

Helen Chadwick

Writing Songs

Look through my poetry books and my files of chosen texts for some lyrics which are appropriate to the occasion or the show. Improvise a tune on the lyrics. Get the tuning fork and some manuscript paper or go to the piano and some manuscript paper or get out a tape recorder and record it.

Or lie in the bath and sometimes a tune pops out, or standing in the shower.

Or sing while I walk.

Write a harmony if another singer or singers will be there. Compose the harmonies one by one, or work out a chord structure and then fit each harmony into that.

Sometimes work out a whole set of harmonies and then later go hunting for lyrics.

Occasionally get inspired by a structure, for example from Georgia or Corsica, or by a rhythm from Bolivia, and write a song based on that structure.

Follow instincts. Don't worry if it sounds familiar. If I like it, keep it. Edit later. Just get the ideas down as fast as possible.

Don't censor. Usually the first idea is the best if I can remember it. If I don't like it later I can dump it then, but not while I compose.

Try it out on singers or instrumentalists and then decide if it should be cut down or developed. Sometimes a song gets developed months after it was begun, other times it is finished in half an hour.

Write to the lyricist/poet/translator and ask their permission to perform/record the song as appropriate.

HELEN CHADWICK (Britain) is a singer/performer and composer. She has written over two-hundred songs and composes for theatre, concerts, storytelling, opera and radio. She has recorded several albums.
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Helen Chadwick. Photo: Simon Annand

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