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Dyspraxia Foundation Patron and International Classical Singer Stephanie Guidera talks about singing with dyspraxia

The following article appeared on the National Youth Choirs Great Britain (NYCGB) website on 8th September 2017
www.nycgb.org.uk

Singing with dyspraxia

Stephanie Guidera was inspired to audition for NYCGB by her older brother. “He joined the National Youth Training Choir when I was 10. I remember listening to the choir at the end of his first course. It was sensational and straight away I knew I wanted in.”

Stephanie’s audition was successful and she joined the National Youth Girls’ Choir. “Being in the choir was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It was extraordinary to be part of something so much bigger than myself and breath-taking to rehearse such beautiful music with the best young singers in the country, in surround-sound.”

But it wasn’t all plain sailing. Stephanie’s undiagnosed dyspraxia – a physical and mental coordination disorder affecting an estimated 3% of the adult population – made rehearsal discipline a challenge, while musicianship classes were “a minefield. Dyspraxia affects people in different ways. In my case my working memory operates at around 30% – it’s like there’s no Velcro!” With no knowledge of her condition, Stephanie felt uncomfortably self-aware. “I just put it down to myself – maybe I’m stupid; maybe I can’t learn.”

Stephanie’s love of singing and music carried her through NYCGB and on to Music College. Her dyspraxia, still undiagnosed, continued to affect her too – but some useful compensations evolved alongside. “I’d always had a very good ear. At an early professional choir engagement I walked out on stage and realised I’d forgotten my music. I couldn’t go back to get it, the conductor set off and I sang the whole of Bach’s ‘Wachet Auf’ from memory!”

It was a meeting with a mentor that changed everything. “She came to see me at college and saw that my music was all over the place, and I was struggling with a schedule. She suggested that I might have dyspraxia and that I should look into getting an assessment.” Stephanie’s college student services funded the assessment, which lasted five hours. When the diagnosis of dyspraxia came, it wasn’t so much of a shock as the revelation that it couldn’t be cured, only managed. “I was devastated and my confidence hit an all-time low.”

The Dyspraxia Foundation was key to Stephanie’s recovery. She went to events to meet others affected by the condition, and realised that she wasn’t alone. More importantly, through increased knowledge, she developed an understanding of why she’d always found some things difficult, and why compensations like her strong

aural receptiveness had developed. “I could start to celebrate my dyspraxia as a neurological diversity and how it actually makes me more original and creative.”

Stephanie has since been appointed as a patron for the Dyspraxia Foundation, and combines a busy professional singing schedule with campaigning to raise Dyspraxia awareness amongst professionals and the general population. She’s particularly happy to have met a younger singer through this work, and to have been able to give her the encouragement and support that she knows can be significant. She's successfully winning coverage, including a BBC News feature.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/health-40588629/dyspraxia-is-like-the-physical-version-of-dyslexia>

Although her time with NYCGB wasn’t without its challenges, Stephanie looks back on the experience with huge fondness. “The pastoral staff nurtured me and being a member gave me such great opportunities. I learned so many varied styles of music, and that love of musical variety has stayed with me. Right now, I’m appearing in a production of ‘Oliver!’ – and later this year I’m one of the soloists in a performance of Mozart’s ‘Requiem’ with Westminster and Liverpool Cathedral choirs. I’m also involved in running singing groups, and work as part of a pastoral care team for Merseycare.”

“It is so important to me that young people realise diversity does not mean you will be disqualified. No matter what you are going through, don’t be afraid of it, and don’t think you’re alone. If you feel that paralysis or that fear, be bold and tell people about it. Don’t paper up the cracks, because they let the light in.”