

Martin Brophy MBE - My thoughts on being honoured for service to music and community.

I believe that by connecting with our voice and learning to sing with each other makes us happier and the world a better place. Receiving this MBE reflects the work of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) choirs and the communities that I serve and I share this honour with them.



Reflections at the Southbank Centre

Twenty or so years ago I realised that there was a spiritual gap in my life. I sought out the London Gay Men's Chorus and through singing with the Chorus I have realised ambitions which had been hidden for years. Music had always featured in my life; my first Catholic school in St Albans, my home town, had music at its heart and by the age of nine I was a leading light in the school music society. We went on trips to the Royal Festival Hall to the Sir Malcolm Sargent Children's Concerts with my mentor Sister Mary Teresa Joseph, a teacher who inspired and encouraged me. Little did I know that so many years later my life would come full circle when I led the team that ran the *Various Voices Festival 2009* at the Southbank Centre and as a thank you, the team bought me a seat in the concert hall, very near the spot where I remembered being for those concerts of my childhood.

My parents were Irish. They came to the UK at the end of the Second World War, met in Birmingham, fell in love and married. They arrived back from their honeymoon to St Albans with 1s 6d to their name, but from this inauspicious start, built up a highly successful landscaping company. Volunteering and helping people, giving to the needy and assisting the down trodden was ever present in both my parents' lives and they have remained solid role models of true Christian values for me in my life. This was coupled with being very sociable and having music and singing as part of regular gatherings in the house. My father fancied himself as a singer and in his day could sing a mean "Mona Lisa". They say "the apple does not fall far from the tree" and in my case it's very true.

Life has a way of setting us challenges and by rising to them we hope we can grow. As a good Irish Catholic boy, with the "face of an angel", I was initially earmarked for the priesthood: the theatre of it appealed to me what with all the dressing up, candles, mystery and power, but I knew I was "different"; I just did not know why. Finding out I was gay (it was called "queer" then) was my first big challenge and I dealt with it by trying to live a lie; I got married, but some years later I finally came out. Living that lie was hurtful to my wife and family, and to me. I remain friends with my former wife; we met at catering college and some years later we started our own successful business in St Albans and we are still making butties 30 years later.

Once I joined the London Gay Men's Chorus there was no stopping me; I loved it and they loved me! I had come into my own, happy in love and in my singing. I got stuck into helping to organise things and after a few years of fulfilling various jobs I was elected Chair. The group went from strength to strength, growing both in reputation, influence and size, taking on charity status, offices and paid staff for music and organisation. It was a highly satisfying and enjoyable pastime that was more like a second job; my volunteering work has continued for over 20 years.

Singing has taken me around the world and I have become involved in organisations in Europe, Australia and North America, with projects also in South America, China and the Far East. I worked on creating organisations like *Sing Out* which have helped to foster and support people to find their own voices here in the UK and Ireland.

A lot of my work is under the LGBT umbrella but not exclusively and it's important to find a balance. I have contributed to focus groups and advisory panels for the London Olympic Games, Southbank Centre and the Mayor of London.

I have danced around on a stage and a cathedral altar singing "Teddy Bears Picnic", I've sung for the Queen in the Millennium Dome on Millennium Eve, and at the Royal Albert Hall, Southbank Centre and Barbican, as well as providing festive cheer as Santa Claus beside Sandi Toksvig singing "Santa Claus is coming to Town" with prancing reindeer and dancing elves. I have worked with celebrities and wonderful singers in so many places; Sir Elton John, George Michael, Boy George, Russell Grant, Daniel Boys and Lesley Garrett CBE, to name but a few.

I've sung and performed in Dublin, where I will be when the announcement of this award is made, celebrating with Ireland's LGBT Choirs. Ireland is the country of my soul, the birthplace of my culture, and the bedrock of my musical heritage; I have taken part in events at the Sydney Opera House, at the Kennedy Centre in Washington DC, Wembley Stadium and in numerous other halls, venues, parks, shopping malls, streets and open spaces around the world. Only last year I was overwhelmed by the excitement of singing at the opening ceremony of the London Paralympic Games. The joy I've been given through both the singing and volunteering is why I want to give something back and, where possible, enable others to have the opportunity to discover this same joy.

I am involved with a charity called Fruitvox which puts exciting voice projects and ideas together: the *Various Voices Festival 2009* saw sixty-five choirs, over 2,500 singers and 10,000 people come together at the Southbank Centre over four days; the *Big Gay Sing* in Trafalgar Square, part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, gave 10,000 people the opportunity to just have a really good sing. We recently hosted an international conference exploring how we could help new choirs and singers in parts of the world where LGBT people are persecuted. I work with a number of LGBT international choral organisations, such as GALA Choruses and Legato choirs. Last year in Denver, at the Gala Choruses Festival, 7,000 singers came together, next year Legatos' Various Voices festival at Dublin 2014 where the team there will again bring 3,000 voices together from across the world. I love making things happen, enabling and brokering magical opportunities, working with so many inspirational and talented people who together have a common mission to make the world a better place for everyone, through our voices.

There was even a crazy few years when I helped set up an action group and we ran a highly visible successful local campaign in Muswell Hill, where I have lived for 30 years. The local paper nominated me as the people's choice for Mayor, it was surreal.

I was very humbled and surprised to receive the news in a rather ordinary looking envelope that I was to be honoured with an MBE in the 2013 Queen's Birthday Honours list. At first I thought it must be a joke; and then, slowly it dawns - the plot that you have had no idea about (and that you must now keep secret for weeks) is actually true. The dilemma of what to say, what to wear, and what to do, is overtaken by what is in fact a sense of bewilderment: why me? To be given such an honour at this time is timely and reminds me that none of this achievement happens in isolation and without brave pioneers and warriors for justice and equality. It's a nice feeling.

I have been very lucky but I know that it has not been a picnic either and my mission is by no means over. So much so that in the last year I have set out on a new partnership to use the tools that we have used for many years to organise events and festivals by setting up *Online Planner*, an event,

festival and conference online organiser. I will be opening the European office as the Managing Director of *Tresóna Multimedia* Europe this year, the largest US music licensor, soon to be the largest in Europe.

I have had lots of help and support along the way and have been blessed by my partners both personal and in business, especially Janice Brophy, my former wife and friend, who supported me often without really knowing what I was working on and Mike Thorn my former partner, who has gone along with so many mad ideas and put up with my early mornings and late nights on the computer for years. I have had support, advice and friendship from so many friends and colleagues including Phil Hewson, Robert Dufton, Martin Kaufman, Charlie Beale, Simon Sharp, Jude Kelly OBE, Chris Denning and Mark Greenburg. Always there my dear sisters Finola Brophy and Ann Burke for late night critique and my loving partner for 6 years Raphael Lennon to tell me it will OK.

On reflection although I never considered the priesthood I have found a rich source of spirituality and am fulfilling my dreams in other ways. My parents were an enduring example and are lovingly remembered: their love and affection have surrounded me and underpin everything I have striven to do and achieve. I have some way to go on my journey and I want to thank those who have supported me in being recognised for my work and they all share in this honour. I hope I can use it to continue to help people find a voice: their own voice and their voice in harmony with others.