

Book review

Bithell, Caroline. 2014. *A Different Voice, A Different Song: Reclaiming Community through the Natural Voice and World Song*. New York: Oxford University Press. 351pp. ISBN 978-0-19-935455-9 (pbk.).

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A Different Voice, A Different Song: Reclaiming Community through the Natural Voice and World Song, published by Oxford University Press and accompanied by a comprehensive website containing a wealth of illustrative materials and additional resources, is the culmination of long-term, multi-locale fieldwork research into singing practices in various parts of the world by British ethnomusicologist Caroline Bithell. Immediately striking is Bithell's rich account of experiencing different singing practices throughout her personal and professional life and her deep fascination with songs from distant places, which fuelled her sustained interest in such issues as singing and identity, language and meaning that underpin the research. The book's particular contribution is its critical in-depth focus on a new, contemporary choral culture that sits at the intersection between the natural voice movement in the UK (with its focus on songs from non-Western and folk traditions) and a growing transnational network of amateur singers interested in multicultural expressions of singing from around the world. Paying particular attention to the natural voice community in the UK, Bithell seeks to unravel the histories and connections of this grassroots singing scene as it has become to enjoy a more public presence more recently, whilst drawing connections to cognate developments in North America and Australia, as well as to other parts of the world. In doing so, Bithell provides hugely interesting perspectives on "the democratisation of the voice, the politics of participation, the liberatory dimensions of harmony singing, the transformative power of performance, and the potential of music making to sustain community and to contribute to intercultural understanding" (1-2).

Following a brief Introduction, the book is organised into nine chapters, with the first serving as an extended context-setting chapter that introduces the book's immediate subject matter; illustrates the theoretical perspectives and literatures that have informed the research; and exposes some of the broader themes and concerns that have emerged from Bithell's focus on the natural voice, community choir and world song. Particularly appealing is Bithell's framing of the first chapter through a vignette of personal fieldwork experiences during the Thames Festival in 2011, which "offers the reader a window onto the musical, social, and political world that is the focus on this book" (16) and sets the ethnographic tone of her writing style as a whole.

Chapters two to eight then delve in an "ever-deepening" (7) fashion into the natural voice movement, beginning in Chapter two with an analysis of the concept of the "natural voice" through a focus on the philosophy and working principles of the UK-based Natural Voice Practitioners' Network (NVPN), around which the natural voice movement centres (here readers are also introduced to the English folk singer Frankie Armstrong), and the Giving Voice festival, an international voice and theatre initiative that "engages with the natural voice in a

way that bridge artistic, scientific, and therapeutic modes” (55). This is followed in chapter three with insights into the experiences, perspectives and values of a representative selection of individual UK-based practitioners involved in the natural voice movement, notably Frankie Armstrong, whilst contextualising these within the various musical scenes and movements and the sociopolitical currents at the time.

Chapters four, five and six all focus on repertoire, whilst moving from the general to the specific across the three chapters. In chapter four, for instance, Bithell provides practical insights into the typical sequence of warm-up methods used to open a choir session or workshop, whilst also analysing the practicalities surrounding the process of teaching and learning by ear and concluding with theorisations about the politics of participation. The chapter is particularly useful for community choir leaders and teachers as it also provides a summary of resources available to them, whilst at the same time illustrating the match between songs from the oral tradition and the natural voice ethos. Chapter five is interested in the appeal of “the other” in song repertoires—“world song”—for natural voice and community choir participants. The entire chapter is based on interview and questionnaire responses from choir members and voice practitioners, whereby Bithell’s ethnographic discussions reveal participants’ fascination with new sound worlds, the lives of other peoples, and a nostalgic longing for a lost past, amongst other fascinating insights, before concluding with an analysis of the politics of unintelligibility. Concluding this tri-partite focus on repertoire is chapter six, which continues with a focus on world song and illustrates more detailed case studies of “especially popular” song repertoire (e.g. gospel, certain African, Balkan and Georgian songs) in Britain. There is less of an ethnographic tone at first with a review of relevant academic literatures, but her writings soon return to the tick ethnographic descriptions in order to reveal and unpack the musical tastes and preferences of her informants before turning her critical conclusions towards questions of authenticity, appropriation and ownership.

A further theme, namely community, is explored in the two subsequent chapters. Chapter seven, for instance, focuses on community choirs in Britain and their various performance contexts, whilst exploring the health, social and communal benefits of community singing. Illustrative materials drawn from short case study examples of selected community choirs in Britain, e.g. Bangor Community Choir, London Georgian choir Maspindzeli and Good Vibrations choir, add a deeper level of understanding and appreciation into the social role played by community music. Chapter eight follows with specific focus on transnational communities, framed by the now common term “global village” and informed by the literatures on travel and tourism. Here Bithell illustrates the popular appeal of musical travel and tourism during the UK-based Unicorn Natural Voice Camp and the overseas singing tours offered by the organisation Village Harmony, whilst exploring the meanings attached to this phenomenon for both host and tour communities.

A Different Voice, A Different Song closes with chapter nine, which serves as an extended conclusion that draws together the themes and issues, critical misconceptions and assumptions that have emerged and been challenged throughout the chapters. Bithell also re-emphasises the important role played by the natural voice movement, community choirs and world song for having “impact far beyond the field of music” and for being “clearly part of a bigger picture and a more powerful tide” (308).

In providing the first full-length academic study of the natural voice movement and similar transnational community music scenes, *A Different Voice, A Different Song* provides a rich and unique contribution to ethnomusicological and cultural studies literatures on issues surrounding musical style, identity, and reciprocity in a postcolonial world, as well as to the literatures in the field of community music. At the same time, the book also taps into more recent national and government interests in the health, social and communal benefits of community singing. The accompanying website provides a wealth of illustrative materials, including web links, biographies and webographies, whilst call-outs inside the written text point towards relevant audiovisual examples from Bithell's fieldwork collection. With such a wealth of ethnographic insight into a hitherto neglected area of study, the book will surely be of significant interest to academics and students from ethnomusicology, folk music, and community music who have particular interests in community and amateur singing, as well as to the participants—singers, community choir leaders, teachers—themselves of this ever-growing and vibrant, transnational natural voice community.