkable and moving. I came into the frame after the cameras departed, when the Oxford Philomusica took over responsibility for shaping the Blackbird Leys Choir's future and asked me to become its music director.

Teaching the group to sing new pieces essentially required patience, especially as few of its members could read music and had little experience of performing in parts. My job was made easier by the assistance of excellent young Oxford-trained musicians, and by the incredible dedication and natural talents of the choir's members. There was nothing miraculous or particularly inventive about the way we went about learning repertoire: hard graft, repetition and old-fashioned choral discipline generally kept things moving. The most profound advances, I believe, flowed from the workshop sessions I led in partnership with Barbara Chabior. These succeeded because of the openness of choir members to explore games and strategies designed to nurture self-expression. Our Blackbird Leys volunteers showed few reservations: in fact, they readily improvised dances; created melodies from their hearts; took to clowning, complete with red noses, and revealed intimate emotions through song.

My role was largely one of raising energy levels at the beginning of each workshop. Barbara's session leadership touched on areas of personal communication and individual confidence building that I would formerly have considered off limits for choral singers. I kept an open mind and was amazed by what we were able to achieve. 'There's something special about allowing people to share the melody inside them with others,' Barbara recalls. She cites an exercise in which pairs of Blackbird Leys singers took turns to present a favourite song in the most extravagant, extrovert fashion. Each then improvised a heartfelt 'naked song', almost whispering it into their partner's ear. 'Out of their initial showing off came an uninhibited, almost childlike expression of innocence. This innermost melody came from the core of their being. It's there in all of us, but is so