

Singing is a natural part of my faith

Nell Wycherley once sang at Carnegie Hall in New York. Now in her 80s, her love of God and of singing hasn't dimmed.

NELL Wycherley was born to sing. In fact, she thinks that she started practising before she could even speak. "I'm told that when I was a baby, I used to scream a lot!" she said. "I'm convinced, looking back, that I was just trying out my voice."

These early rehearsals would eventually blossom into a lifelong career. Now in her 80s, Nell has performed all over the world, and even received an MBE for her services to opera.

Based in Portchester, she is passionate about her local church, and last year presented an afternoon called 'Happy Go Lucky in Song' in aid of much-needed building repairs. Those lucky enough to attend were offered a musical tour through her life, career and faith.

Nell was born and grew up near Bridgetown in Barbados, where both singing and going to church were a natural part of life. It became apparent early on, though, that Nell had a special talent.

She said: "My mother even took me to New York to see if I could get into Julliard, but I didn't have any confidence at that point. Then, by chance, an Italian maestro turned up on the island to do a concert – and my mother said, you must let him hear you sing!"

Nell was unsure, but her mother



wasn't the type to be argued with. "She found out what hotel he was staying at and arranged an audition," she said. "He heard me, and he immediately wanted to train my voice."

This maestro was Odone Sommovigo, and he moved into the family's spare room. Nell

remembers a joyful time as she sang with him every day, learning operatic arias and all kinds of new music.

Her gift of song began to open doors to global adventure. Along with her maestro, Nell – known then as Nell Hall – performed across South America, then at

the famous Carnegie Hall in New York.

A review of the event can still be found on the New York Times' online archive: "Nell Hall, a charming soprano from Barbados in the West Indies, made a successful New York debut last night." She sang at an international competition in Italy, and then – on the 9th of June 1963 – arrived in England for the first time.

Through all of this, it was never Nell's musical success which brought her confidence. Having gone to church out of habit throughout her childhood, God became real for her in her early twenties.

She said: "I had a good friend, the wife of one of our vicars in Barbados, and she helped me realise that God loved me. And not only me, but everybody else! I didn't have much belief in myself at that time, but Jesus says in the Beatitudes 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. That's how I became conscious of my need for God – that he was real, and had meaning and purpose for me."

Nell's faith, and the support of other believers, became invaluable to her as she travelled the world: "No matter where I went, I was surrounded by the prayers of those who knew me. I needed the help of the people who were praying for me and caring for my spiritual life."

When she first came to England and settled down in south-east London, she found a warm welcome at church. The vicar at St Laurence Church and his wife invited Nell to come and practice in their home: they ended up becoming lifelong friends, eventually conducting Nell's wedding and supporting her career in England.



(Above): Nell performed as Nell Hall in the 1950s and 1960s; (far left): Nell Wycherley as she is today

"My life's always had supportive relationships, and a sense of the spiritual, at its core," says Nell. "It's not just about going to church, but about being a person with God at the centre. That's what I tell my grandchildren." Fame has never interested her: she's motivated by a love of music, and the desire to use her talents for God.

'No matter where I went, I was surrounded by prayers'

Fundraising for St Mary's in Portchester is just one of the things keeping Nell busy these days. She's also a Reader at the church, conducting funerals and occasionally preaching: "I always say to the vicar, you're giving me my annual airing!"

She sings in the choir, and leads a house-group – a highlight of her week. Alongside church commitments, she organises Portchester Stroke Club, which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary.

She also hosts bed and breakfast guests in her home, enjoying the

opportunity to meet people from all walks of life.

She said: "I talked with one guest over dinner and she told me that she was an atheist – I said, well, God loves you still! I told her my story, and explained that verse from 2 Corinthians, where Paul says we 'have this treasure in jars of clay'. None of us are perfect, but God can still shine through."

"She really responded to that, and she told me about that line from one of Leonard Cohen's songs – 'There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in'."

Looking back over her long life, Nell is grateful for the past, and at peace about the future: "I'm aware that at my age, death can't be too far away. But like Paul in Romans 14, I say, whether I live or die, I live or die unto the Lord. And while I can still breathe, I'll be singing."

Nell shares her musical gifts and life story in the hope that people will be inspired to support a cause close to her heart – visit www.stmary-portchester.org.uk/donate to give to the church repair fund. And visit www.portsmouth.anglican.org/nell to hear tracks from her latest CD.