

Over The Rainbow

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In September last year I signed up for a “Learn To Sing In Harmony” course, which was being run by ladies barbershop chorus Tudor Roses, based in Winchester. I’d barely sung since school days. The course ran once a week for eight weeks on Mondays - the only evening of the week I could reasonably call my own, free from providing the Carol’s Cabs service my children are accustomed to. I spent the time at these sessions learning vocal exercises and skills, and trying to sing a different part to those stood next to me. Tudor Roses sing a capella (unaccompanied singing) in the barbershop style of four part harmony with base, baritone, lead and the very high tenor parts. I opted to join the baritone section – low enough to suit my vocal range, but not completely down in the basement! By the end of the course we could sing two full songs with the main chorus, one with a set of moves to complement the vocals. It was time to perform!

The next stage, in November 2014 was challenging! I had to bravely get up in front of “family and friends” alongside chorus members and the other “Learn to Singers” – roughly 40 of us – and perform the songs (and moves) we had been diligently learning. I was in the front row, so felt a little exposed. Having survived that experience, I went on to perform with them at the Gosport Music Festival – that was more daunting as we were in competition, in front of judges and a large audience of experienced vocalists, and there was a pressure not to let Tudor Roses down. Thankfully, there were no complaints – we won our category (with a big cup), and a sense of achievement alongside it!

Auditioning to join the Tudor Roses was the next barrier – those of us from the course who had decided to continue hovered around nervously waiting our turn to sing. The news came shortly afterwards – I was now eligible to become a member of the baritone section of Tudor Roses, and henceforth known as a newbie! That’s when the hard work started. I decided not to join them in Portsmouth for the next competition as I didn’t feel I could learn the repertoire of 5-6 songs in time, so my first performance as a fully-fledged member of the chorus was to perform on Mother’s Day at the Theatre Royal in Winchester, in aid of the Wessex Cancer Trust, in association with three other diverse forms of musical performance. This was my first performance in a theatre setting, and apart from the “friends and family” performance, was the first performance on the risers. I had moved back a row by now, but it was a daunting thought to perform to a paying audience in a professional venue. I’d also had to master several songs, including moves for a selected few – could I remember it all?

Of course I could – the show was a big success. It was a great experience to be able to tuck under my belt, and another achievement in my growing collection. However, that wasn’t the end of it! The show to celebrate 20 years of Tudor Roses was fast-approaching. Now we had to knuckle down to learn and polish 15 songs, again with routines for a number of them. In June, we all headed off to Andover to perform at The Lights in Andover – another professional theatre setting. This time, as well as performing so many songs, we had to cope with four completely different outfits. No wonder they have a tradition of doling out glasses of port to the whole chorus at their performances! Or perhaps that explained why my two second-half outfits went missing during the interval – to be found (after everyone denied taking them) ON another newbie member of the chorus!

Clearly not satisfied with the challenge so far, I signed up to perform at the Ladies Association of British Barbershop Singers (LABBS) Annual Convention, which this year was in Bournemouth. This you might think would be a doddle after the earlier shows, as we only had to learn two songs.

However, they had to be honed to perfection, and everything had to be just so – including all of us wearing the same colour foundation! I got a shock when I saw a photo showing the view from the stage at the BIC where we were due to perform – it went on for what looked like miles! I spent the whole weekend in Bournemouth with the 'Roses, but it was Saturday morning that counted. We warmed up thoroughly and rehearsed in a large room by the entrance in the hotel we were booked into, and some of the guests seemed to enjoy it. Once at the BIC, we were shuffled according to strict schedules for the “dressing room”, warm up room, photography and finally – onto stage. Wow the auditorium was big, and filled with other LABBS members – choruses and quartets and guests - and there was a line of nine judges lit up by their desk lamps right in front of us. We got stuck in and delivered a great performance of our two-song repertoire. We were never going to win – rehearsing a mere one night per week with the rest of the chorus simply isn't enough to compete with the big northern choruses. But I did win a sense of accomplishment – I would never have felt able to do what I'd just achieved just a year earlier – and I'd earned the right to lose the “newbie” tag at last.

I'm so glad that I took that first step to join the Learn To Sing course. I love it when we all sing in a restaurant we have gone to for a meal – and it does seem to be appreciated by the waiters and other guests. It is good for my health – my breathing, breath control and health have all benefitted, it's great for my self-esteem and state of mind, and I never get time to worry about work when I'm performing or rehearsing with the 'Roses so it's a great escape, and there's a feeling of belonging. It's been a challenging time, but rewarding too. I'd thoroughly recommend joining a choir to anyone who might be thinking of giving it a go.