

Freeing the Voice

An Interview with Christiaan Boele

by Matthew Thurber

In 1905, Swedish opera singer Valborg Werbeck-Swärdström was in the blossom of her career. At 25 years of age, she was performing to rave reviews on the finest stages of Europe. Then, just before the summer holidays, disaster struck: she completely lost her voice while singing on stage. Once in easy command of many octaves, she suddenly could not sing a single note.

Surprised but undaunted, Werbeck used the time off to turn her fine sensibility and intelligence toward her own voice. Singing had always come naturally to her; as a child in the Swedish countryside, she had sung as easily as she breathed. So what had happened? She traced her vocal difficulties back to age 15, when she first began to study singing at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm. The lessons she had there and in following years were given in good faith, but through their materialistic methods they had gradually ensnared and imprisoned her once-free voice in husks and layers that even her great talent could not, in the end, overcome. So she began to seek a new way to sing and, along with this, a new way to *think* about singing: a way that sought no longer to 'build' and "form" her voice, but to free the voice she had known so intimately since childhood.

Early in this process she met Rudolf Steiner, who immediately recognized her talent.¹ Steiner soon became a helping guide for Werbeck's research and the project took on dimensions she had never dreamed of. By 1924 she had established a full-fledged "School of Uncovering the Voice", which included numerous new understandings of singing and music, as well as countless exercises that can help each person to progress on his or her artistic and personal path. Steiner endorsed Werbeck's school of singing as "sanctioned by him and established on the basis of spiritual science."²

Werbeck, who lived in Germany, began taking students and achieving artistic and therapeutic successes. With the help of her husband Louis, she completed a book on her approach: *Uncovering the Voice*. But like so many other cultural blooms, her singing school was suppressed by Nazism and the Second World War and all of the copies of her book were lost. After the war she turned to singing therapy, and for two decades she healed countless people, all the while developing numerous therapeutic singing exercises. She was often asked to take on new singing students, but she refused, saying that the people who came to her were too formatted by traditional music training and would not be able to sufficiently unlearn these wrong practices and concepts in order to receive what she had to offer them.

In 1967, through her therapy work, Werbeck met a young musician named Jürgen Schriefer. Here at last, she perceived, was someone who might be able to receive the

1 She reports his first words to her as: "What a beautiful etheric larynx you have! I do not want to be immodest, but it seems to me that you sing as I speak. And isn't it true, if one did not speak or sing with sublimated air, the throat might not be equal to the demands placed on it?" (*Uncovering the Voice*, Sophia Books, 2008, p. 24)

2 *Uncovering the Voice*, p. 26-27.

gifts she had to offer. She began giving him lessons; and soon she had a small circle of regular students. During the last five years of her life, she made them the heritors of her rich knowledge and wisdom of the voice.

Christiaan Boele, born in 1956 in The Hague, was one of the first students of Jürgen Schriefer. For more than 40 years now he has travelled the world – often 10 months out of the year – to teach and promote Werbeck singing. When Covid restrictions created openings in his schedule, I jumped at the opportunity to invite him to lead a three-year singing training here in Provence, France. (The training was started in 2019 by Gerda Euskirchen, a former student of Christiaan.) During our module this May, I sat down with Christiaan to interview him for *New View* and posed a number of questions.

Why is it important for people to sing?

I think that most people nowadays are missing out on a magnificent opportunity: the opportunity to be in touch with and to develop one's voice. We do not value the process of learning with the voice and do not notice that through singing we are in touch with ourselves in a different way than in any other activity. A reason why we do not do this more is also because singing is very complex and, in our days, increasingly difficult to handle for our modern way of processing things.

What is it about modern life that makes singing harder?

In earlier days, the ability of people to connect to singing was easier because they were singing more out of their heart and their intellectual consciousness was often not even very developed. That allowed them to dive into the sphere of singing in a way that was not self-conscious. They were not 'trying to sing'.

Also the wars, both World Wars, have influenced the whole inner constitution of the human being where, especially after the second World War, lots of the cultural heritage from earlier centuries has been lost. There were still, in the 1920s, for example, the German *Wandervögel*. That was a strong movement where young people travelled, especially through the countryside, to meet with each other and to sing together. Through the Nazi time and then the Second World War this has been totally lost. It was a very idealistic movement in those days and I do not doubt that there was something similar in other countries as well that I am not aware of.

You can also see in countries where there was oppression, where there were dictators, where people were suppressed, that there was often a strong singing movement, which was a way you could inwardly free yourself, at least from time to time. Estonia was one example. In the last years before they became independent, every second year they had a song festival with 10,000 or more people singing at the same time in one big place. It was not a political demonstration but it was like an inner 'freedom-call' as I understand it.

In earlier days the slaves, and other people who were unfree, were singing to free themselves.

Do you think that singing has declined?

Very surely so. One can clearly see that singing since the mid-1800s already was rapidly declining. The range of the voice has been getting narrower. The singing of the low range has become increasingly popular. Also in speaking, low voices are clearly dominating and [in singing] we do not have any access to the high notes, so we have lost there a very large part of our singing voice ; singing does not come naturally anymore.

What can we do to transform the situation?

If one looks at the beginning of the 20th century, there was hardly any personal hygiene – no showers, no toothbrushes – and now we have a very highly developed hygiene. Care for the outer body is something that we have understood in the last century. Now, increasingly we need to care for the inner life and also – which is connected! – care for the voice.

What is unique about Werbeck singing?

This impulse is not only meant to be for people who are so-called ‘musical’: it is for anyone who wants to connect to the voice. That is one of the most important things. There is no ambition of development of the voice, that one *wants* to reach some goal, rather the first thing is, as when you care for a plant, that you nourish it and take care that it can have good conditions to grow in. To live into the question : What can I contribute so that my voice increasingly feels well and can develop in its own good way?

Also this Werbeck schooling is not a certain method with a certain ideal for how [the voice] should sound – operatic or in one or other style- – but it is a *universal background work* with the voice that can then lead to all different possibilities in singing, not limited to certain styles.

In my own experience there are many different innovations in Werbeck singing – for example, in breathing, in the approach to speech, in how one fills a space – that only now are being adopted by some more modern singing schools.

For my feeling Werbeck lived like a century ahead of her time. She was able to grasp methods that already are becoming even more valid the longer we go on with the changes happening to our life and our time. In any field connected to singing she has found new approaches, you will find this evident in different singing methods – and there are many in the world. One cannot say, and I will never say, that there is only one right method. But what I admire is that she can put this, all that is in the singing, together with the whole background of Anthroposophy, coming out of a deepened image of the human being.

What is the meaning of singing on a deeper human level?

I hesitate to have this published, but nevertheless I will try and answer your question. One can say, singing on a deeper level is when the human being relates to the higher self and receives and reconnects to pre-birth impulses which are also part of the reason why we are living. This brings part of us alive, which is not easily addressed in any other way.

Also the elements that we are using in singing- – working with cosmic principles (as evinced by Steiner, in the vowels uniting to the planetary sphere; in the consonants uniting with the zodiac) – these elements have a strong effect on the structure of our physical and inner life and bring us their harmony and the ability to widen from our ‘lower’ being – that which we are transforming in our daily life, if we are awake for it – towards our higher self. So that is what singing really can do.

In one course you said that we are bringing into the physical world sounds that exists inaudibly in the spiritual world.

Imagine standing on a bridge and looking on a large river. You see all this water streaming and you ponder how it has been streaming there for thousands of years and it looks like it will stream for quite a while after we are [gone]. This is an image of the cosmic ‘sound stream’ that we connect with when we sing. Our ears cannot hear the cosmic sound, but in the moment when we sing we are connecting to it as when we look at the river. Even if we do not see the river directly, we have the memory of the river in that moment. This reconnects us to that which was audible [before] birth: where we can find our aim – pre-birth intentions – and the reason why we live a life on Earth.

You have also been a professional singer on many stages. Do you feel that for you as an artist, this way of singing has been crucial for your development?

Yes. I would go still further and say this impulse has, in a way, saved my life. Without this impulse I think I would have become quite a materialist. Although my upbringing wasn't like that, I would surely have done something in business and would have become more of a ‘normal’ guy. The singing has awakened in me my [higher] capacities and continues to do so. This means neverending development and change, and I have come to see that as my aim. Changing inside yourself through the vehicle of doing the singing exercises is actually more important than the outcome on the outside, which is like the flowers coming forth from within the plant. The nourishment of the whole inner life and the changes wrought are the most important.

You've said in your courses that the voice can also tell us things that are coming from the future.

Yes and to that one can add that there are scientific studies in Europe, and in the United States, that show that one can discover severe illnesses – like Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, ALS and others – more than a decade before their outbreak. . The pattern of the voice has a strong connection to health and inner structure – not visible, but audible, if you are sensitive in listening for it.

In the Covid era, public singing has been forbidden almost everywhere.

I guess that the more singing gets lost, after a while the more the need will arise to reconnect to our voices and to see how ‘genius’ the human voice can be. It connects to so many different layers of our whole being that in the beginning one has no clue as to how deep this really can be. I would invite anyone who has the slightest inkling of interest to try and not to care about where they are with their voice but to just see

what one can do. And that can be satisfying in the utmost, as I have experienced with thousands of people.

In working with others, no matter what that work precisely is, I think the quality one really needs is to learn to listen deeply to students, in such a way that you are a mirror with your ear for how each person can experience themselves in their "doing". I see that as a humble task: that I do not only share my long-collected abilities but that I can really lend my ear to the student, who experiences him or herself in different ways that would not be possible without my ear. I also experienced that once with a Swiss singer who listened so deeply to me that I felt, "I feel myself differently." It's one of my practical tools as well as a continuing journey to realise the ideal.

For somebody who has never tried Werbeck singing before, if they asked you to describe it, what would you say?

[My explanation] will stay have to be theoretical and I warmly suggest that anyone who has only the faintest interest takes the opportunity to then experience this also. In this schooling there is a profound change in the approach towards the voice and that happens through simple exercises, which anyone, even people who have 'no voice' and have never sung in their whole life, can do. The changes happen in the approach towards breathing, in the approach to the musical sound and the tone world, in the approach to speech syllables and their effect... . And what you can notice immediately is that inside us the whole fluidity of our body starts to stream differently and we start to be penetrable for the sound of our physical instrument ; we are harmonizing our physical instrument, one could say, with our inner one. In a very practical way, you learn to bring a spiritual consciousness together with your soul-feeling to how that communicates with your physical body. It's not physical exercises like "do this, do that", it's really a wholeness as to how we approach these aspects in an inner, deepened way, that is very effective.

Just a few days ago, a musician said that when she goes after the singing lesson to the bathroom and looks in the mirror she thinks she's ten years younger. Indeed, you are adding youth forces in the way you are approaching yourself in singing.

Why is Werbeck singing so little-known compared to other fruits of Anthroposophy?

Steiner said to Werbeck that she should make herself "not too easily available" and also that she only would pluck some of the fruits of her work in very old age. When I see how the situation has been from the 1970s on, when I joined with this work, I think the cooperation of some of the people working with this impulse has not been as satisfactory, as profound, as was needed, so there is not a supporting organization behind the impulse and it is quite scattered, only carried by what some individuals are doing. My prophecy (which is dangerous to say!) is that this could increasingly become more popular for millions of people, who suddenly realize how important the voice is, and how deep, but simple, the access to this field can be if you give it some attention. It doesn't need so much work every day, you don't need to be that serious, but at least sometimes water the plant.

We use our voices all the time, many of us for our jobs, and so often we don't take care of our voices--it's just a tool that we use and throw away.

I fully agree.

Is there anything else that you'd like to share with the readers of New View?

I am very thankful that people may be willing to read what I have to say and to consider these new ideas. I think that it is important that we not only care for things towards which we have a primary liking. For some people the idea of singing at all is not interesting, because they do not believe that they have any voice and do not see how this could widen their human experience. In the high north of Finland, in Rovaniemi at the Arctic Circle, I was brought to a singing course and the daughter of the man who was driving said suddenly, "Daddy, why don't you come with us to the singing course?" The answer of this man was typical. He said, "Well, that is really the last thing I would like to do, that other people would need to hear my voice. I cannot sing at all." We have sunk so far that many people do not have even a belief that they could have any voice. That could be one of the most important tasks of the School of Uncovering the Voice: to bring back this basic ability to sound musically through the voice . This impulse is not just for talented people but it's a really a public educational impulse, that is accessible and can bring enormous joy. Also, it is not limited by age. From pre-birth to after death we can experience that singing can have healing, uniting and strengthening effects on our whole society.

Steiner said that if people sang more, and more righteously, criminality would decrease. I think that it matters where you put your inner attention, and if we can guide that towards singing, we are in a realm where we meet the best of the impulses that we have in ourselves. They become perceptible and by that we grow as human beings and go towards a united and harmonious future.

Matthew Thurber lives near Avignon, France.

[Matthew : Where does Christiaan live?]