



playing with noise

Jill Glenn learns how to sing

Master Your Voice In Six Weeks, says the press release for a course devised by soprano Julie Gray, of The Singing School in Bushey.

Six weeks? Amazing. Impossible.

Apparently not. Julie's programme of six lessons is designed as a taster for adult beginners, and each half hour session focuses on a different area of vocal technique. By the end you should have an appreciation of the skills involved, and the ability to reproduce some sweet sounds. Of course, you then need to practise. This is not a magic formula that will take in the Wicked Witch of the West at one end and spit out Cecilia Bartoli or Bryn Terfel at the other. But you can practise safe in the knowledge that what you're doing can only improve your voice. And other things, too. The benefits of singing – physical, emotional, social – are extensive. [See box, next page].

Although my relationship with singing is more vocal mystery than vocal mastery, and my voice a source of embarrassment – "You may feel that I am worse than a beginner and completely unteachable," I email to Julie, which, in retrospect, smacks of self-pity, but which I firmly believed – I am extremely tempted by this course.

I've had a secret yearning to sing since I left school (I loved morning assembly with a rousing hymn to start the day, loved the old-fashioned music lessons – *A Good Sword and a Trusty Hand*, *Early One Morning*, *Hearts of Oak*) but my desire has been muted (like my voice itself) over the years by friends and family, who, with my best interests at heart, have pointed out that I can't hold a tune. Add to that my seriously under-developed sense of rhythm (I can only clap in time by watching other people) and I think I may be Julie's nemesis. But she's up for the challenge, and, taking a deep breath – in more ways than one – we begin.

What do you want to do with your singing? Julie asks.

My ambitions sound terribly limited... to be able to sing a line or two of a song as it comes into my head without those around me shuddering. Or without my thinking that those around me are shuddering. It rapidly becomes apparent that the ability to sing is largely wrapped up – for me at least – in thinking that you can. Or can't.

And I want to be able to sing hymns at funerals. As I voice this, it sounds ridiculous (Julie looks at me as if I'm mad), but funerals are the place where I seem to do most of my singing, and the place where I'm therefore most aware of my limitations. I'm under no illusion that I'm going to turn into head chorister, but I would like to be able to open my mouth with confidence – and the belief that I'm not offending the dear departed, or my fellow mourners.

Our first half hour session involves simple instructions on how to stand and how to breathe, plus lots of reassurance from Julie – "It's not about making a beautiful sound at this stage" – while I work through some basic voice exercises. Half-paralysed as I am at the audacity of what I'm doing, I am determined to get this right. I'm encouraged to laugh, reminded that I'm not signing up for life, and that all we're doing is "playing with noise". It's quite fun, actually.

I end lesson one with a raucous rendition of *What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor?*, during which I discover that my primary school recorder lessons have left me with at least a basic ability to read music, and that, contrary to everything I've ever been told, I can hold a tune. I can also, it seems, take instruction: Julie tells me to try something a certain way, add some more emotion (yes, even into *What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor?*) and I find that I can. It's a good note on which to depart, after what feels

like the shortest 30 minutes in history. My head is buzzing with new terminology ... 'splat breaths'... 'rolled rs'... 'lip trills'... 'twang'... It's a real mind shift. And voice shift. I've survived it though, and I can't wait to go back for more.

Apparently, everyone has tongue issues, so we devote a good proportion of our second session to getting the position of this vital muscle just right. If it's too tight, too tense, then you produce a strangled sound – and end up with a distinctly sore throat.

The majority of articulation in singing comes from the tongue, not the lips, I'm told, so it's crucial to know what you're doing. I'm trying to produce a "rich, round noise... free and confident", and I find myself making some ridiculous faces, wagging my chin around to get everything in line – but all of a sudden there's quite a clear, pure sound coming out of my mouth, and even I can hear the difference. Was that really me? "There you are," says Julie, with considerable satisfaction. "I knew you could do it."

We talk about primal sound, too – coughs, laughs, sobs – and the way these integrate into the singing process. And about the emotional connections too. There is masses to learn; this is an intellectual process as well as a physical one, but it's surprisingly undaunting, and with a few simple tips it seems perfectly possible to improve, and to believe in that improvement.

On week three, we turn our attention to repertoire, rather than technique. I'm pleased, even though I appreciate the point of the exercises. It's just that I'm keen to put my new knowledge into practice in something recognisable. Julie has suggested I try a song from a musical, and, ironically (this is long before 'I'd Do Anything' hits the nation's tv screens), I pick *As Long As He Needs Me*, from *Oliver*. Could I have been the new Nancy?

This isn't a piece I would ever have thought I could sing before now, and if I'd tried it would have been in a low, breathy register that bears no relation to the notes as written or to my natural voice. For years I've sung in as low a voice as possible, in order to minimise the chance of anyone noticing I'm doing it. Julie tells me I'm a soprano. (It's the only point in the whole process when I think 'does this woman know what she's talking about?'). She

proves to be right, of course, and I find myself hitting high notes correctly, when I can overcome the fear of them. They lurk at the end of the score, taunting me from half-way down the page...

Julie has techniques to cope with this, though, which I lap up, and by the end of week four, when her next student arrives early, I'm confident enough to let a stranger sit in on the last few minutes of my lesson. And I'm not ashamed of the sound I'm producing.

Just as I really believe I'm making progress, with one lesson to go, my budding career is interrupted by an emergency admission to hospital. I lie in a semi-darkened room, with the notes of *As Long As He Needs Me* running through my head. I can see them on the page; I can feel my tentative attempts to pick them out on an imaginary keyboard under my fingers. I just can't sing them out loud. And I really miss it.

Somewhere between weeks one and five, Julie has turned me from someone who'd like to sing, into someone who can. And does.

For more details, visit www.juliegraysoprano.com or call 07789 187646.



THE BENEFITS...

Singing can: Increase self esteem and confidence ■ Energise and deliver a feeling of euphoria ■ Reduce stress ■ Promote self-discipline ■ Help breathing for asthma and panic attack sufferers ■ Help reduce feelings of anger, depression or anxiety (through the release of endorphins) ■ Encourage creativity ■ Overcome shyness ■ Improve articulation and presence when speaking ■ Improve confidence in public speaking and public appearances ■ Bring people together

and

May: Develop and strengthen lungs ■ Strengthen back, correct posture ■ Increase oxygen to the brain ■ Tone intercostal muscles and diaphragm ■ Strengthen bowel, bladder and stomach ■ Benefit hearts and circulation by improving aerobic capacity ■ Improve sleep patterns