



South East Region Teachers Association

Vocal Exercises and Dancing Challenges

Vocal Exercises by Katy Salt and Dancing Challenges by Mervyn Short

September 2012

Reporter: Marian Speakman

Around 30 people attended the September workshop of the South East Region Teachers' Association (SERTA) at Finchampstead. Two subjects were covered: "Making the Best Use of your Voice" and "Looking at Difficult Dances".

In the morning Katy Salt, a speech and language therapist, gave us a 2-hour session on looking after our voices. She has a background in ballet and acting so was well able to understand the difficulties that we dance teachers face.

She started off by explaining the anatomy that enables us to speak and why teachers' voices are at risk. She was particularly keen that we drink lots of water and regularly steam our nasal and vocal passages! She suggested, to the dismay of many of her audience, that alcohol and caffeine should not be consumed before taking a class – they both dry out the vocal folds (sometimes called vocal cords). A quiet time with no talking beforehand will also help.

Then we were given some exercises to do. First of all she checked that we were breathing correctly – deeply down into the abdomen – not just to chest level. Alison Raisin was a willing guinea pig who lay down in front of the class and demonstrated the breathing and the first few exercises of making weird sounds to practise projecting the voice.

Then it was the turn of the whole class. We formed a conga line and each held the ribcage of the person in front. We had to check that we breathed in a way that pushed the hands of the person behind us outwards – much hilarity ensued. To get us thinking about posture we all walked around the room in a standing in different ways – first slumped forward, then with chest thrown forward and shoulders way back and lastly in an upright stance – greeting anyone we passed and noticing how each posture made us behave.

A section on vocal techniques included a long, deep yawn, sticking our tongues out while reciting the months of the year, singing “My mother makes marvellous macaroni”, and making the noise of a passing racing car (n-n-e-e-e-o-o-o-w-w-w).

She stressed that your voice will only become stronger slowly with time and practice. The session ended with questions from the class and she was able to extol the benefits of manuka honey and Boots blackcurrant sweets and to warn us that both whispering and coughing are bad for the vocal folds.

We all came away from the session better informed about how to manage our voices and with ideas of how to care for them and thus improve our performance as dance teachers.

In the afternoon, Mervyn Short took us through a session entitled “Easy When You Know How – looking at difficult RSCDS dances”. He had identified dances from books 1-29 which rarely appear on dance programmes and was interested to find out why. Some have unclear instructions and others have formations that are unusual.

We looked at 5 dances :-

Just as I was in the Morning from book 19, which has a unusual promenade; Fiddle Faddle from book 12, which has 2 diagonal reels of 3 going on at the same time with unconventional entries and exits to them;

Mrs Hill's Delight from book 28, which has the 1st couple slipping then setting while turning halfway and away from each other;

The Gentle Shepherd from book 17, a jig at a much slower pace than we are used to and some unusual turns;

Miss Nellie Wemyss from book 27 with 1s crossing down to turn 2s right ending facing each other up and down set.

All these dances have an awkward section which makes them difficult to perform neatly but with Mervyn's help and except for one (Mrs Hill's Delight which we continued to find difficult), we were able to dance them well by the end of the session. It was nice to be challenged by these unfamiliar dances and satisfying to find that we could make them look quite easy once we knew how! I just hope we can all pass our new knowledge on to our classes as expertly as we were shown them.

A copy of Mervyn's notes is available on the SERTA web site (www.serta.org.uk).

Marian Speakman