

UNIVERSAL CHANTS

Sound created the material universe,
and sound is the key to transcending it:

all you have to do is find and emit your own individual note.

SHEILA HALE talks to Jill Purce, who developed her system of meditational chanting after working with Stockhausen and studying in a Tibetan monastery

Jill Purce can teach you to make a sound which is like nothing else on earth. It is your 'own' note, and the idea is that prolonged chanting of this unique sound will decompose your material, rational and no doubt harassed everyday self (in the same way that one particular note can shatter glass) and carry you 'across the threshold from the normal to the sacred world'.

You find your own note by relaxing your body and mind, concentrating on your breathing, 'which is linked to the subtle energies of the body', and vocalising the out-breath. The result is far more disciplined and effective than a primal scream; and although it certainly isn't musical in any conventional sense, it does have an unnerving and powerful beauty, especially when demonstrated by Jill Purce or chanted in unison by an experienced group of her pupils.

When you have found your own note you stick with it, exploring and enhancing it by vocalising its harmonics – the subsidiary notes which give it its timbre – simultaneously with the fundamental note. The harmonics of any note are normally inaudible. When released, as they can be by manipulation of the vocal cavity, they sound as though they were being played by a miniature flautist whom you had accidentally ingested.

Most people can master this satisfying technique in a day or two. Some, interestingly enough, can produce the harmonics before they can hear them. This, according to Jill Purce, is because

'our sense of hearing is atrophied because it has no social value'. By 'hearing' she means something other than the opposite of deafness or even perfect pitch. She wishes you to listen with your whole being to the vibrating material world. 'Molecules are jiggling round, air is moving, strings are vibrating. All matter consists of periodic vibrations; in fact the scientists say that "periodicity" is really all one can say about matter.' The human body is no exception, but 'we in the West are out of tune – literally – with those subtle bodily vibrations which are recognised by the Oriental traditions'. Every person is apparently surrounded by an aura of energy as individual as a fingerprint. She sometimes asks her classes to play a kind of mystical blind-man's buff by identifying the personal vibrations of a silent partner from across a large room. The higher purpose of these exotic exercises is, no less, 'to enter into the nature of mind. We're exploring parts of ourselves never explored before, mapping ourselves: it's like an inner cartography.' But the adventure requires one major and difficult sacrifice: you must learn how to abandon rational thought, which Jill Purce calls 'the chattering mind' (an adaptation of the Tibetan word 'namtok') and which she defines as 'the cycle of perception and conceptualisation that prevents us from being "present".'

Sound, she believes, gives access to this essential meditative, non-rational state because it was by

sound that the material universe was originally created. Many religious and mythic traditions describe the Creation – the translation of spirit into matter – as a sonic event ('In the beginning was the Word'). Orthodox science, furthermore, is now generally agreed on the big-bang theory. So that sound, which created all matter, is also the key to its dissolution: 'Our task is the spiritualisation of matter; we are trying to sift matter into spirit, rather like sifting flour into air.' Some of the people who attend Jill Purce's sessions describe their aim less gracefully and less originally: they wish 'to climb out of their heads'. Fortunately for those who lack metaphysical ambition, her sonic practices also have more straightforward therapeutic effects. Her pupils include professional singers and actors, psychotherapists, people who will try anything once as long as it's 'alternative', and people who simply want to have some fun. Her 'musical medicine' has worked for stutterers, pregnant women, people who have difficulty being spontaneous ('They say they feel blocked in the throat'), people who are afraid of their own voices (this is apparently not uncommon), as well as those who suffer from shortness of breath, from anxiety or from lack of energy. 'If you can learn to speak out in a strong and confident way, your life is changed.'

Jill Purce is herself blessed with radiant, good-humoured self-confidence, as well as a resilient, primeval quality of beauty that

reminds one of Piero della Francesca's madonnas. Intellectually she has gone her own way, creating her own synthesis of scientific theory, comparative religion, art history, philosophy and literature. 'I was always fearless in my questioning. I have never been taken in by expertise. I tend to think in cosmic terms.' At the University of Reading, where she read Fine Art, she became interested in patterns in nature and art. 'I created my own subject. They said "What's that?" and let me get on with it.' The eventual outcome was her book 'The Mystic Spiral', published in 1974 in the Thames & Hudson 'Art and Imagination' series, of which she is also general editor.

In the early Seventies she met the German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen when he was in London for a performance of his piece 'Spiereila'. They were both at that time fascinated by the relationship between sound and material form, and the eighteen months they spent together in Germany were devoted to an intense study of the effect of sonic vibrations on matter. She inspired and helped him with his installation, 'Alphabet for Lièges', which demonstrated the effects of sound on thirteen different material substances, including fine powder, glass, liquid and the human body making love.

It was Stockhausen who initiated her into overtone chanting. For his piece 'Stimmung', a meditative work for six singers, he had invented what seemed a totally new way of singing that produced




JILL PURCE

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harmonics. Later she came to realise that overtone chanting was in fact used in certain Oriental cultures to induce meditation, particularly in Mongolia and in Tibet, where she continued to study the practice. From these diverse sources she has devised a system of chanting and meditation which is, she says, unique, and which has established her international reputation as teacher and lecturer.

She lives now in Hampstead, in a flat she shares with the biologist Rupert Sheldrake, inventor of a controversial theory about formative causation which postulates the existence of what he calls morphogenetic fields. According to Rupert Sheldrake, knowledge and skills are transmitted by these fields, which is why, for example, modern children seem to understand computers and cars as though by magic. Jill Purce modestly ascribes the relative ease with which her pupils learn harmonic chanting, which used to take ages when Stockhausen was working with it, to 'Rupert's theory' rather than to her own skills as a teacher.

Their flat is crowded with books on the occult, fringe medicine, Zen and other such subjects, about all of which I am wilfully ignorant. But she was not in the least put off by my confessed scepticism. Indeed she seems to prefer working with unbelievers. 'I love teaching people who haven't done other alternative practices. To see the transformation that comes over them when they have discovered their inner selves is truly thrilling.' ■



*Jill Purce amidst
the periodic vibrations of
Hampstead Heath.
'I tend to think
in cosmic terms'*