

cialists at Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust.

It's based on the very gentle singing of lullabies — because lullabies are such an instinctive and universal form of song. The results are hugely encouraging: trials have shown that participants reported a significant improvement in their quality of life and, specifically, in their breathlessness, in comparison with a control group who were offered more standard post-Covid care. Referrals are coming in from NHS trusts around the country.

WHY WE SING is a rich combination of deep dive into the science — from neurology to behavioural psychology — and anecdote. She investigates the part played by singing across a lifetime, from the earliest development of the larynx in babyhood, through to adolescence, adulthood, and into old age. She looks at everything from nursery rhymes to the use of song in specific circumstances such as worship, football, and protest.

It is a very personal book, drawing on years of experience and expertise, and utterly engrossing. Much of what she has discovered and shared with the reader is autobiographical.

The story starts, arguably, with her grandfather, Hans Hollander, a Jewish Czechoslovakian musicologist, who escaped from the Nazis with his wife and three-year-old son (Ms Hollander's father) only because, in March 1939, he received a letter of invitation from the BBC to travel to the UK to advise the BBC on Czech music. (Ms Hollander told this story with the help of her

brother, the actor Tom Hollander, and her father, in 2019, in *The Letter on Radio 3*.)

Music, then, quite literally saved the lives of her family. She has early memories of singing with her grandparents. Her mother, a primary-school teacher, encouraged her musical interests, although her father, a biologist, had reservations about the security of music as a career ("After all, he'd been a refugee since he was three," she says). She remembers with fondness the BBC's weekly *Singing Together* programme for primary schools.

At seven, she started singing in the church choir — and loved it. A choral scholarship took her to Cambridge; and afterwards, even when her opera commitments meant a nomadic life, she always found her way back to church and church music whenever she found herself in London.

As a result, the English sacred choral repertoire is deeply embedded, and has become part of the way in which she reaches for God. Today, she sings with the choir of the University Church in Oxford, and this is what keeps her hanging on to a spiritual life when the Church appears to be doing its worst ("Christianity is really hard").

In one chapter, "Heaven", she explores the use of sung music in worship, contrasting her experiences of singing meditative Taizé chants with her godmother in Vienna with a noisy celebration of the feast of the Assumption with the priestesses of the Candomblé religion in Bahia, in Brazil, and again with Sankirtana, a form of devotional singing ("a truly

operatic kind of worship") in the far north-east of India.

The approaches could not be more different. What do they have in common? "It is in naming the gods in song that you show devotion, and move into a prayerful, spiritual practice," she says. English church music may not be as dramatic and exciting as Sankirtana, but it is still all about the search for transcendence.

"In what way does it offer a path to enlightenment?" she writes of singing Renaissance polyphonic sacred music. "Perhaps in those moments of exquisite tension where our voices vie against one another for acoustical space. Or when we pause for a moment, and hear our sound reverberating through the building, more spirit than body. I sense it in the long, melismatic phrases, not as florid as [in Sankirtana] but still with

a sense of yearning that draws my heart heavenwards. And in those cadences where my alto line presses against the natural harmony of the other parts, and I feel my voice pushing outwards towards the cosmos, questioning."

The book ends with a moving chapter on singing and death ("The Orpheus story teaches us how singing brings things together: how it can bridge two painfully incompatible forces, the need to love and the need to die," she writes). Ms Hollander writes of singing to Immie in her last weeks, and also at her funeral. She says: "I think singing at the funeral of someone you love is the best way to say goodbye."

We meet not long after the BBC has announced its plans to disband the BBC Singers. Music education appears to be under great threat; *Singing Together* has long since been



A disabled child enjoys a group music-therapy session

axed, and she writes in the book about her own participation in the Sing Up! programme for primary schools, which lost its funding a decade ago. Some people still remain nervous of singing, post-Covid. What of the future?

"I have lots of hopes for why ordinary people will keep on singing, whatever the future holds," she says. "And, fortunately, there are others who feel the same." She points to the expanding NHS Arts on Prescription programme.

"There is more and more collaboration between health professionals and musicians, acknowledging how cost-effective our art can be as a prescribed treatment. In the next couple of years, the number of link workers attached to GPs' surgeries in England is set to quadruple, offering increasing opportunity for patients to choose group singing as part of their healing process."

"The new National Academy for Social Prescribing has laid out ambitious plans for dissolving the barriers between audiences and artists, which must surely lead to an increase in amateur choirs. It is a major cultural shift, and timely. The research data is in; we just have to get going, trusting our singing communities to keep us mentally and physically healthy."

And finally, she suggests, we should take inspiration from the songbirds. "Down my street, the drills and the engines have returned with a vengeance, but the birds are still valiantly telling their stories, expanding on their riffs, testing out their mating and their nursing calls. They're never going to stop singing; it's too much part of their nature."

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