

Venice Manley

IN MEMORY



It was only three days before she died in August 2004 that by chance I saw her wrist band in hospital and saw her birth date. She was sixty-nine years of age. A very beautiful woman and one with the twinkling nature of a young pixie, she had always seemed at least twenty years less.

Until near the end, Venice retained her high clear soaring soprano notes which shone out. She sang classical music and Eastern European folk songs, spirituals and her own songs. She had taught singing to individuals and theatre companies and choirs. She worked with Nor Hall, in Canada, in America, with Odin Teatret, in Germany, in Holland and for the Roy Hart in France.

For the last five years of her life she ran Maspinzeli, the London Georgian choir, teaching the rich vocal harmony tradition she had learnt from her Georgian friends. Just two years ago her tenacity took that choir to Tbilisi to perform, no mean feat for a woman with one and a half legs who had not long before recovered from serious cancer operations.

Inspired by Frankie Armstrong, she was one of the first singing teachers in Britain who taught a repertoire of world music, and in so doing, influenced a whole generation of singers, actors and the burgeoning community choir scene. She could run huge workshops. When Venice taught gospel and spiritual songs she could make a room rock like no other white person. She was a gifted one to one singing teacher, always working instinctively with the person rather than starting with a set method.

She had a luminous presence. At the festival of *Songs of Heaven and Earth* at Findhorn in Scotland one year, she totally lost her voice, but somehow managed to run a fantastic singing workshop the while, and even compose one of her two great compositions: *Waking into the Light*, a chant which came to her perfectly formed one morning while lying in a sunlit filled room.

We sang together in the acapella group Inanna, later known as Kite, and often found ourselves at the same Voice Festivals, or with our Georgian friends, or in a project with Meredith Monk. It was with Kite, a group of singer/songwriters, that Venice started composing. She also brought us Irish songs she had learnt from the travellers, and songs she had learnt from Ysaye Barnwell of *Sweet Honey on the Rock* as well as Eastern European songs. Through the Centre for Performance Research in Wales, she met Enrique Pardo and later performed in his group. She was a theatrical being.

As a baby she had been left by her parents with slightly reluctant neighbours for a year. But her parents never came back, and when at the age of eleven she was run over by a bus and lost half of one leg, they adopted her. She ran away the day she legally

could and became a traveller of sorts.

With her partner she became involved in the rights of the travellers in Ireland, and later set up and taught in a Montessori school for the children, with money she raised from Yul Brynner and the Beatles. She used to say it was the greatest thing she ever achieved.

But her heart was in the singing as was her great gift. Her childhood dream was to be a dancer, but after the accident it was singing which became her passion, though she remained a graceful mover and dancer all her life and many people had no idea that she was disabled.

Venice was an unstoppable collector. Her flat was full to bursting with beautiful things she had collected from charity shops. It was impossible to enter the second bedroom because it was so full you could not open the door. It was the same when she journeyed. Each summer she would make the long drive down through France to the Roy Hart Theatre. There she would lie by the swimming pool and speak French and teach singing alongside her friends there. And each summer the announced date for her departure would get put back for days or even weeks, while she sorted out her packing. The car was full to bursting with bag upon bag, and even included her sewing machine. She dressed abundantly, with layers and flowing skirts, beautiful lace tops, fingers covered in rings. She was similarly generous with her nature, making each person feel that she was really interested in them. And she had a wisdom she would gently share when asked.

Not so many years ago she finally found and met her birth father. He adored her, and until his death this father was a great source of love for her.

Even in hospital when she was dying from stomach cancer, she remained an entertainer. Friends and singers came to visit her from far and near, the table was full of flowers and cards, and people came away laughing from her stories and antics and high pitched giggles, even though she herself was at times in terrible pain. On the day she died a hospital administrator came in with her mail: six letters. "Venice needs her own postman" she laughed. Venice had already been in hospital three months at that stage, and the amount of post was a recognition of how loved she was, despite not being in contact with any family members.

A few days before she died, we sang together many of her favourite songs, including a setting she wrote of a poem by the Persian poet Rumi

*There is some kiss we want with all our lives,
A touch of spirit on the body.....
Close the language door and open the love window.*

Venice knew the secret of how to do that with her singing.

Helen Chadwick