

From patient to performer

BY PETER CAWREY

Peter Cawrey lives in Harpenden, Hertfordshire, with his wife Dorothy. He had a salvage laryngectomy for squamous cell carcinoma in 2015, three years following his initial radiotherapy. Due to complications and a complex recovery, he has elected not to have a speech valve, but uses an electrolarynx. Here, he tells us about the way in which his vocal identity has changed and evolved, and his involvement with the Shout at Cancer Choir, led by Thomas Moors.

Everyone told me that I had a loud voice. In the company of more silent people and in such calm confined spaces, my wife Dorothy would lean in and tell me to be quiet. It was however useful to have a loud voice at work on building sites, to speak and often shout to members of my team over inclement weather, the din and the distance. My laryngectomy fortunately coincided with my retirement from work and the worry of not communicating with an audience faded into the background. I often refer to it as that lump of concrete around my neck or, my ball and chain. Like a convict, I feel that it is an unwelcome, ever-present imposition that wasn't there before.

It may have been two years after surgery, at the regular ENT clinic, that my speech and language therapist asked if Dorothy and I would like to attend a concert by a group of laryngectomees at a church hall in West Hampstead. Dorothy and I acknowledged our SLT team as we quietly sat down in the pews with an audience of about 100 eager medical technicians, students, family supporters and other laryngectomees. There was a buoyant, nervous, excited and encouraging buzz of expectation in the air as we watched eight laryngectomees form the front row, with about a dozen singers and musicians behind them in the transept. I was spellbound. The raw guttural sound at the front, was counterplayed at the rear and all around by exquisite music and singing of a professional standard. They rocked the



The Shout at Cancer Choir.

church to the rafters as the audience clapped throughout the last three songs and stood as one in applause, with shouts of 'bravo!'

I identified and wanted to join in, help and be with these people: my kind of people. We all have the same disability. We never talk about it. Why should we? There is too much life to live. When we are together, we do it as a choir for each other, the audience and that lonely laryngectomee out there who might too be uplifted and want to join in. We do it for our community.

When I was in the school choir, aged seven, I was told off for growling and told to just mime the words. Can you imagine my total surprise when I initially

presented to Maestro Thomas, with my electro larynx swinging on my lanyard and he accepted me with open arms? I said that perhaps I could help as a stagehand or do some administration. His bewilderment turned into a wide grin as he said in his Belgian accent, "No! You can sing." He added "if you like", then he walked off. I was in.

We rehearse in the basement of a coffee shop off Old Street in London, where all the locals welcome us as friends and we have a social catch up. After an international convention in Brighton, we had three laryngectomees from the USA visit us. We were rehearsing an aria and we coerced them to join in the singing. They later wrote that it was the best part of their trip.

We are grateful to our support team of professionals and enthusiastic amateurs. We have a soprano who has helped with breathing and voice delivery, a voice-over linguist who has helped with annunciation and scripts for our productions, together

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with a beatbox expert who helped with dexterity of sounds and movement of the mouth. We also learn from the various musicians that accompany us and, above all, from Maestro Thomas.

We may be performing in an abbey, or a school hall; we could deliver a whole programme in front of cameras, or a light afternoon interlude for a convention of medical professionals. In the midst of COVID, we provided a live and audio-visual presentation at The World Choir event in Gent. I went along, just to sit in the audience and enjoy our concert, to say hello to my musician friends and to meet new laryngectomee acquaintances from The Netherlands, France and Belgium.

We have received awards at film festivals in the USA for our documentary, *Can You Hear My Voice*, by fellow laryngectomee and professional film maker Bill Brummel for Atos. We were recognised by (former) Prime Minister Theresa May. I had the honour and privilege to attend Westminster Abbey in 2021 to receive, on behalf of Shout at

Cancer, The Queens Award for Voluntary Service; other representatives have attended the Queen's Garden Party.

I have recharged, adjusted and now I have a new lease of life. We shall continue to spread the word, 'life after laryngectomy is good', through our concerts. Our current project focuses on recovery from radiation and new growth, singing in harmony with recordings of the sounds of the revered trees at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We are recovering from being contained by the beast of cancer. Like convicted prisoners being released after being contained in cells, we need to adjust rehabilitate and find a different place in society to the one we left behind.

We are often referred to as laryngectomees, or 'larys' for short, but some think that's derogatory. My grandchildren call me 'Robot Grandad'. Never call us patients. We are not patients. We have finished with cancer. We are over it. I hope that you can join us and move on. Just call us by name, or better still, 'Hey, you singers!'

Scan here to watch the Shout at Cancer Choir performing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjGRUd00Uow>



Back in 2016, Thomas Moors told us all about the creation of Shout at Cancer – the charity set up to help people who have had a laryngectomy. To read this article, simply scan this QR code.



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