

Access issues in English folk singing styles and techniques: A review of the roundtable discussion ‘Singing styles and techniques in English folk singing’

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Abstract: In this reflective summary of one of the Access Folk 2023 Singposium roundtables, the event moderator Jessie Thompson draws on the contributions of panellists Frankie Armstrong, Kate Thompson and Paul Wilson to lay out some central views on folk singing style and technique. Although styles and techniques are not generally understood to be access issues, the panel used the framing of accessibility to refer to the ease with which a singer can participate in English folk singing. In most genres, mastering technique is the domain of professional singers. English folk singing is rooted in non-professional community singing. The accessibility of stylistic vocal information is therefore vital to encouraging participation, as a singer’s vocal choices and habits reinforce social connections to their communities (Diamond, 2011; Potter and Sorrell, 2012). The roundtable and this reflective paper begin a conversation about the process of English folk singing and experts’ opinions of these processes, with the intention of identifying key vocal choices and habits.

Introduction

As an MA student, I was surprised and a little terrified to be hosting a roundtable discussion at Access Folk’s Folk Singing Symposium. I was especially nervous when I discovered that folk legend Frankie Armstrong was to be on the panel. It was a sink-or-swim moment for me as my first foray into academic conference presentations. This article uses the conversations generated at this event to identify accessibility questions caused by attitudes to vocal choices and habits in English folk singing today. I use the term accessibility to refer to the ease with which a singer can participate in English folk singing. Vocal styles and techniques are not generally understood to be access issues. In most genres, mastering technique is the domain of professional singers. English folk singing is rooted in non-professional community singing, and therefore the accessibility of stylistic vocal information is vital to encouraging participation, as a singer’s vocal choices and habits reinforce social connections to their communities (Diamond, 2011; Potter and Sorrell, 2012). The roundtable’s purpose was not to investigate whether English folk singing styles and techniques were helping or hindering participation but to begin a conversation about the process of folk singing and what experts’ opinions of these processes were, with the intention of identifying key vocal choices and habits commonly found in English folk singing. These experts were Frankie Armstrong (FA), folk singer and founder of the Natural Voice Network, a network of practitioners with a community-centred approach to singing; Kate Thompson (KT), a singing teacher for Sheffield-based folk organisation Soundpost; and Paul Wilson (PW), co-founder of Wren Music, an organisation that encourages community folk music-making in Devon. To discover their thoughts on English folk singing style I asked five questions:

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1. How would you describe the sound of English folk singing?
2. Do you teach folk singing differently from other styles?
3. What, in your opinion, are the most important aspects of folk singing?
4. Do you think the sound of English folk singing is changing?
5. What do you think the attitudes are to vocal tuition in the folk world?

These questions invite the panellists to be transparent about the key features of English folk singing style and the changing demands on folk singers, which adds to the availability of stylistic vocal information. Needless to say, we did not define English folk singing style in one morning, and the conversation often strayed from the main questions. Using a transcription of the audio recording of this event, I have analysed the discussion and identified four types of issues that either encourage or discourage participation in English folk singing; these categories were: embodiment, common vocal choices and habits in English folk singing style, the effects of commercialisation, and the limitations of Western classical notation. This article will share some critical points of this conversation between vocal experts and explore the possibility that the current lack of transparency concerning folk singing style in the English folk singing community discourages singer participation.

I am a singing teacher, a folk singer and a folk club organiser and passionate about making people aware of their vocal choices and sharing this with the community. I have also recently completed a master's degree in Traditional and World Music at the University of Sheffield. As part of this, for my dissertation, I researched professional contemporary English folk singing styles and techniques, both from a performer's and an audience's perspective. This roundtable helped me cement my thesis concerning folk singing style, and I went on to develop insights from this discussion in my research for my MA dissertation, specifically in relation to ideas of audience expectations of professional folk singing, where vocal habits and choices become important for defining a singer's professional persona.

Terminology

Since this roundtable, I have refined how I discuss style and technique. I principally adhere to John Potter's (1998, p. 1) definition: 'a style being the outward sign of a singing variety, a technique the means of its realisation.' Vocal techniques are the actions employed by a singer to make a specific vocal sound. I have split these actions into two categories: vocal habits and vocal choices. A vocal habit is an unconscious use of a technique, and a vocal choice is a conscious use (Thompson, 2023).

Embodiment

When asked, 'How would you describe the sound of English folk singing?', embodiment emerged as an important feature of the sound of English folk singing from the outset of the discussion:

FA: Just to say one word. With the source, traditional singers, the word I would use is 'embodied'.

PW: With Frankie, I'd say the traditional sound of traditional singing is from that person. They're giving of themselves, and the song comes out of them. The vocal tone needs to serve the lyric and serve the song and we are guided by ... making it your own.

'Embodiment', which the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines as when 'something or someone represents a quality exactly', is an ideal that can be welcoming to new singers. The concept of embodiment invites the singer to sing in whatever style is natural to them, suggesting that there are no boundaries to singing English folk from a technical standpoint. The panellists identified

three qualities that can potentially be embodied in folk singing: the singer, the narrative, and the music. In the exchange above, Armstrong and Wilson are commenting on the first type of embodiment, the embodiment of the singer themselves. In my research into audience expectations of folk singing, I termed the singer's embodiment 'vocal authenticity' and identified this as one of the two principal features that audiences expect from professional folk singers (Thompson, 2023). Vocal authenticity is a commons-owned vocal style that is available to everyone by virtue of its lack of specific qualities. It is widely understood that the voice can be an indicator of a person's individual and cultural identity (Fuhr, 2013; Mersch, 2013). With vocal authenticity, this has become idealised, which means that in English folk singing, there is a demand for a singer's voice to represent a singer's individuality without any affectation. Kate Thompson also expressed this in the roundtable: 'It's authentic to the singers themselves. It's their own interpretation, and isn't trying to... It's just true to them.' Taken to its extreme, for full vocal authenticity to be achieved, a singer would not craft or polish their performance or sing with an accent different to their own.

Armstrong outlines the importance of regional accents in regard to vocal authenticity in folk singing:

FA: People with strong north-east accents... the voice placement is different than someone singing in a West Country or Sussex accent... and I think very much then that people weren't so influenced by American singing. The number of people who I've had in workshops who have offered a song ... but sing it in an American accent without even knowing it. So that's something that's blurring the edges.

Here, Armstrong revealed one of the boundaries placed on modern English folk singing. My own research interviewing professional folk singers and audiences indicates that accents are a concern for both singers and audiences (Thompson, 2023). The use of accents in English folk singing demonstrates the limitations of vocal authenticity on accessibility. A new singer may be unaware they are singing in an accent different to their own and receive a negative reaction that leaves them confused and discouraged from participation.

The second quality that the panel discussed in relation to embodiment was narrative, which is often considered the overriding focus of folk singing (Roud and Bishop, 2012). In my research, storytelling is the second key feature that audiences expect from English folk singers. It is even identified as a reason why audiences listen to folk singing in preference to other types of singing (Thompson, 2023). Armstrong expressed this: 'But I always feel that we are vehicles to communicate song. Song isn't a vehicle to show off our voices or what fine vocalists we are. We are in the service of the song.' Wilson and Thompson also emphasise the importance of narrative to folk singing:

PW: An aspect of folk singing, not an aspect of sound necessarily, but getting the story out. Whether you're singing or speaking, telling the story is so central.

KT: One of the really helpful techniques I've used with a lot of singers is getting people to say the songs as a story. And it works both ways.

Thompson and Wilson both demonstrated a belief that the expression of the story is vital to the song. In my research, I found that singers who use vocal dramatisation (the manipulation of vocal timbres to enhance the storytelling) tend to be more successful, suggesting that audiences find these performances more accessible (Thompson, 2023).

In discussing the role of a singing teacher in folk music Thompson explains how learning to use the voice can help with the embodiment process, asserting that as a singer, you

can serve the story better if you feel comfortable with your voice and know how to use it effectively.

KT: I think it's taking that and making, from my perspective, maybe more an amateur singer to feel that it's okay to look into that and it's not that you're a fraud if you don't just open your mouth and it comes out. And it is okay to work on your own voice and to open it up and make it feel more comfortable. Because then you CAN embody your song so much more, because you're not thinking "Oh, I can't get this note". You can just be in the song and enjoy it much more.

These discussions about embodiment highlight the need to question whether the ideals of embodiment can both help and hinder accessibility to folk singing. The singer's embodiment, or vocal authenticity, suggests that English folk singing is welcoming to anyone singing in any way. But this obscures the often-unspoken traditions of English folk singing that create barriers for inexperienced folk singers (Hield, 2013). However, embodying the narrative through vocal dramatisation encourages audience engagement. Vocal teachers are helping students achieve the sounds needed for vocal dramatisation by teaching singers to explore their voices, which leads to a more satisfying experience for audiences and, as Thompson points out, the singer themselves. Due to the emphasis on embodiment, the vocal experts were reluctant to point to any vocal choices that are particular to English folk singing.

Vocal habits and choices

Although the vocal experts' focus was on embodiment, they did mention specific vocal habits:

PW: There are certain aspects of singing which are identifiable as folk ... and I think that will persist and maintain.

Wilson also pointed to English folk needing a variety of vocal choices for the different types of folk styles that are sung:

PW: A lullaby and a shanty are sung with slightly different sounds, but they are both part of the English tradition... for English folk music we need a whole wide palette of folk sounds. There are certain sounds on the edge of it that we wouldn't want to use. A dropped larynx and bel canto sort of stuff doesn't apply to folk singing. But there is such a wide range.

The teachers agreed that singers should have a 'vocal colour palette' of timbres available to them. These timbres or colours are what I refer to as vocal choices:

KT: It's interesting, though, isn't it? Because with an instrument – you would accept that with a clarinet there will be a few squeaks, or a violin sounds horrible for the first few years. But with a voice, because it's so personal, people are really scared of making a horrible sound. And actually, something that I've really enjoyed is going back to primal sounds. It's harder with adults because they don't want to make these sounds but that's when you free up and make the primal sounds, it can change your palette.

Here, Thompson identified one of a singing teacher's key roles to be helping singers find the vocal colours in their voices, which allows singers to make vocal choices. Armstrong mentioned how important these vocal choices are:

FA: I've done a lot of workshops with storytellers. And they said I've just helped with the flexibility of their voice ... They've just got more colours on their palette.

When discussing vocal choices, the experts touched upon 'twang' as a key component of the English folk singing 'palette':

KT: When you get a more American sound that's got a lot of twang in it... more witchy... their voices tend to carry a lot more.

FA: You can use your own voice and still twang.

KT: I think with twang it's interesting, because if you sing it in someone else's accent, which uses more twang... twang tends to neutralise all inflections and emotions and it can sound very the same all the time. And I think that can be an interesting quality. If you are taking on someone else's accent, it's not necessarily as authentic and emotional as it might be in an English accent.

PW: Where I've come across twang most in tradition is with the Romany Gypsies I've collected from ... I think the singers we're talking about would sing in certain contexts like the family gathering, the travelling fair and the pub or the folk festival. I don't think they'd vary their delivery much wherever they were singing.

The inherent twang in a singer's accent is seen here as part of their vocal authenticity. However, Thompson felt that this vocal choice can be overused and overpower the nuance of a voice, eliminating the emotional and storytelling potential of a singer's performance. Wilson's reply highlights that twang is employed in situations where the voice needs to carry.

These exchanges reveal the importance that the vocal experts attribute to the vocal colour palette. This hints that rather than English folk singing being unpolished, there is a reality of crafted voices within the genre, which is supported by my research into audience expectations of folk singing, which concludes that audiences expect a level of vocal crafting, while maintaining the appearance of vocal authenticity (Thompson, 2023). Making an appropriate vocal choice for the song is vital to communicating the song and please your audience. Armstrong highlights this:

FA: I think, in a way, we are making more conscious choices as revival singers as to which songs call us to sing. To put through our own viscera, which I don't think was the same for source singers. So, we are making it into a conscious art form.

Acknowledging that English folk singing is a conscious art form could be vital to accessibility. If folk singing cannot be dismissed as unskilled and there was a clear range of vocal choices that potential singers can master, would more singers develop the confidence to participate in performances? More research is needed into vocal choices in English folk singing and how this transparency would affect participation.

As well as embodiment and vocal choices and habits, both of which address the process of singing, the panellists also discussed how other genres influence English folk singing.

Commercialisation

Beverley Diamond's (2011) alliance studies model suggests that musicians constantly make choices that put them on a continuum between mainstream (appealing to the global undifferentiated audience) and distinct (creating sounds that are specific to a musical style). In relation to folk singing, professional singers must balance singing with mainstream sounds that do not alienate audiences with distinct sounds that will maintain their position as folk singers so they can be commercially successful. The roundtable panellists were concerned about this

International Journal of Traditional Arts, Issue 5, 2026 www.tradartsjournal.org

topic and discussed the use of microphones and the effect of commercialisation on unaccompanied singing.

The panellists acknowledged that folk singing style was changing, with rock and pop genres blurring the lines with what is considered 'folk':

PW: The range of those self-identifying as folk singers is changing. Laura Marling and the Mumfords. Because for my money these are pop bands that have a banjo in or an accordion.

Presumably, Wilson meant that this influence of contemporary commercial music is affecting the sound of folk singing, but he did not expand on this statement. He did continue by expressing his belief that professionalism has disconnected singers from their traditional contexts:

PW: The professionalisation of folk singing has transformed it... I think it's a totally different relationship to the singer and the song and the community. As a professional, the connection to local community has often disappeared. We're discussing a genre which has floated off into a cloud.

Armstrong pointed out that part of this transformation is a decline in unaccompanied folk singing:

FA: [There is] much less unaccompanied singing going on these days. Our primary singers may well have a band and accompanists. It was not at all strange... you know I did a lot of touring the folk scene in the 60s and 70s ... it wasn't unusual to tour unaccompanied songs. What I did for years doesn't seem to be an option for people these days.

The roundtable and the audience members who commented felt this was because solo unaccompanied singing is not well respected as an art form. Two comments by audience members in particular summed up the audience's concerns:

A1: I started out just singing unaccompanied and I found that I didn't get taken seriously. I'd have so many people [be] like, "Well anyone can sing. So, what are you doing that's special?" I had to get better at playing the guitar so people would say, "Oh yes, you're a proper musician, we can put you on our stage". Which actually really upsets me because I feel happiest just singing, because I think it brings you to the story more.

This comment was met with support from the room. The audience appeared to identify with the experience that to perform folk semi-professionally, a singer must either have instrumental skills or access to a band. Another audience member expanded on this point:

A2: I think there is a pressure on the young musicians and singers coming through generally to add value, to differentiate themselves from everyone else on the market and I think that's behind it. I get that it's a commercial pressure...

These personal experiences reveal potential prejudices within the music industry. The opportunities contemporary promoters give to unaccompanied folk singers would be an interesting area of research to develop.

The microphone is one of the most important developments in nearly all genres of singing (Potter, 1998). My own research demonstrates that professional folk practitioners feel required to master techniques for singing both with and without a microphone (Thompson, 2023). Kate Thompson discussed one of the reasons microphones are so useful in folk singing:

KT: I think ... that it's the context that the song will be happening in will change the sound. If you're in a pub with no mics you're gonna need to use techniques that travel over all the background noise. Whereas, if you've got a mic or it's a lot quieter then it's not necessarily things [that make a loud] sound [that are important].

Thompson said that using a microphone means that singers no longer need to rely on vocal techniques to project their voice, a fact that can facilitate the performance of quieter and more subtle singers. This means that the microphone allows a level of equality that is often overlooked in folk singing environments. While the panellists had concerns about commercialisation of folk music, they felt that Western classical notation was an important factor in singers' engagement in folk singing.

Western classical notation

There was a consensus among the vocal experts that it was inappropriate to use the terminology of Western classical music when teaching English folk songs:

FA: I get really cross when people impose these what I call 'elitist terms' that come from Western Europe ... for inappropriate material or community choirs.

Wilson echoed this, identifying differences in the terms for embellishments and the use of soprano, alto, tenor and bass vocal parts as problematic. This raises some questions about the prejudices of English folk. In twenty-first-century England, where most people have had school education in Western classical music, are these terms inaccessible? In what way should you talk about the music to a potential singer? Thompson addresses this:

KT: I'm constantly trying to walk this line when I teach and when I do workshops... How much do people actually need to know because ... for me, I found it really helpful to know how it works but others who embodied the music more don't need to know that.

This statement suggests that it depends on the singer, rather than being a strict rule. Wilson and Armstrong discussed moving a song's pitch to suit the singer's voice. Singers should use notation as a useful tool but should feel free to change key where necessary:

PW: The idea of pitching and centring your voice... Vaughan Williams did it, didn't he? In 1906 – *The English Hymnal*. The pitches of most of the hymns were lowered, wasn't it? And everybody started singing in church because he brought it to a pitch where a lot of people's voices were. They weren't trying to be tenor or sopranos all the time. Let's get people feeling more authentic by not worrying about whether they are a soprano or not.

FA: I remember a woman saying, "It feels too high but it's what is in the book". No, NO! Notations in books can be such a drag. People think that's the right key for it. Classical singers move things around too. Find the key that works for you – with the expression you want to communicate.

Armstrong also identified bar lines as another problem of notation, particularly as a barrier to effective communication of narrative:

FA: The minute you put bar lines, you are actually reducing the possibilities. It has to be done because that's currently how notation happens. But given that traditional singers rarely sang exactly the same tune for each verse, let alone each time they sang it, you know it's an improvisatory form.

When asked what the attitudes to singing lessons were in the folk scene, the vocal experts revealed the important things that vocal teachers can offer:

PW: Historically, [it's] most dismissive. "I just do it. You can't learn it..." Attitudes to training are changing. And in my experience, folk choirs have embraced that a lot more than solo singing.

FA: So, finding the different ways of singing and discovering you can do them in these experimental workshops were what started to make people realise they can actually find out things about their voice and enjoy it and feel excited and feel the vibrations. And it wasn't couched in 'technical' with a capital T language, but it was about knowing all the things that make the voice feel 'better' for what you wanted to do.

Despite the differences between traditional and Western classical music there were some features of singing practice that the experts agreed were needed in all genres of singing.

FA: May I return to my first point: embodiment. Because I start with the feet ... for me, what you do with your knees is a crucial technique and [one] that everybody can understand. And not talking about the hyoid, that loses me as well as other people. But what you do with your knees, with your stomach muscles, with your shoulders, with your jaw, tongue – all those things you can help people to understand and find out what helps you...

KT: I think that's quite universal across disciplines whether you're a folk singer or a classical singer. We've all got bodies which we need to use in our singing. You're gonna have problems with the tongue, the jaw, the body as a whole, and I think the closer we can bring those thoughts... I think it diverges when you start thinking about type of sound. But in terms of making a healthy and open sound, it's quite similar, actually.

The panellists' comments suggest that singing teachers may be a vital part of navigating the repertoire and creating a bridge between Western music practices and English folk song as it exists today. If this is true it could limit participation in English folk singing. Singing teachers are an expensive luxury for many people, meaning that engagement is restricted for financial reasons. Experts in folk singing are also rare, which means that singers in some areas may have limited access to this seemingly vital resource.

Conclusion

This roundtable discussion has demonstrated that stylistic vocal choices and habits are a potential access issue to English folk singing. The vocal experts' comments show their belief that embodiment, vocal habits and choices, commercialisation and Western classical notation have affected participation in folk singing both as a listener and performer. Embodiment of the singer (vocal authenticity) appears to be a welcoming concept but obscures the realities of expectations on folk singers. Vocal dramatisation is key to engaging audience engagement and requires that a singer craft their voice, which compromises their vocal authenticity. This

idealistic struggle within the folk singing community creates barriers to engagement and participation, making potential singers feel unsure of the rules. Acknowledging English folk singing as an art form crafted by each singer would encourage participation, as well as allow for the development of the practice through an acceptance of alliance-making vocal choices; for example, instead of pop and rock sounds being frowned upon, these sounds would be seen as part of a rich tapestry of artistic choices available to folk singers. Encouragement of folk singing as an art form could result in more opportunities for folk singers, particularly through building professional respect for unaccompanied singing. However, these developments all depend on the availability of information about English folk singing style through access to folk specialist singing teachers, in conjunction with academic research and sharing of knowledge within the English folk singing community. These conclusions raise important questions about the accessibility of English folk singing:

- Can we talk about vocal choices in folk with more clarity and honesty?
- Are there ways of singing that are not acceptable in folk?
- Are there outdated traditions in folk singing that do not serve the community anymore?
- Can acknowledging folk singing as an art form with various influences make it more accessible?

Transparency is the key point in all these questions. To be truly accessible, participants need to know what is expected of them. Access Folk (Butler et al. 2023) has identified ‘information’ as a first-level change that can help accessibility, and this also applies to vocal style. English Folk singing style is diverse, and more research is needed to help singers, teachers, promoters, audiences and academics understand and appreciate it.

This roundtable discussion influenced my MA dissertation by securing the concepts of vocal authenticity and storytelling as vital aspects of English folk singing. It made it clear to me that the concept of stylistic vocal choices is not yet embraced in English folk singing, which affected the questions I posed to singers and audiences. However, my research revealed a deep appreciation of skilled folk singing from audiences, as the vocal experts in the roundtable all affirm. As Armstrong says, ‘We are making it into a conscious art form’.

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