

What on earth is a 'Song Surgery'? I was about to find out. I turned up to an address in South London both intrigued and pleased by my invitation to this event, and very curious. I'd quite deliberately not done my usual 'research by Google'. I wanted the experience to be fresh, and for the reality not to clash with my preconceptions. But whatever expectations I had were far exceeded – it was a marvellous afternoon and I left inspired and somewhat emotional. It was probably a rather good thing I hadn't properly briefed myself, as it would have been daunting. For the other participants were all classical musical and dance professionals who'd long been at the top of their game, whereas I don't know my Asola from my Elgar. My only qualification is my dopamine deficiency.

I dragged my daughter, Lucy, along to film the experience and we were both immediately struck by two things, First, the warmth and friendliness of everyone involved. More on that in a moment. We were greeted by the soprano Bibi Heal, the charismatic, blond-bobbed force behind 'Song Surgery' and her pianist in this project, conductor and composer, Stephen Barlow. He is also the owner of that second thing.

The room. Simply calling it a room is a bit like calling Windsor Castle a cottage. The wonderful space we were in was an airy expanse, a South London version of one of those New York lofts that in TV series seem unfeasibly home to poorly paid cops, all stretching high ceiling and extensive wooden flooring. It was once a printing works built on a spot where, pre-war taxi drivers used to park their cabs. There's a large table in the middle, a grand piano close by and harpsichord to one side, and all around some pretty wonderful pieces of art. Renowned portrait artist June Mendoza has painted Queen Elizabeth II, Princess Diana and Lady Thatcher in her time and here you'll find her portrait of Stephen sitting at that piano in this very room. Near neighbours are a gorgeous, larger than life (or death) full colour Tutankhamun and a brightly painted rocking horse off a real carousel. Stephen tells me "it's a bit of a kaleidoscope - a musician's HQ with all my books, archives, various keyboards and instruments, scores and sheet music, and the pictures and prints are an intentionally eclectic mixed-bag - fitting for a room dedicated to rehearsal and creativity in a joyful way."

We're all sitting round the large central table, complete with cans of juice and ridiculously luscious cannoli and that same sense of playfulness is to the fore when Bibi suggests we go round and explain how we know each other.

"I first met Will about 15 years ago when he cast me as a duck in his *Wind in the Willows* for the Royal Opera House" she begins, smiling at Will Tuckett, ex-Royal Ballet dancer, choreographer and award winning film and theatre director. He's sitting next to Zenaida Yanowsky, who was until recently, principal dancer at the Royal Ballet. They worked there together for more than twenty years and back in the day were an item. Now both married to other people, they clearly still have an easy rapport. Bibi continues "I've hero worshipped Zen since seeing her dance live in a ballet of Will's at that time. Stephen conducted my very first professional opera, *The Marriage of Figaro* at Garsington Opera in 2000. And he conducted Dom in an opera back when he was a student singer at Guildhall." Dom is Dominic Best, a film maker specialising in the arts. Bibi continues "I met Dom literally only 4 weeks ago by gatecrashing his mate's picnic at Grange Park Opera and eating their profiteroles!". Sophie Knowles, the English National Ballet's Dance Health Manager, like myself, is a newbie, both to the group and the project.

Where this all heading is still slightly mysterious. This latest project is an extension of 'Song Surgery' in which Bibi and Stephen 'prescribe' a song handpicked for an individual based on their suggested mood or theme. And then perform it. They currently have about 60 songs in their repertoire, mostly by well-loved composers, from Mozart and Mendelssohn to Ivor Gurney and Samuel Barber. Bibi says "If you know *why* you're hearing a particular song, why it was chosen for you, and have the picture painted for you before you hear it, you gain far more nourishment from it." 'Songs That Move' builds on this principle but adds "participatory movement to build an artistically-led physio programme."

Stephen tells me later "I've always had a deep interest in the science of how and why music and art (and of course architecture) affect us beyond the more simple pleasure we gain. Of course, the pleasure and the science are inextricably linked. The practical use of the arts in matters of our health both physical and emotional has developed in leaps and bounds in my lifetime as I mentioned, and when Bibi with whom I enjoy working so much drew me into her project, thinking with such a potential breadth of involvement from others across the performing arts, I was thrilled to join her."

That's music to my ears. As one of our guest consultants on the Movers & Shakers podcast put it, "exercise is not a recommendation, it is a prescription". Having this condition must, I suppose, be dreadful for those who've always done plenty of exercise and love it and now feel frustration that they are less proficient. For me it's a different sort of challenge: I have never done much exercise and thinking about regular grunting in a sweaty gym does not excite me. But I must do it, must just keep moving. So anything that does intrigue, entice or tempt me is worth investigating.

My family might observe music is more of an obsession than a hobby for me, sadly not playing it, tracking down new stuff rather than making it, and my knowledge is eclectic, extensive but patchy – encyclopedic only if the volumes concerned were missing half their pages and the library containing it had half burned down. So, I'm rather out of my depth here - classical music is pretty much in a wing of the library I'm only now beginning to explore. Still, that is half the pleasure - surprising yourself discovering new friends, new sounds to enjoy.

Bibi's plans seem purposefully loose, open to developing organically, yet based around a trusted formula. She first explains the meaning of the song or poem or simply translates it into English. She, as she puts it, doesn't, simply lean against the piano but instead embellishes each song with gestures – picking little flowers for example. Then Stephen plays and Bibi sings. It is an exquisite performance, full of fragile power. The rest of us listen to 7 songs, entranced by their beauty, before returning to earth to talk about what to do next.

And this is where I come in, to wreck any sense of ethereal splendour. But then the whole point of this exercise is to help people with Parkinson's so they want my input: what can I do and what do I want to do? The end point may well be a series of short films, which people can follow at home, pirouetting against Parky.

Now I've always wished I could dance, and often do have a bash, in the privacy of my kitchen rather than a club, hampered only by my rhythmic shortcomings, lack of litheness and stamina, and all-round inability to get more than a slow skank going.

Quite separately, I really enjoy watching ballet – the more modern, the fewer tutus, the better - but although slightly envious of my fellow Shaker Paul Mayhew-Archer’s involvement with the English National Ballet dance classes, the thought me of dancing the classics is so utterly ridiculous that it has never seriously crossed my mind. Until now.

So I tell the others that I have always been crap at dancing, love the idea of dancing but having Parkinson's has given me permission to dance and be crap because nobody would expect me to be anything else, other than crap.

So, with that declaration of licenced inadequacy out of the way, it is on with the session. The song that has been chosen for me is Fauré’s *Les Berceaux* (The cradles). Written in 1879, it is based on a powerful poem by R F Sully-Prudhomme, the first person to be awarded the Nobel prize for literature.

This is the final verse with the official translation, and then my version.

***Les berceaux* by Gabriel Fauré (The cradles)**

<i>Et ce jour-là les grands vaisseaux, Fuyant le port qui diminue, Sentent leur masse retenue Par l’âme des lointains berceaux</i>	And on that day the great ships, Leaving the dwindling harbour behind, Shall feel their hulls held back By the soul of the distant cradles.
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When the huge ships reach that day
And surge forth, past the fading port
Their bulk seems restrained, made fraught
By the call from souls of cradles far away.

Zen and I stand next the piano while Will gets to work running his finger over the sheet music, humming under his breath. At lightening pace, he come up with an idea to bring out the central conception of the poem – our movements will reflect the two main images, of women rocking a baby’s cradle and the motion of ships struggling to escape the harbour, taking their men folk away from home. He takes a few minutes to explain the moves to Zen. Then I’m up. It’s my turn. The music starts and I concentrate hard trying to mimic and mirror her movements, trying to remember the instructions: move my arms, leading with the back my hand, as though trailing it through water. Although my focus had to be fierce just to keep up, it feels rather blissful, slow and graceful. I am, of course, well aware the video will show only outward awkwardness and not the inner peace.

In the end it is just an old bloke waving his arms about a bit but it feels good, an achievement. When we have run through it a couple of times Zen beams and hugs me. I feel a sense of relief but a much greater sense of satisfaction, even joy. I wasn't exactly agnostic about this idea in the first place. After all music is good, art is good and exercise is definitely good for Parkinson's so in combination they can't be bad. I’d talked to Paul about dance and was rather envious of his experience. Nevertheless, the notion of “prescribing songs’ sounds whimsical, bordering on the eccentric. But I’m a convert. I can’t wait to discover what happens next. I have a feeling that whimsy works.