

Engaging the community in An Anthology of All Things

The recent release of Johnny Parry's *An Anthology of All Things* has quietly turned a few heads (and ears) towards what is quite a unique piece of work. The likes of the respected (and global) *Monocle* magazine and PRS for music have given column inches to what is a fine example of composition that engages the community genuinely in the work.

At a time when many schools are looking for both original ways to engage students in large scale performances whilst simultaneously engaging the wider community within the music across the longer term, Johnny Parry may have just hit upon (and pulled off) a creative solution. Keith Ayling asked him how *An Anthology of All Things* came about.



What were the inspirations for this project?

I previously wrote a piece of music entitled 'Rebuild it Piece by Piece', whereby the lyrics were a collection of clichéd uplifting phrases. Individually they hold a concise sentiment but strung together they became complex, contradictory and almost tragic in the way each phrase made the previous more arbitrary. Bedford Creative Arts, who commissioned the work, and myself were interested in expanding on this idea of collecting snippets of language from which point my own contribution was in the order I presented them and how they engaged with the music.

Another early decision was to create something that unashamedly attempts to be truly universal, a task which I knew of course was ultimately insurmountable. By choosing the movements to be inspired by the most fundamental, and irresolvable, traits of the human condition 'An Anthology Of All Things' was always going to proudly fall short. Broad themes such as love, death and childhood were being dealt with directly within the movements, however I wanted the very sound of the attempt to be the unsung topic that resides within the whole piece.

The very notion of creating an anthology of all things maybe flawed but the compulsion within us to discover truths through understanding one-another and expressing ourselves is very real and equally extraordinary.

It appears to have a very unique feel in that the community were heavily involved in the composition? How did that process work?

Once all the eight movements were assigned a topic as we then approached the public. We set up ways for people to donate a sentence that was personal to them relating to each theme. We used social networking and set up a website as well as visiting different community groups and running workshops. We received hundreds of unique thoughts which were then to be pieced together to make the libretto. The way in which people engaged with the idea was very generous and with every donation the work became richer in ways I couldn't have predicted. *Movement 1 - Things I Like About Myself* for instance was met with an awkward trepidation, people often cited fairly superficial traits they respected in themselves rather than the important qualities we can easily see in each other. In this sense the

public shaped the work for me as the movement became more about the nature of the dialogue than the answers themselves.

How did you connect the musical composition to the collected lyrics so that they didn't feel disparate?

Good question as this was potentially one of the hardest parts to achieve. I rather foolishly made a commitment at the beginning to not doctor peoples donations, however to then attach them to melodies became extremely difficult as they all had different lengths and phrasing. I made sure all the verbs, nouns and adjectives stayed the same but eventually found small ways to help make them flow alongside each other. For example I allowed myself to swap, 'you are', to, 'you're', and I would take extracts from the longer donations. I had to build a huge database which reflected the syllables and phrasing of all the donations then started to find ways to combine them all to fit the music. At times I slightly felt like a data-analyst resolving a puzzle that potentially had no solution all the time trying to remain musically and conceptually creative. Even remembering this task now makes me start to sweat.

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From a composition point of view, what were some of the lessons you learnt during this process?

One of the most enjoyable elements of this project was not only did we want the public to help write the work we also wanted them to sing it. We set up a choir specially, now the Bedford Arts Choir, inviting anyone to join without audition. As a result we had a mixture of musical backgrounds. It was tempting to allow the fact that we were not a professional choir to inform the quality of the music. With limited rehearsals I had to write more thoughtfully than I have in the past. I had to justify any complexities in the score to myself rather than resorting to it through compositional restlessness. Mostly this lead me to find a solution that was not only achievable but perhaps less convoluted than the music I may have come up with otherwise. It became clear to me that although amateur, the wealth of musical opportunity within our choir meant that any compromise to the overall musicality of the compositions would be only through my limitations.

Incidentally although originally set up for just this project the Bedford Arts Choir has continued to flourish way

after *An Anthology Of All Things*. My close friend Roger Illingworth who was the accompanist on my project has taken over running it creating a really solidified and accomplished group of singers as they take on many wonderful new compositions and unique projects.

How have you learnt some of the other skills needed such as conducting? Particularly without formal training, do (classical) musicians respond in the same way to you?

There are many aspects of what I do that involve a round-about-the-houses approach to achieving something that I am not actually trained to do. I have however cleverly surrounded myself with many talented people who I constantly ask for advice. I am also happy to wildly stab in the dark as an undignified means to an end, which is perhaps a quite accurate description of my conducting. Having me conduct the piece was a very last minute solution. I have conducted smaller pieces before but more in the capacity of a giant metronome than an emotive conductor. I was very lucky to have a few crucial lessons with local conductor Ian Smith leading up to the performance but ultimately it was the

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interview with Roger Illingworth,
Conductor of the Bedford Arts Choir

Can you provide a brief overview of the Bedford Arts Choir?

The Bedford Arts Choir is unique for Bedford - an amateur vocal group focussing on contemporary works. The artistic focus at Bedford Creative Arts is producing ambitious and new large scale artworks and we want our work with music to be equally bold and risk taking. The choir is now a regular part of Bedford Creative Art's programme and our commissions for the choir are usually original new music produced or arranged specifically for the choir by living composers and songwriters.

In what way does a conductor relate to a mixed community choir that has gathered in this way? What are the challenges?

This is the first choir I've been involved with, initially as rehearsal pianist and then as leader. It was set up specifically for the Johnny Parry project, and when that project ended I thought it was a shame to disperse it! 30 people in one room with an interest in performing contemporary music seemed too good an opportunity to pass up. We have a number of songwriters and composers that sing in the choir and help with arrangements and writing of the material, which has been an invaluable resource. We're constantly looking to the next project and ways of involving the choir in the process, sometimes through contributing lyrical content, sometimes through suggesting source material. One of the biggest challenges is the range of abilities. We tend to work from written scores, which people relate to in very different ways: some people are strong readers, but for many of our members it's simply a visual aid for learning aurally. Another challenge is choosing repertoire that satisfies the choir's tastes and abilities whilst also satisfying what I see as the artistic remit of the choir.

Roger, I believe you also teach - how does working with a community choir differ from more formal teaching?

The rehearsals for the community choir have a much more informal feel. People are there to wind down as well as to produce high quality art, so it's important not to over-do the educational elements. We tried introducing some sight-singing and solfège elements to the warm ups, but I think the formality was a bit of a turn-off for members, so we abandoned it quite quickly!

In relation to the Johnny Parry project, (and possibly other projects) do the participants feel more excited to work on locally composed material than they would on well known repertoire?

I think a lot of our members are passionate about local issues, so they're excited to work in this way. There are plenty of other local choirs performing well known repertoire, so this feels absolutely central to our identity. Saying that, I'm interested in starting to pair the local contemporary music with other 20th and 21st century works from more established composers, but it will always have a contemporary element.

How did the project evolve? In what basic order from composition to final recording / performance? How would you amend that order next time - from the point of view of the community participants?

Johnny's starting point was the lyrical material, and a lot of the initial choir members got involved through that process. The works were then constantly workshopped with the choir, often undergoing several transformations from the first time we sang them to the final product. The performance was always the main goal, with the recording taking place afterwards. With hindsight, it might have been good for the recording to be part of the rehearsal process, and to have had the recording ready for that first performance, but it would have added a massive amount of logistical issues to an already intricate and ambitious undertaking!

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