

It's clear even before we start our interview that Vivien Ellis' twin passions are music and harnessing its power to bring a community together. Ten minutes after we meet, she's already regaled me with tales of eighteenth century ballads, her efforts to learn how words were pronounced in historical songs in a bid for authenticity, and her love of first person musical narratives that put the singer 'in the character's shoes'. And that's before her impromptu performance of a Bulgarian work song, right there in her suburban living room.

The piece, an otherworldly ululation between vocal registers, is a song traditionally performed by communities of working women, to accompany domestic tasks such as knitting and calling animals out to pasture. It's something the sixtysomething classically trained singer and wellbeing practitioner learned while on a music teachers' exchange programme to Bulgaria in her twenties. Like many key turning points in her life, this trip is referred to by Ellis as a "Road to Damascus" moment.

"I can't describe the emotional impact [Bulgarian song] had on me," she tells me. "I became obsessed with this way of singing. It was the polar opposite of how I'd learned to sing."

Ellis' interest in world music coincided with her beginning to run workshops centred around the 'natural voice' movement. The movement, still in its infancy in the early 1980s, champions the idea that anyone 'can' sing, while prioritising learning songs by ear, as opposed to with sheet music, in keeping with the tradition of oral song present in many cultures.

Still, it was only in 2013 after the death of her mother ("it felt like there was a glass wall around me, where you can't see other people but they can see you") that she began to introduce mental wellbeing to her practice as a music teacher. Since then, she has been running the Dragon Cafe Singers, a drop-in choir in Walworth that forms part of the broader Dragon Cafe, a mental health and creativity venture based in Southwark and the City of London.

The choir is open to all and does not use sheet music, with singers ranging in age from about 30 to over 80. Ellis waxes lyrical on the mental health benefits of singing with others – repeating 'call and response' mantras can replace the repeated negative thoughts typical of anxiety disorders, and movement in time with music reduces the risk of dementia.

This is not to say that Ellis compromises at all on treating musical performance as a serious intellectual endeavour. When I attend a weekly session, Ellis gives historical context for a seventeenth century ballad about London sex workers protesting their treatment by the police, and explains vocal techniques like melisma (multiple notes sung on the same syllable) in accessible terms.

“People have such low expectations of community art,” Ellis explains, “but I want there to be a shock and surprise effect when people hear the work we’re doing.” She takes pride in how her choir produces performances recorded to industry standard, composed by members of the group – notable projects include ‘Southwark Rebel Women’, about inspirational women from the borough including Mary Wollstonecraft and National Trust founder Octavia Hill.

Another “Road to Damascus” moment in Ellis’ life came when a neighbour offered her the opportunity to teach GPs about the links between the arts and healthcare. The resulting course featured dance, music, visual art, and storytelling, and she plans to resume her involvement in GP training next year, for the first time since the pandemic.

“GPs recognised the benefits [of creativity] for themselves, and therefore for their patients – many of them were people who had enjoyed music or writing when younger, and had to leave those activities behind because of the way our education system works,” Ellis explains, adding that some of the GPs had been inspired to join choirs themselves.

Despite her growing interest in mental wellbeing, Ellis’ touchstone still remains a deep intellectual love for the music itself, and a vision of a community built through shared experience of song.

“I’m bored with recorded music, I want something fresh and new. The whole reason we have songs in the first place, before written language, is to keep traditions and stories alive. People are immortalised through our work.”