

ENO Breathe: ‘The art of medicine and the science of the arts’

Harry Otto Brunjes 

English National Opera, The London Coliseum, London WC2N 4ES, UK

Corresponding author: Harry Otto Brunjes. Email: drbrunjes@folkingtonmanor.com

Social prescribing is an active partnership between community and physician. Its foundation lies in the truism that health is ultimately defined by genetic, social and environmental factors. Social prescribing is a discipline which has increased in status in recent years, becoming more widely accepted and is now in receipt of both Government support and funding. It is an integrated approach and some view the concept as the sort of professional care that doctors were once able to offer when the pressures were not as great as they are today. There has been a growing understanding of the relationship and potential of the arts to promote health, prevent disease and accelerate rehabilitation from illness.

ENO Breathe is a joint project between English National Opera and Imperial College NHS Trust treating respiratory problems post-COVID with three specific missions. First, to improve the recovery and wellbeing of the patient. Second, to evaluate and evidence the impact of the work. Finally, to roll out ENO Breathe as a national programme. The project is all part of ENO’s aspiration to be a leading arts provider in social prescribing working at the cutting-edge intersection of arts and health utilising the art form of opera for an integrated, holistic recovery programme that would support both body and mind.

English National Opera presents mainstage opera at its home in the London Coliseum and elsewhere but the company also does much more. ENO Baylis is English National Opera’s learning and participation programme, offering people of all ages a range of opportunities to engage with opera. The whole concept is rooted in the socially driven work of ENO founder, Lilian Baylis, who believed that opera and the arts can make a positive difference to people’s lives. Therefore (continuing the theme and aspiration of the founder), the modern ENO believes it can both empower and employ social prescribing to transform the lives of people and communities. To plagiarise a metaphor, ‘ask what can opera do for the country

and not just what can the country do for opera?’ Lilian Baylis was indeed an early pioneer for social prescribing.

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) became a global pandemic in 2020 with an unparalleled impact on individual health, the resilience of healthcare systems and the wide-ranging wellbeing of sovereign nations. A significant minority of COVID-19 patients report on-going symptoms beyond one month from symptom onset. The most commonly reported are shortness of breath and fatigue. Other symptoms include headache, cough, joint pain, chest pain, gastro-intestinal disturbances, dysphagia, anosmia, anxiety and depression. Shortness of breath is well documented as a frequent and problematic presentation of long COVID. Clinical abnormalities (on follow-up imaging) are reported as mixed inflammatory and fibrotic. Lung function studies report a predominance of a restrictive pattern and reduced lung diffusing capacity. COVID-associated coagulopathy is widely reported but associated with severe disease and venothromboembolism.

Imperial NHS Trust already employs singing as part of integrated care for people with chronic respiratory issues and often those specifically related to smoking and asthma. Imperial considered that ENO Breathe could help with the breathlessness patients experience when recovering from COVID-19. The physiological problems with breathing are compounded by psychological complications manifesting as anxiety in shallow, panicky breaths as opposed to deep inhalation.

An integrated six-week pilot of weekly, one-hour sessions involving singing, breathing and wellbeing was structured, aimed at enhancing the recovery of patients experiencing symptoms after their initial COVID-19 illness. Patients are referred into the pilot by Imperial NHS Trust. The criteria is that all patients had been hospitalised with COVID-19, had been discharged to the community but are still

experiencing breathlessness after 8–12 weeks, despite normal computed tomography scans. The programme includes remote learning technology to develop an online programme (via Zoom) that is fully accessible to patients who are self-isolated. The sessions are led by an ENO vocal coach and singing specialist. The online participant hub contains a range of digital resources created for ENO Breathe including breathing techniques, singalong tracks and bespoke filmed lullabies to listen to and watch for calm and relaxation. Core to the pilot will be posture, physical readiness and breath awareness. Each session will have a specific theme and targets. Participants move and stretch in a physical warm-up helping them find ‘space to breathe’. They learn exercises they can utilise outside of sessions to regulate breathing in moments of panic and/or breathlessness. Long COVID patients can also experience vocal fatigue along with their breathlessness and thorough vocal warm-ups are useful in supporting the voice.

ENO Harewood is a programme that provides a full-time training and performance scheme to talented singers at the beginning of their careers. This allows them to continue their technical development within the professional environment of a repertory opera company. Classical singers spend years training to coordinate the complex physiological tasks singing requires. A lot of time is spent learning to distil these into a single sensation; a single thought. ENO Breathe takes this same approach and applies it to working with people recovering from long COVID. Emotional connection and engagement is key. The musical material on the programme elicits an emotional response and is uniquely appropriate for this

group as it is explicitly designed to calm. A love of singing is not a prerequisite for taking part. The aim is that the programme will be of value both for those who enjoy singing and for those who feel more ambivalent about it.

Why lullabies? Lullabies are short and memorable and by their very nature are accessible to all. Lullabies stretch back further than the written word, and are rooted in love, tenderness and caring. They span cultures and continents. Many lullabies have a peaceful, hypnotic quality and tend to sit comfortably within a non-specialist singer’s vocal range making traditional lullabies ideal for this group and this programme. There are also powerful moments when lullabies appear in operas. Each of the ENO Breathe lullabies has been linked to a partner lullaby from a moment in an opera. These are to watch, listen to and be immersed in. Singing lullabies builds emotional connections with the other activities and exercises on the programme. Participants leave sessions with a calming song in their heart, and crucially, this creates a positive emotional connection to a wealth of tools and exercises to help manage their symptoms.

English National Opera values the work of ENO Baylis to the same level as mainstage opera. There is no hierarchy. The same level of attention, resource and expertise was focused on creating ‘ENO Breathe Lullabies’ with performances recorded especially for participants on the programme. The performances and recordings for these lullabies were made with members of the ENO orchestra, ENO soloists, ENO Harewood artists, and ENO stage and technical over a three-day schedule detailed below.

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| CONDUCTOR | Martin Fitzpatrick | PRODUCTION MANAGER | Aggi Agostino |
| ARTISTIC DIRECTOR | Annilese Miskimmon | LIGHTING DESIGNER | Marc Rosette |
| DESIGNER | Nicky Shaw | SENIOR LX TECH | |
| BREATHE CREATIVE DIRECTOR | Suzi Zumpe | STAGE SUPERVISOR | Martin Riley |
| DIRECTOR OF ENO BAYLIS | Jenny Mollica | SOUND/VIDEO | Peter Hatherall |
| PROGRAMMES MANAGER | Lucy Anderson | WARDROBE MISTRESS | TBD |
| FILM CREW STAGE MANAGEMENT | TMAX X3 Phillip Turner | WIGS & MAKE-UP | Corrine Young Philip Carson Sheard |
| STAGE MANAGEMENT | Rosie Davis | WARDROBE MISTRESS | ENO Staff TBD |
| STAGE MANAGEMENT | James Bartrum | DEVELOPMENT | Andrew Given |

| NOTES: | | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|--|
| SUN 08 NOV | 10.00–15.00 STRIKE DECK/FIT UP 10.00–11.00 FILM CREW GET IN | 12.00–13.00 DANDELIONS GET IN | |
| MON 09 NOV | 10.00–13.00 Onstage Set up with film crew, LX and Tech Sound Get in CREW/FLIES 10.00–21.00 | 14.00–17.00 ORCHESTRAL FILM SESSION I FULL ORCHESTRA ALONE [STAGE] - Méditation de Thaïs, Massenet (violin solo) - Act 3 prelude, Carmen - Intermezzo, Cavalleria Rusticana, | 18.00–21.00 ORCHESTRAL FILM SESSION 2 FULL ORCHESTRA + SOLOISTS [STAGE] - 'May breezes be gentle', Cosi fan tutte, Mozart (Munch, Oomens, Wilson) - 'How clearly I remember as I lay beneath the trees', Pearl Fishers, Bizet (Morgan) |
| TUES 10 NOV | 10.30–13.30 ORCHESTRAL FILM SESSION 3 FULL ORCHESTRA + SOLOIST [STAGE] <i>Production photography and filming taking place</i> - 'As once before', Pearl Fishers Bizet (Mafi) - 'Evening Prayer', Hansel & Gretel, Engelburt Humperdinck (Mafi & Arditti) - 'Come now a roundel', Midsummer Night's Dream, Britten (Mafi) CREW/FLIES 10.00–18.00 (ADDED CREW FROM 13.00) | 15.00–18.00 ORCHESTRAL FILM SESSION 4 SMALL ENSEMBLE + BENJAMIN & [STAGE] - Summertime – Porgy and Bess, Gershwin (Benjamin) - Where e'er you walk I - Semele, Handel (Oomens) - Gently Little Boat I – Rake's Progress, Stravinsky (Benjamin) | SMALL ENSEMBLE STRUCK & HARPSICHORD SET UP |
| | 9.00–10.00 HARPSICHORD TUNING | | |
| WED 11 NOV | 10.00–10.30 CONTINUO REHEARSAL [STAGE] 10.30–13.30 ORCHESTRAL FILM | 14.30–19.30 BREATHE EXERCISE FILM SESSION ZUMPE & CORNTHWAITE [STAGE/COLI] | |

(continued)

Continued.

NOTES:

SESSION 5
CONTINUO &
HARPSICHORD
+ MAFI & ARDITTI
[STAGE]
- **‘When I hold you’,
L’incoronazione di
Poppea Monteverdi**
- **‘Let sweet oblivion
soothe you’
L’incoronazione di
Poppea, Monteverdi**
CREW/FLIES 9.00–20.00

As a result ENO Breathe was rolled out nationally on 28 January 2021. This phase will involve 1000 patients across a range of hospitals throughout the country including London, Cheshire and Merseyside, Newcastle and Manchester. ENO is expanding the online material available to participants during the programme along with making dedicated groups available to NHS staff recovering from COVID-19. Additionally, support continues for those who completed the initial six-week programme in 2020. Strict monitoring and an evaluation programme will continue in this phase with plans for a more in-depth trial already underway.

Social prescribing encompasses the values of ENO and reinforces the company’s wish not just to provide artistic excellence onstage but also to ensure that opera and the performing arts can provide genuine and sustainable benefit to the community long term evidenced by a full evaluation and publication. It is believed by both English National Opera and Imperial NHS Trust that ENO Breathe is a unique opportunity to provide both support and recovery for the physiological and psychological consequences of long COVID.

Declarations

Competing Interests: None declared.

Funding: None.

Ethics approval: None declared.

Guarantor: HB.

Contributorship: HB.

Acknowledgements: None.

Provenance: Not peer reviewed; editorial review.

ORCID iD: Harry Otto Brunjes  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4050-9285>

References

1. Younan HC, Junghans C, Harris M, Majeed A and Gnani S. Maximising the impact of social prescribing on population health in the era of COVID-19. *JRSM* 2020; 113: 377–382.
2. Brunjes H. Ladies and gentlemen, there will now be a long interval – theatre in the covid-19 era. *BMJ* 2020.
3. *Imperial College Healthcare Working with English National Opera on Singing Programme for Covid-19 Patients*. See www.imperial.nhs.uk (last checked August 2020).
4. Dixon M. The role of social prescription, Westminster insight’s tackling loneliness and social isolation in older people conference, December 2020.
5. Pitini E, Adamo G, Gray M and Jani A. Resetting priorities in precision medicine: the role of social prescribing. *JRSM* 2020; 113: 310–313.
6. *ENO Breathe with Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust*. See <https://eno.org/news/eno-breathe-with-imperial-college-healthcare-nhs-trust/> (last checked August 2020).
7. Pillay, Kondratiuk, George, Park, Onn Min Kon and Lalvani. *Literature Review of the Long-Term Health Impacts of COVID-19*. London: Imperial College London, 2020.