

# Singing for Joy: Creating Community and Sustaining Function in a Choir with Parkinson's Disease

By Carol Grimes



*The Sing for Joy choir, now composed of approximately twenty-five individuals, was formed to provide people with Parkinson's disease (PD), their carers and others with medical conditions, the opportunity to sing. Its further purpose has become to promote community singing as a part of the long-term treatment of chronic conditions. It has since its inception been led by Carol Grimes, An inspired soul-jazz legend who trained expressively for this purpose with a speech therapist (Speech-Language Pathologist) to find singing exercises particularly appropriate to those with PD and other medical conditions, to combine with her own way of work." In the words of founder and choir member Nina Temple, "the choir has become a physical therapy which*

*strengthens throat and facial muscles to help with continued clarity of speech, a creative experience and a supportive community. According to co-founder and choir member Sarah Benton, it gives "A sense of purpose to lives often broken up by isolation, providing a quality of lively inclusiveness." Carol says, "You often hear people who work with voice saying, 'If you've got a voice you can sing.' But people with PD have to contend with the literal withdrawal of voice, so to see them really going for it and enjoying the singing is inspirational." As Nina says, "When we are singing together at the top of our voices, I feel a release from the constraints of my disease and a connection with joy."*

I was born, and many years have passed and much music have I made. I discovered one day, in a Pub in Hastings, that I could sing - a surprise, as I had had no encouragement as a child or young adult and no musical training. I perform my own curious songs and poems - Jazz, Blues, Improvisations and Contemporary Opera - with the musicians and singers I have had the phenomenal pleasure to work with over the years and have recorded and toured extensively here in the U.K, in America, Europe (East and West), Scandinavia, Scotland, Japan and beyond

In the early eighties, I began working with a group of young people in Poplar, near where I lived in the east end of London. This was to be the beginning of my passage towards an understanding of my own voice in order to best facilitate others, an investigation of what supports our voices in order to sing out what the heart and soul feels without strain and damage to the vocal instrument. Prior to this, I had opened my mouth and whatever sound I made was it! No thoughts of 'How does it all work?' My entry into the world of singing had been more accident than design; and then it became my life. Finding my voice and singing my life has given me my life.

31

When invited by Nina Temple, the founder of *Singing for Joy* and a Parkinson's patient herself, to work with a group she was setting up for people with PD, I was immediately interested and curious. Encouraged by Nina, I spent some time at the Hospital in Queens Square with the Speech Therapist Elina Tripoliti and soon discovered that the physical and creative aspects of the singer's and vocal facilitator's life worked wonderfully well symptoms group members are struggling with.

Besides Parkinson's, we have people with Multiple Sclerosis, M.E. (known in the US as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome), Cancer, Arthritis, Asthma and people referred by NHS with mental health difficulties. Muscle tension and rigidity; shortness of breath; loss of vocal strength and stamina; monotonic speech patterns; imprecise articulation; a closing down of facial expression; low self esteem; tremor in jaw, lips and tongue; disturbed swallowing patterns; fatigue - all these symptoms seem to be helped considerably with the singing and breath work.

Another aspect of my work with *Sing for Joy* began life because of a need to raise money in order to continue the group's existence after our grant expired. We organised a benefit concert using the TUC Congress Hall, raising enough funds to survive another year, and the group became a performing one. We have just held our fifth benefit and have performed for the Parkinson's Disease Society Annual Carol Concert three times, in such splendid venues as Southwark Cathedral, and at one or two other events.



Performing skills require rehearsals: building bigger and bolder voices, stage presence, courage, commitment and the necessity to communicate, singing out to an audience while projecting not only the voice but also the whole person, working together as a team to support each other towards producing an animated and dynamic performance.

Most of the *Sing for Joy* members had never performed in public or even sung in a choir or group prior to joining *Sing for Joy*. A few people had sung with amateur choirs, but most had not sung since school days, if at all, and given the very little rehearsal time

- we meet once a week and have the wonderful Dorian Ford as our pianist for only one hour - this was challenging and sometimes difficult.

Some struggled with pitch, others with rhythm, some with memory, harmony, phrasing or timing. A few read music, most did not. I prefer to work from ear, employing memory, both muscular and emotional. I want people to sing out rather than singing to sheets of A4 with dots and words written on them. I prefer the songs to be learned aurally and enjoyed physically, rather than as an academic exercise. Word sheets are handed out, but all are encouraged to memorise.

The nature of the group, bought together with the common criteria being illness, meant that people's taste in music varied widely, unlike the Jazz Singers' classes I run at the City Literary Institute where there is a common musical thread. I bought them *The American Song Book*, Brecht, Joni Mitchell, Sting and Lily Allan, The Pogues and Leonard Cohen, Jazz, Blues, Folk, Pop, African and Albanian songs and more - an eclectic mix!

32

I encouraged the participants to bring in songs they loved, adding to my own vastly growing repertoire for the group. We have an enormous list of songs. This sometimes led to difficult discussions around what songs to perform. We now have a very democratic voting process!

The rehearsals - memorising words, melodies and arrangements; working on articulation, rhythm and phrasing; my pleas to smile, to look at each other, to sing out to the audience and to themselves - all necessary in the performer's art and in this situation - were an example of the therapeutic benefits of the work, visibly bringing people into life: listening, looking, feeling and engaging.

At the beginning of each weekly session, whether rehearsing or not, we work with a warm-up, using breath for respiratory support, resonance, vocal pitch practice, harmony and rhythm, singing loud and soft and, in between, doing muscle exercises for the mouth and the face, all put together with a gentle physical movement. These skills have clearly helped in soothing some of the symptoms and building vocal strength and breath control.

A tense, tightly held body resistant to the music, operating purely from the head, fighting the pulse and rhythm and denying access to the emotions, will result in a singing voice using only a fraction of its potential, and a delivery that has limited dynamic range. The message will be contrived and empty, a shallow performance.

The human being carries extreme vulnerability within the vocal tract, the throat, the mouth, the lips the tongue, the voice. Well-used metaphors, such as 'A lump in the throat' and 'I feel choked' accurately describe physical sensations felt within the body in response to emotional disturbance or cognitive discontent and these sensations will indeed disable a voice, producing an unsupported and strained representation of the dominant means of connecting and communicating with others. A mind in torment or fear will shut down, retreat, become strained, the vocal timbres infused with the ingredients of those emotions.

A common area of tension is located in the neck and jaw. A head thrust forward from the shoulders, the jaw clamped almost shut, lending the voice a trapped and strained tonality, talking through clenched teeth - all are very noticeable in a person with Parkinson's and other neurological conditions.

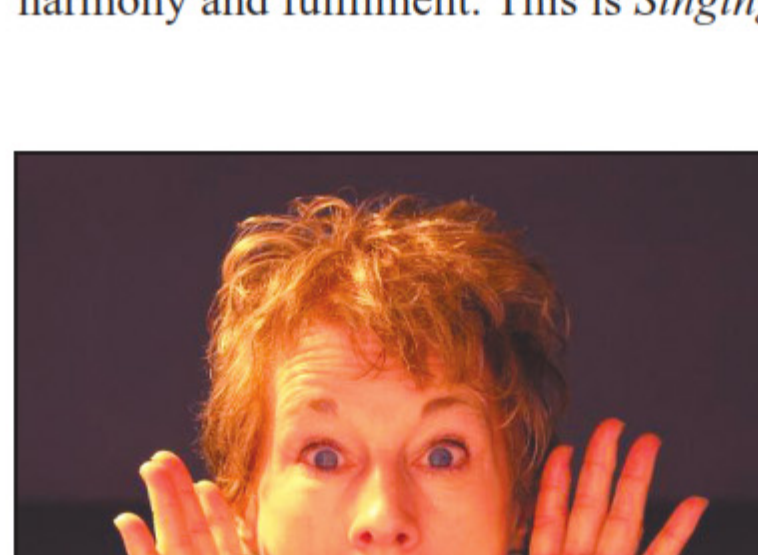
A way of identifying the most basic and necessary actions needed to manifest the human voice is to tap into the primary life force, without which living would be impossible and which is expressed through breath, movement, mind and body. Engaging with the essential senses of hearing and sensation, tapping into the vibrations of the voice as it hums around inside the body as energy and resonance, is in itself an act of self-investigation, leading to a deeper and more informed physical and cognitive awareness.

For many people, the initial work with breath while the foundations are established in order to produce a dormant memories that inhabit the body, stirring and reactivating feelings and responses. In assisting the participant in the extrication of long held tension, releasing the neck and jaw, and working with both the physical and the emotional holding on, a practitioner is enabling the participant to release vocal power and fluidity, to enrich the timbre of the voice and to inhabit fully the potential to speak with a voice that is imbued with a more rounded and confident range of expression.

33

Working with the body in the discharge of tension through voice enables the participant to verbalise a more fully integrated delivery, giving their vocalizations, their song, freedom and flight. Allowing the body to fully accommodate the voice is the route towards resonance and support. The effects of working with voice in a physical way, thus bringing the voice into the body, are dynamic, a multi-sensory somatic experience.

The attainment of a harmonious balance of physicality, breath and voice will in turn instill a person with harmony and fulfilment. This is *Singing for Joy*.



*Carol Grimes, VMTR, is a singer/songwriter, teacher and choir director who came to prominence as a singer in 1969 as a member of Delivery, associated with the Canterbury Scene, and performed regularly on the London blues circuit in the '70's. At the same time she released her first solo album Warm Blood. By the end of the decade, Grimes had moved to a more jazz-inspired style, including a lot of scat singing, since which time she has recorded many albums, including Alive at Ronnie Scott's, Mother, Eyes Wide Open and, most recently, Something Secret. Now known mainly as a solo artist, she also does theatrical work, teaches singing and performs with The Shout, an extraordinary acappella singing group led by Orlando Gough and Richard Chew.*



34