

Institution: The University of Manchester		
Unit of Assessment: 33B (Music , Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies)		
Title of case study: Singing for Life: Advancing Natural Voice Practice through Professional Development and Intercultural Engagement		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: September 2005-January 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Caroline Bithell	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Ethnomusicology	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: September 2005-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2014-December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact Bithell's research into the natural voice movement and global singing traditions generated new knowledge, understanding and methodologies that have impacted on professional and creative practice. Beneficiaries of the research include: i) an international network of 700+ choir directors, whose practice has been elevated, enriched and expanded; and ii) thousands of amateur singers and performers of world music, who have experienced technical improvement and new forms of intercultural engagement. Key pathways to impact included: i) professional development accessed via a monograph, CPD events and online resources; and ii) voice workshops, festival plenaries and advisory work that engaged a wider public.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research The research comprises three interrelated projects. The first focused on multipart singing in Corsica, the subject of Bithell's first monograph (<i>Transported by Song</i>, 2007). The second examined the natural voice movement and its intersection with multipart singing in world oral traditions, culminating in a second monograph (<i>A Different Voice</i>, 2014). The third investigated multipart singing in Georgia (Caucasus). Further outputs from these projects include book chapters and refereed journal articles. The research led to new findings in three key areas:</p> <p>a) Explication of a new socio-musical movement: Bithell's is the first investigation of the natural voice movement. <i>A Different Voice</i> [1] broke new ground by theorising the evolution, philosophy and methodologies of the Natural Voice Network (NVN: naturalvoice.net), whose members are committed to making singing accessible to all through non-auditioned choirs where songs from diverse cultures are taught by ear. In examining how this network of 700+ practitioners in the UK and beyond became a pioneering force for musical democratisation, the research revealed the emancipatory potential of an inclusive alternative to mainstream choral practice – one that challenged assumptions about musical competency in Western societies and enabled tens of thousands of aspiring singers who do not read music, and so are excluded from most choirs, to access the health and wellbeing benefits derived from singing. In answering the core question of why songs from the oral traditions of 'other' cultures provided the lynchpin for this movement, the research also identified a set of alternative techniques and skills that enabled practitioners without classical training to become effective choir leaders.</p> <p>b) Insights into multipart singing in traditional societies: Bithell conducted first-hand, intensive research into musical repertoires and practices in Corsica and Georgia [2, 3, 4], both identified as preeminent sites where a unique heritage of polyphonic songs continued to be practised as part of a living tradition yet was under-researched. In each place, she worked with professional ensembles, cultural organisations and national institutions, alongside researching regional and village-based traditions. The research produced new insights into song repertoires and singing style, the functions and aesthetics of collective music-making, contemporary modes of transmission, culturally-informed understandings of the rewards of singing, and the role of singing in building and sustaining healthy communities.</p> <p>c) Understanding singing as a vehicle for intercultural encounters: Bithell's research into interactions between native culture-bearers and student-singers from diverse parts of the world included participant-observation in international summer camps, study tours, festivals and workshops (including some curated by Giving Voice and Village Harmony: see §4), interviews with teachers, hosts and participants, and close analysis of teaching styles and learning modes. Her findings reframe the often negatively loaded debate around cultural appropriation by highlighting</p>		

the humanistic potential of singing encounters that transcend geographical and linguistic borders and by revealing the mutual benefits of cultural exchange [1, 3, 5].

3. References to the research

1. **Bithell, C.** *A Different Voice, A Different Song: Reclaiming Community through the Natural Voice and World Song* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 376 pages + companion website. DOI: [10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199354542.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199354542.001.0001). Reviewed in major journals: ‘truly insightful and incisive,’ *Twentieth-Century Music*; ‘a rich and unique contribution,’ *Ethnomusicology Forum*. Led to key plenaries at international festivals in UK and Poland. Supported by **[G1]**.
2. **Bithell, C.** *Transported by Song: Corsican Voices from Oral Tradition to World Stage* (Scarecrow Press, 2007), 404 pages. Available on request. ‘A sophisticated and sensitive study,’ *Current Musicology*. Awarded 5 stars by *Songlines* (no. 1 world music magazine).
3. **Bithell, C.** ‘Georgian Polyphony and Its Journeys from National Revival to Global Heritage’, in C. Bithell and J. Hill (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 573–597. DOI: [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765034.013.017](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199765034.013.017). ‘A convincing methodology fleshed out with insightful analysis,’ *Popular Music*; ‘extremely interesting and fresh,’ *Ethnomusicology Forum*. Led to keynote for Spanish Society for Ethnomusicology **[G2]**.
4. **Bithell, C.** ‘Folklore, the City and a World in Transition: Intangible Cultural Heritage in Georgia (Caucasus)’, in B. Norton and N. Matsumoto (eds.), *Music as Heritage* (Routledge, 2018), 193–215. DOI: [10.4324/9781315393865](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315393865) **[G3]**.
5. **Bithell, C.** ‘Songs, Sounds and Sentiments in Translation: The Transnational Travels of Corsican and Georgian Polyphony’, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 21/2 (2012), 333–348 (peer-reviewed). Available on request.

Key grants (all awarded to Bithell as PI): **G1** Leverhulme Research Fellowship: ‘The Natural Voice and World Song’, 01/7/11–30/6/12, GBP25,057; **G2** British Academy/Leverhulme Small Research Grant: ‘Georgian Polyphony and its Post Revival Journey into Global Culture’, 28/6/10–31/12/11, GBP5,580; **G3** British Academy/Leverhulme SRG: ‘Safeguarding and Transmission of Musical Heritage in Contemporary Georgia’, 1/6/15–31/12/16, GBP9,922

4. Details of the impact

The underpinning research addressed a need for a deeper understanding of the history of the natural voice movement, the efficacy of its methods, and the dynamics of singing traditions in world cultures. Close collaboration with NVN members informed the direction of the research as it unfolded. The research also involved engagement with two other bodies espousing similar principles and practices: i) Giving Voice, a project of the world-leading Centre for Performance Research (theopr.org.uk), is devoted to exploring the world’s vocal traditions and developing vocal practice. Its 2-to-3-week-long festivals bring together performers, teachers and participants from across the world (average weekly attendance: 50 presenters and performers, 700 day-workshop participants, 1,000 audience members). ii) Village Harmony (villageharmony.org), a US-based association, produces singing camps and study tours in partnership with local teachers in different countries. Its mission is to provide ‘*authentic cross-cultural musical immersions for amateur and professional singers in the US and around the globe*’ (average participants per annum: 1,600) [1]. *A Different Voice* [1], whose companion website hosts extensive multimedia materials, including performance videos and links to songbooks, had impact in its own right as a resource that directly informs practice (610 hard copies sold; open access since September 2020; eBook also part of electronic subscription packages). Follow-on activity building on the wider corpus of research outlined in §2 included bespoke CPD training, public workshops, plenaries at international festivals, and the preparation of new digital resources for the NVN website. Bithell’s appointment to the NVN’s Board of Trustees in January 2018 was an endorsement of the value accorded to her expertise. This position – later consolidated by her election as Chair – enabled her to develop further resources and practical interventions and play a key role in defining future directions.

The research helped extend the reach and influence of the NVN itself [A]. By March 2020, the NVN had 732 members, up from 468 in December 2013 (just before the book’s publication). The majority are in the UK but 12% are now spread across the world. Through the NVN alone, the research/impact has reached practitioners in continental Europe, North and South America, the Middle East, Australia and New Zealand, alongside the UK and Ireland. Some UK-based members also regularly work overseas. As detailed on the NVN website, members typically run three or more weekly choirs, often supplemented by weekend workshops and educational or outreach projects (some dedicated to refugees or homeless people, or those in hospitals, care homes or

prisons). Through their work, the impact of Bithell's contribution through [1], CPD training and the online resources she has compiled extends to tens of thousands of amateur singers. The research has also reached hundreds of participants in workshops, festivals and singing camps, including those organised by Giving Voice and Village Harmony. Further details of reach and significance pertaining to beneficiaries feature in the sections that follow, which also include representative quotes from the sources listed in §5.

1. Providing professional development, influencing practice and expanding capacity

A Different Voice: The book was enthusiastically received by NVN members, who praised its 'accessible' style and spoke of how it 'affirmed', 'validated', 'empowered', 'inspired' and 'enriched' [B, C, D]. Many reported buying extra copies to give to others and encouraging both colleagues and choir members to read it [A, B, C, E]. Readers testified to how it endorsed and contextualised their own work, raised its status, lent weight to funding applications and advocacy, and increased their confidence, self-esteem, pride and resolve: *'It was an exciting and powerful affirmation of who I am'*; *'Caroline's book helped me understand better why I do what I do, and how it works, and why it is so effective and powerful'*; *'This book gave me confidence to stand up more easily for this way of working – I have seen a change over the last 4 years in how this type of choir is valued'*; *'It really imbues confidence when talking about the work, especially in medical or non-arts settings'*; *'It's great to say to funders – here's a book about this work!'* [B, C, D]. One choir leader promoted the book on a blog (1,998 views) as a resource that *'answers all your questions'* [F]. NVN president Frankie Armstrong credits *A Different Voice* with playing *'an important part in enriching and deepening the practices of the network'* and bringing in *'new people from more diverse backgrounds'* [A]. She promotes it on the NVN website as *'essential reading for anyone interested in the development of the Network and community music...and the what, why and how of song'* [F], and writes: *'I'd quite like to...insist that reading this book is a necessary qualification for being a member!'* [A]. The book has enabled founder members to appreciate their own role in a radical socio-cultural shift. For one, it was a revelation to realise that she had been part of *'a movement that has fundamentally changed the way that community singing happens...what we do...is life-changing for the people we work with as well as for ourselves'*; reading the book *'reaffirmed the purpose of what I'm doing...reignited the spark...and boosted my confidence'* [B].

Others attest to how the research brings together the histories and practices of the NVN in a way that makes them accessible and usable, whilst also providing scientific support for their work by synthesising research in other fields (e.g. music and the brain) and applying this to the NVN ethos and method [A, C, D]. The book is valued for the way it *'allows and encourages debate'* and helps people reach a more informed understanding: *'We can say: "Read the sections on that, it might help you think about it"'* [E]. One singing leader appreciated *'the book's unravelling of complex issues I have struggled with about the use of songs from different cultures...how to honour your sources, and encourage your groups to see music as an open door into other worlds'* [D]. Another affirmed that it *'acted as a stimulus for me to examine my own assumptions about songs in the NVN repertoire and encouraged me to find out more'* [C]. One reported: *'A documentary maker is making a film about my activist choir and I found the book a really useful reference to articulate my thoughts'* [D].

The book launched some readers on a new career path. Its *'profound impact'* led one choral conductor from Chile to relocate to the UK to research community choirs under Bithell's supervision on the MusM Ethnomusicology at The University of Manchester. After participating in Bithell's training and other NVN events, she returned to Chile to pioneer NV choirs there: *'I am starting something new that nobody else is doing here in Chile...I am passing on to other choir directors...the new knowledge and techniques I acquired through Caroline's work and my introduction to the NVN, in a way that has a positive influence on their own professional work and the experience of their choir members'* [G]. The book also alerted readers to other histories, giving *'a clearer sense of being part of a very varied and rich tapestry of other projects and strands of development'* [D]. Giving Voice director Joan Mills highlights how the book *'demonstrates and explains the importance of opportunities for exchange and interaction between organisations: it shows very clearly what can happen when you share knowledge and there is a cross-fertilisation between people who have similar ideas and visions, yet sometimes located within very different contexts'* [E].

CPD workshops: Workshops available to NVN members most often focus on learning songs which they can then teach to their choirs. Bithell's contribution is unique: she provides specialist knowledge grounded in her scholarly training and direct experience of diverse musical cultures, presented in a style that participants find 'accessible', 'informative', 'inspiring' and 'intriguing' [C, H]. Her contributions to the NVN's 3-day Annual Gatherings have ranged from workshops for 30 people to plenary sessions for 150 [H]. These were complemented in 2018–2020 by a variety of other events, including bespoke study days in Manchester (8 delegates from London, Edinburgh, Midlands and North West) and Cardiff (22 delegates from across Wales) [H] and workshops for other projects/organisations (see below); further study days planned for 2020 were postponed due to COVID-19 but will be rescheduled when circumstances allow. Participants gained new insights into the cultural contexts of specific repertoires, together with practical techniques and theoretical frameworks designed to enrich the ways in which songs are taught and performed; they also received resource packs to support the implementation of their new skills and knowledge [H]. Feedback testifies to how the workshops/study days changed understanding, increased confidence and influenced practice in ways that extend the impact to participants' choir members, *'provid[ing] firm foundations for our practice and ensuring we work in a respectful and authentic relationship with other cultures'* [C]. Respondents gained a *'deeper understanding of [the] role of singing other than entertainment/commercial/ performance'*, a *'better understanding of strategies to research/find research on the background of songs'* and a *'greater ability to embody a song through an increased sense of empathy and connectedness'*. Some reported feeling *'more empowered to teach this kind of material'*; others were inspired to *'encourage more vocal freedom...and experiment with timbres with the choir members'* or to pursue *'application of songs for life events (end-of-life, transitions, coming of age, celebrations, grief and lament)'* [H].

Online resources: In addition to the resources on the website for *A Different Voice* [F], Bithell has assembled a substantial body of resources for the members' area of the NVN website [F]. This now acts as a gateway to hundreds of pages of text-based materials and thousands of hours of listening and viewing, with links to research reports on the benefits of singing, briefings and toolkits, themed playlists, world and folk music documentaries providing accessible cultural context, and a collection of bespoke teaching demonstration videos (many filmed by Bithell herself). One member sums up the usefulness of this massive new resource: *'Ideas for warm ups, for when I'm feeling a bit uninspired. Videos of other teachers teaching a song and reflecting upon their methods to help self reflect and keep my practice good. Having accessible at the touch of a button recordings and information from so many musical traditions is a real support to being able to present songs knowledgeably. Working freelance can be lonely: these resources are an inspiration'* [C]. The demonstration videos have added value for overseas members: *'With the videos the language barrier is not so much of a problem...All of that material is very helpful, especially for those of us who are very far away and want to set up a choir with the philosophy of the NVN'* [G]. (NVN video views March–December 2020: 4,743)

2. Enhancing community music-making, creative practice and cultural understanding

Amateur choirs and connected communities: Through the extensive network of choirs led by NVN members, the trickle-down impact of Bithell's research reaches thousands of amateur singers in the form of stylistic or technical improvement, enriched cultural understanding, and increased confidence and wellbeing. Ways in which these benefits are channelled through the professional development undertaken by choir leaders have already been noted. Users of the research testify in particular to its positive influence on how they teach songs from different cultures: *'We have a deeper understanding of how the songs belong in their home culture and how they are sung. I can draw on this information when I'm teaching my own choir so that it is done as respectfully as possible, and being able to pass on knowledge of that particular culture means that I am helping to widen people's understanding of the world'* [C]. Impacts have extended to more innovative ways of working, leading some to change how they design concerts or singing holidays, or to experiment with new kinds of community events that bring neighbourhoods together around singing. One described how *A Different Voice* led her *'to try and make my concerts and choir rehearsals an experience of collective joy, and to try and do it deliberately, because I know why I'm doing it, and to have the techniques to be able to do it'* [C]. Another was prompted to rethink her approach to the singing holidays she leads in Morocco and to create opportunities to

exchange songs with local people: *'There's something much deeper in terms of communication and connection that happens when we have that kind of exchange and Caroline's book provided an important impetus for developing this more reciprocal approach'* [B]. This practitioner also works with war veterans and people in care homes and hospitals and values the book as an affirmation of *'the importance of the role of singing work in creating alternative positive realities for people... What Caroline has written is highly political...because it's about the change that can happen'* [B].

Voice workshops, festivals and intercultural encounters: Choir members and other singers (both amateur and professional) have encountered Bithell's research directly through attending her voice workshops and plenary talks at festivals. Through these events, her impact on vocal practices, participatory music-making, cultural awareness and theoretical understanding has reached a more diverse demographic, including performers of world music, members of transnational singing networks, and participants in intercultural summer camps. Her plenary talk at the 25th Anniversary Giving Voice Festival (UK, 2015; week-long event with around 800 attendees) elaborated key findings from [1] as part of *'taking stock of how much we had come to know, understand, recognise and feel about the voice in performance'* and *'stimulated many areas of discussion'* [E]. Her plenary at VoicEncounters in Poland, a two-week event co-produced by Giving Voice and the Grotowski Institute as part of Wroclaw's European Capital of Culture celebrations in 2016 (average daily attendance 350), addressed the theme of traditional vocal forms and skills as sources of experiment, transformation and inspiration for the performer [F]. These presentations to singers, actors and voice trainers from across the world, joined by local audiences, have enriched practice, reinforced synergies between different communities of practice and raised public awareness. More specifically, Giving Voice director Joan Mills writes: *'her research and very practical exploration of [Georgian] singing has been extremely helpful for choirs throughout the UK and within the Giving Voice project... because Caroline has been able to create a "bridge" between Georgian ethnomusicological research and those who may have no academic aims but participate in Georgian singing...for pleasure. These choirs and their leaders now have access to much more detailed understanding of the songs and culture at a level that is appropriate for beginners as well as those who have a much deeper level of expertise'* [E].

Bithell's Corsican and Georgian research has also benefitted hundreds of singers associated with Village Harmony. Co-director Patty Cuyler identifies [2] as *'the only book I urge participants to read'* as preparation for the singing camps in Corsica and [3] as *'top of my reading list for our Georgian music courses'* [I]. Cuyler included several other publications by Bithell in the resources for the 2020 online Corsican singing course, at which Bithell also gave a talk providing cultural and historical context [F]. Among the 50+ attendees from North America, Europe, South Africa and New Zealand were several choral directors who planned to share their learning with singers and colleagues in their home networks [I]. Bithell also worked with singers new to Georgian and Corsican traditions at the 2020 Narberth A Cappella Voice Festival (approximately 400 attendees) [F] and during a 2018 residency in Brazil, where she also gave a one-day workshop on the natural-voice method (part of Unicamp's Local Musicking project: 60 participants) [F]. In Georgia, she introduced natural-voice practices and Corsican songs to around 250 singers, music educators and folklorists at a series of workshops and talks (2014–18) [F].

Alongside interviews for the podcasts SingSing (188 downloads) and Harmony UK (441 plays), her research reached a wider public through her contributions as interviewee/consultant to documentaries on Georgian and Corsican music for BBC Radio 4 and Deutsche Welle [F].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Statement from President of the Natural Voice Network (14/08/20)
- B. Statement from NVN founder-member and host of CPD day (14/09/20)
- C. Set of three testimonials from choir leaders (06/08/20, 21/08/20, 16/10/20)
- D. Collated responses from survey of readers of *A Different Voice* (2018)
- E. Statement from Director of Giving Voice Project (23/08/20)
- F. Report: websites, blogs, podcasts, radio features and events referenced above (2014–2020)
- G. Letter from Chilean choir conductor (19/08/20)
- H. Collated feedback from participants in CPD workshops and study days (2018–2020)
- I. Statement from Co-director of Village Harmony (28/11/20)