

‘THE ONLY THING BETTER THAN SINGING IS “MOOR” SINGING!’

Thank you, Ella Fitzgerald... from Kari McGowan

It started with a single, unexpected voice. I was working with a man with learning difficulties who in three years had not spoken in the group. He would smile shyly, occasionally laugh, but mostly work with great industry at whatever activity I devised. We were laughing together one morning when, unprompted, he started to sing! Following a stunned silence, everyone cheered, joined in and the atmosphere was transformed.

Driving home to Devon one evening after a day of Shape Note (Sacred Harp) singing in Oxford – 14 hours after leaving home and 80 songs later – I marvelled at my renewed energy and sense of well-being. And so I decided to look into what group singing opportunities exist around Dartmoor, particularly choirs.

The diverse choices available reflect the many reasons people sing. Small, informal house groups such as Cheriton Bishop’s ‘Folkus’ provide a space for individuals to enjoy singing together, without the pressure of performance. Non-auditioning community choirs abound with inspiring Musical Directors and broad repertoires singing for pure enjoyment as well as public performance. Add to this the performance-oriented auditioning choirs and a picture emerges of a lively and varied singing community around Dartmoor.

I asked Plymouth-born teacher and composer Ewen Sinclair, whose piece for small orchestra and Celtic harp ‘Tales of the Moorland IV – Journey to Yellowmead Down’ is inspired by his Princetown home, for his thoughts on group singing.

‘Music is undoubtedly powerful; it talks to us all yet it also facilitates communication in deep, profound ways. Participants of music-making groups dedicate time and energy to enhance their musicianship, but the most notable benefits are surprisingly extra-musical.

‘Participants begin to associate themselves with the ideals of the group and develop family-like bonds which in turn empower the community as performances are staged... music is the right of the whole



PHOTOGRAPH ROBIN TILLEY

Moor Harmony

community, it helps to strengthen the bonds of those who belong to it.’

In the four Beacon Villages on Dartmoor’s northern edge can be found a monthly folk club, a Shanty group, a Christmas Carol Service choir and Moor Harmony, a South Zeal based choir. Living in the village, it was the obvious place to find out how a choir might originate and develop an identity.

Musical Director Jeremy McKnight described how a village newcomer with choral experience felt ‘a gaping hole’ in local activities and placed an ad in the village magazine suggesting that ‘anyone interested in forming a choir’ should turn up in the local pub. A house with a piano was found, six interested people increased to 10, squashed in a tiny living room while Jeremy, an accomplished pianist, was conscripted to ‘note bash’ until someone ‘turned up’ to lead the group. Sixteen years later, he is resigned to the role, numbers increased and an alternative venue found – a conservatory – the ‘South Zeal Conservatoire!’ With experience varying from semi professional to the inexperienced enthusiast, unable to

read music, the learning curve was steep. Lessons were learned – the first being a fixed rehearsal evening, the second being that ‘a mix of people requires a wide repertoire and just because someone loves to sing a Haydn mass does not mean they won’t enjoy “Moon River”!’ A third lesson was delegation and a committee was formed, coincident with the arrival of a very experienced singer able to advise and share her wide repertoire.

‘The Choir’ became Moor Harmony, retaining the principle of being open to anyone with most of the core members remaining. The 25 members participated in one of the choir’s most ambitious performances, Karl Jenkins’ ‘The Armed Man: A Mass for Peace’. Their achievements include a recording of 14 ‘Ave Verums’, including one of Jeremy’s own composing, a celebration of the American Songbook, English Sacred Choral music and the occasional competition entry ‘A choir that plays together stays together!’ Jeremy observes, and their singing year includes the summer barbecue, Christmas dinner, a performance in South Zeal’s tiny church during Open Gardens, a



The Lost Sound – A cappella chorus

carol concert and a larger work biannually.

Moretonhampstead-based Dartmoor Harmony came together in 2013. Bee Denning realised serendipitously that she had the gift to lead singing groups. It was people's response to her songs, her way of teaching and communicating that prompted her to create choirs. Bee is very alive to the importance of the sense of community singing can create and her three choirs (Moretonhampstead, Bovey Tracey and Ashburton) meet together for Moretonhampstead Music Day. Part of the Natural Voice network, she is committed to singing by ear, a very inclusive approach designed to remove the fear of not feeling able to 'read' a musical score. 'The songs I choose have to speak to me. I can't teach songs I don't enjoy. I tend to go for powerful songs with meaning. They have to be vibrant and uplifting and get us dancing... or make us weep. We have to be standing and if possible, move with the music. My biggest passion is harmonies. I love seeing people's faces when the harmonies start. I love seeing people make connections through regularly meeting to sing.' Bee is keen that shy newcomers are not intimidated and she asks her singers to 'blend your voices so you can't hear yourself'. She quotes William James, 'I don't sing because I'm happy; I'm happy because I sing.'

Based in Buckfastleigh, 'The Lost Sound' is a 30-strong auditioned amateur a cappella choir. Musical Director and singing teacher Sandra Smith trains members in vocal techniques including singing in small ensembles. They describe themselves as 'Multi-layered, textural and innovative'. Their material is eclectic,

having a strong folk influence using contemporary arrangements of traditional tunes interspersed with pop and gospel. The choir performed local composer Chris Hoban's song 'The Old Lych Way' included in their short film dramatising the history of the medieval 'corpse road' crossing from Bellever to Lydford. Dartmoor National Park will feature the film on its website. Chris has arranged his pieces for the choir, having been 'so impressed by... the musicality of the performances', by the achievement of 'a warm blended sound' where 'not a single voice stood out from their peers'.

These three very different choirs represent a tiny sample of the many singing opportunities around Dartmoor.

Chagford Singers is a small, non-auditioning choir with a professional Musical Director, Christopher Fletcher, MD of the Plymouth Philharmonic, widely regarded for his open choral workshops. The Chagford-based Unity Gospel Choir draws members from a wide area surrounding Okehampton which itself has several choirs, including the established Okehampton Choral Society and the new, vibrant Okehampton Singers, directed by Kelly Young, performing their first concert on 18 December in aid of Devon Air Ambulance.

Bridget Ansell directs the auditioning Ashburton Singers and also leads the Widcome Singers Community Choir whose varied repertoire includes the newly discovered 'Widcome Carol'. The small Ashburton Community Choir enjoy a relaxed singing of music 'fun, interesting and beautiful'. Tavistock choirs include the Mount Kelly Choral Society with an



Dartmoor Harmony

ambitious programme directed by operatic tenor Julian Jensen. Whiddon Community Choir has a core membership yet welcomes visitors. Tedburn St Mary Community Choir, 'a choir which sings and acts from the heart' will tackle any style of music, concerned with enjoyment, commitment and fundraising.

Totnes-based a cappella choir Glorious Chorus is directed by Helen Yeomans who is involved in running the 'Rise Up Singing Camp' at Hembury Woods, Buckfastleigh in July 2016. 'Singing for all' is how the network of Community Choirs, The Big Noise Chorus describes itself, with groups in Ashburton, Exeter and Torbay. Dunsford Singers is a non-auditioning choir of around 50 members whose aim is to enjoy making music, taking on diverse and challenging pieces while fundraising for charity.

There has probably never been an easier time to find a choir to suit you either as a singer or audience member! Search online for these and many more Dartmoor choirs. ■

Ashburton Community Choir
07980 680052
Chagford Singers 01647 231450
Dartmoor Harmony 07958 083493
Dunsford Singers 01647 252519
Ewen Sinclair
www.evermoonmusicstudio.com
Folkus Cheriton Bishop 01647 281110
Lost Sound Chorus 01364 643105
Moor Harmony 01837 840005
Mount Kelly Choral Society
01822 616702
Okehampton Singers 07932 241623
Tedburn Community Choir
01647 231450
The Big Noise Chorus 01392 275444
Unity Gospel Choir 07967 364593
West Devon Folk Choir (Wren Music,
Okehampton) 01837 53754
Whiddon Community Choir
libby.turrell@btinternet.com
Widcome Singers 01364 631238