



easily blocked by fear or expectations of being a “performer”. They threw off the formal costume that has been used by millions of people to cover their true song. That was the moment when they turned into angels, into transparent beings.’

Barbara’s analysis may sound disturbingly New Age. But it stands on years of practical work with people whose skills of verbal communication have been limited by circumstance or illness. It also draws on personal experience of overcoming fears about the honest expression of emotions. Studies in drama, dance, singing, mime and clowning helped her defeat physical and vocal tensions connected with what she describes as the trauma of divorce. ‘It was as if my joints were like stone,’ she recalls. ‘I could not communicate with my body and only dreamt about dancing. For the first year when I was studying dance, it was all about overcoming the fear of people watching my clumsiness. My colleagues always picked up the steps quicker than me – I felt disabled! But after two years, I realised these dance and theatre sessions had allowed me to lift the blocks that had been created by my life. Whatever you do in dance or with the voice reflects what’s happening in your life; if you can remove the blocks caused by experience, it can also inspire your life.’

Learning to communicate through movement and non-verbal uses of the voice, she adds, can help singers overcome barriers to expression and restricting preoccupations with technique. ‘The body has knowledge that can intuitively inform what we do, but very often we block it off from our thinking process,’ Barbara observes. Dancing allows you to follow what the body dictates. It’s like disappearing from your thoughts and accepting what the body wants you to do.’ She identifies a comparable disconnect between natural vocal expression and formal singing.

By introducing clowning disciplines to the Blackbird Leys workshop volunteers, Barbara showed how the gap between ‘correct’ singing and apparently erratic movements and sounds might be closed. ‘It’s the most powerful tool you can use, to show people that it’s all right to stay with “mistakes”. When I started to sing, I was completely fixed on being correct. But through clowning, I came to welcome myself into my singing.’ The process, she adds, was liberating for the voice, so much so that it

became unexpectedly free. ‘I went to a teacher to sort out this freedom. She said that I had gone too far, that I had gained too many levels of colour and intensities. It was not something she could tackle. I realised, though, that my experience had overpowered the conditioning that comes with teaching, which says that singing is this but not that. I so enjoyed the pleasure of singing freely that I didn’t care. I had discovered this inner expression.’

While working at a shelter for homeless single mothers in southern Poland during the 1990s, Barbara began to share knowledge gained during her theatre studies with people in emotional crisis. The results were more immediate and effective than anything she had formerly achieved with the same group as a desk-bound senior social worker. ‘After work, I rested from my role in authority and became more attuned to the rhythms those women lived every day,’ she explains. ‘I remember asking one woman, who I knew had a fantastic temperament for this, to recite a poem I’d chosen for her by Adam Mickiewicz while she ran across some tables in the canteen! All her character came through the poem when she used her whole body. Her voice became confident and rich. Why? Because she connected with her innermost energy, that which was at the very core of her being. This came through her body. She had to think about running, not about being “right” or “wrong” in the way she recited this famous Polish verse.’

Singers, she adds, can discover new levels of expression by exploring non-verbal communication. Songs improvised to nonsense syllables certainly helped deepen the expressive range of participants in our Blackbird Leys workshop sessions. This experience subsequently filtered into the group’s approach to performance and also contributed to its developing confidence in tackling tough musical challenges, including a splendid work written for the choir by Orlando Gough, singing in Italian and Church Slavonic, and learning pieces by Tavener, Britten and Stravinsky.

In applying a broad range of related strategies to our sessions with the Blackbird Leys Choir, Barbara reinforced the vocal confidence of strong performers within the group. Her workshops also gave others, those who might easily have been lost even within a relatively small community choir’s ranks, the courage to claim singing as a natural form of personal expression. ‘I love the workshops and wish they would just go on for ever,’ one member declared to me in an e-mail message. ‘I find them very healing and love how it feels to discover parts of myself that I am beginning to like and appreciate.’ Another singer found her full voice, a rich and true alto, as we worked on reversing the legacy of individuals’ childhood memories of being told to shut up or button their singing lips. She went on to sing a solo from *West Side Story* in concert at the Sheldonian Theatre with the Oxford Philomusica, with confidence and moving emotional honesty.

So many choral and vocal ensembles, including highly accomplished amateur choirs, battle to make progress by programming increasingly taxing compositions, working obsessively on balance and intonation, or focusing on narrow aspects of vocal technique. No one would deny that these can contribute towards a group’s musical development. I believe there are comparable, perhaps even greater overall gains to be made, however, by exploring fresh ideas on communication and expression in singing. Over the next few issues of *The Singer*, I’ll report on the best of these in detail and talk with leading practitioners. I want to discover how my Blackbird Leys experiences compare with those of other choir trainers, workshop leaders and singers. Above all, I hope to persuade sceptics that techniques of self-expression developed within the healing arts can be practically applied to singing. ■

