A song for the joy of the singing

The urge to sing is primal, healing, and transcendental, says Julia Hollander, in an interview with **Sarah Meyrick**

DEBBIE HASTINGS

Julia Hollander

MANY musicians — singers, above all — remember the Covid lockdowns as a time of crushing silence. Work dried up overnight, leaving precarious incomes under threat. Concerts were cancelled, and choirs of all kinds stopped meeting. Communal singing was declared to be a highly risky activity, in spite of the shaky evidence.

All true, says Julia Hollander, the author of *Why We Sing*. But there were compensations. As the spring of 2020 turned into summer, news emerged that nature was enjoying a revival in singing. Songbirds celebrated their best season for 150 years. Humpback whales in the Atlantic were discovered to be improvising new songs; without the competition of container ships, they were able to sing to each other across huge distances, and, in doing so, created increasingly complicated music. The impulse for song in creation appears to be universal, and irrepressible.

Humans were in some confusion, none the less. "Every live music venue, every church and hall and theatre and pub stood silent as singers and other performers turned their skills to shelf stacking and street sweeping," she writes.

"Yet on doorsteps and balconies and all over the internet, suddenly everyone seemed to know all the words to that Second World War classic, 'We'll Meet Again', even the kids in the school playground. Along my street on a Thursday evening, once our clapping in honour of NHS workers was done, somebody dusted off their saxophone and accompanied a rousing communal rendition of similarly vintage number 'Over the Rainbow'."

Ms Hollander, who is 58, began her working life as a stage director in opera, but, by the time the pandemic struck, she was earning her living as a singing therapist, teacher, and performer. Like so many others, she had time on her hands. The pandemic got her thinking: what was it about singing which mattered so much?

As she says, "In this high-tech age of ours, when we can listen to 24-carat singing at any moment of the day, edited and tuned to perfection, how come DIY singing continues to happen at all? Why are we compelled to pursue such an apparently useless activity?"

She was, she says, intrigued. The seeds had been sown by her therapeutic work with dementia patients, as part of the Alzheimer's Society's "Singing for the Brain" programme. The work is tough ("Sometimes, as the session approaches, I start to dread the responsibility, fearful of the suffering and confusion I'll encounter," she writes), but "surprisingly satisfying", she says. She talks about how moving it is to see someone who can no longer speak join in the words of a song, or start to weep when they hear a couple of bars from "There'll be bluebirds over The white cliffs of Dover".

MS HOLLANDER came to music therapy via a poignant journey. Immie, the second of her three daughters, was born profoundly brain-damaged after a terrible birth in which she was deprived of oxygen. At five months came the diagnosis: her whole cerebral cortex had been destroyed, and she would never walk or talk.

But Ms Hollander and her fellow carers discovered that Immie responded positively to music. As she says, "Singing offered us something I'd assumed would never be possible: a relationship."

This discovery offered a whole new perspective on singing. "As I watched the therapists at work, my previous musical experiences started to seem far from creative," she writes. "If their songs were rambling plants, mine might as well have come straight from a garden centre, hybridised over generations and completely inappropriate for Immie, whose ears weren't trained for ready-made conventions.

"Her singing was intuitive, in the moment, without reference to anything but the vibrations in her body. She didn't relate to concepts, not even her own name; but as the seed for a song, that name was capable of making her alert and happy and entirely alive."

Singing opened up fresh possibilities. "She had demonstrated how integral song is to anybody, however vulnerable; how much it makes us human," Ms Hollander writes. "It is a gift granted to everyone, even those without a cerebral cortex."

And singing is demonstrably good for us. Biomarker tests on the saliva or blood of singers before or after singing show measurable changes in certain hormones: levels of oxytocin, dopamine, and serotonin all increase. Cortisol — the "stress hormone" — goes down. Adrenaline is a bit more variable, she says, because singers may need adrenaline to perform. It also actively stimulates the production of antibodies.

And singing together, as a community, adds a whole new level of benefit, both at an emotional level and also at a physical flesh-and-blood level. Research has even shown singers' hearts beginning to beat in time with one another.

If we were in any doubt, we have only to consider the case study that she includes in the book about the therapeutic programme that the English National Opera (ENO) developed to help to counter the effects of Long Covid. "ENO Breathe" is a six-week online course designed in collaboration with respiratory spe-

WHILE Ima and her fellow Sankirtana practitioners seem to relish physicality, we English make huge efforts to escape it. It is a serious dilemma: how to connect to the spirit world, distant and incorporeal as we imagine it to be, while using something so undeniably corporeal as our bodies. Even if we're not dancing or drumming, we still have to contend with our red and gaping mouths.

The Church of England is by no means the only religious movement to get hung up on such issues, but as my country's home brand I know a certain amount about it. I know, for example, that its founding fathers were so het up about the seductive physicality of singing that they made sure the original Book of Common Prayer contained no tunes.

If anyone insisted on adding music to the words, they were encouraged to do so in the most frugal fashion, one note per syllable, so as to avoid too much demonstrative emotion.

Like the whitewash masking the murals in our parish churches, there is still a characteristic cleanness to the vocal style. This is epitomised by our child singers, whose prepubescent voices are reassuringly free of the vibrations of nature that might draw attention away from heaven or, worse still, arouse the senses.

Compared with their more fulsome cousins on the Continent, choristers in England aim to be vibrato-free, leaving any reverberation to the vast space of the building beyond. When I was young, it was only boys who were allowed to sing in the traditional chapels and cathedrals. This was due to the patriarchal roots of worship, but some also claimed it was because their sound was purer than girls'.

Towards the end of the 20th century, people started doing experiments to discover if this was really the case. It turned out, once they had their eyes closed, that even the most expert expert couldn't tell the difference: mini XX was just as capable of disembodied sound as mini XY.

And did a surge in gender equality occur in choirs up and down the land? Well, over my lifetime many noble souls have campaigned and battled, and gradually the cathedral doors have creaked open. Girls now make up nearly half of all child choristers in England — one of whom is my daughter Bea.

She and I take great pleasure, singing amid Oxford's dreaming spires. Whether it's Tudor anthems or Taizé evenings, or Catholic masses, I am often surprised how much religious repertoire is being sung around my city, and not always by people of faith. In the university where secular disciplines and super-rational discourse are much valued, to sing devotional repertoire definitely doesn't mean being a believer. You just have to be able to deliver.

Which is not so different from the Sankirtana philosophy of practice being the route to enlightenment. Where it differs is that the audience don't have to believe anything either — because, let's face it, even an atheist can be a sucker for the transcendental.

The most notoriously vehement of Oxford University's God-deniers have been known to turn up at evensong. I have no problem with that. They love listening to the music. And, while theologians may still be struggling to reconcile the corporeal with the incorporeal, the rest of us live in a world where religious practice is in severe decline. If it's singing that gets the bums on pews, then bring it on.

This is an edited extract from Why We Sing *by Julia Hollander, published by Atlantic Books at £16.99* (Church Times Bookshop £15.29)*; 978-1-83895-362-1.*

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