

A CHORUS OF APPROVAL

THINK YOU CAN'T SING? THINK AGAIN. GET A TASTE AT A CAROL CONCERT, THEN TRY A COMMUNITY CHOIR OR A SING-ALONG. EVERYONE CAN ENJOY THIS UPLIFTING ACTIVITY

Words: CLARE GOGERTY

If you are heading for a carol concert this Christmas, you will know about the pleasures of singing in a group. Spend an evening belting out old favourites, confident that any vocal errors are masked by other voices, and the chances are that you will leave with your spirits raised, your mood lifted and with feelings of goodwill towards your fellow carol singers. What you have experienced is the transformative power of community singing.

Singing in groups, too long confined to football terraces, schools and choral societies, is having a revival. TV programmes such as *Glee* and Gareth Malone's *The Choir* have done much to promote singing together by demonstrating that not only is it a joyful activity but that everyone can do it.

NOT JUST FOR 'SINGERS'

"Often people get told as children that they 'can't sing' and subsequently feel insecure about singing for the rest of their lives," says Tom Carradine, who runs the popular Carradine's Cockney Sing-alongs (carradinescockneysingalong.co.uk), a piano-accompanied knees-up, with old music hall, movie, pop and Cockney favourites. "It's a real shame. I'm a firm believer that anyone can, and should, sing. When a group of people reach a critical mass and you get lost in the sound, you almost forget yourself for a sublime moment. That's when the magic happens."

Many of us, emotionally scarred by auditions (and subsequent rejections) for school choirs, are finally discovering the joys of a sing-along, be it as part of a choir or just a good old bellow with some mates. Rock Choir, which combines the singing of chart hits with movements, now has 300 choirs nationwide, Carradine's Cockney Sing-alongs attract hundreds of revelers of all ages to its regular get-togethers, folk choirs are growing in popularity and traditional choirs are over-subscribed.

My own conversion to group singing came when a job I loved was coming to an end. During the difficult period of negotiations with management, I joined the office choir. Each week at 6pm, I knew that for an hour I would forget my worries as I concentrated on the music, and I knew that something else would happen: my mood would switch from anxiety to exhilaration. Singing felt simultaneously liberating and bonding – something loosened inside me and I felt closer to my colleagues. Put simply, it rocked.

SINGING IS GOOD FOR YOU

The elation that comes from throwing your head back and letting sound come out can partly be explained by the release of two hormones – endorphins and oxytocin – both of which have been found to alleviate stress and enhance the feeling of bonding. These effects are cumulative: the more you sing, the more chilled-out you become, and frequent singers have been found to have lower levels of cortisol, indicating lower stress.

Singing is also an aerobic activity – all that deep breathing gets more oxygen into the blood, which is good for the circulation, the nervous system and generally calms you down. It can also help delay the onset of dementia, as demonstrated by the Alzheimer's Society's 'Singing For The Brain' project, which provides dementia sufferers with a way to express themselves and socialise that they can't find anywhere else.

COME TOGETHER

As anyone who sings in the bath or alone in the car knows, solo singing has plenty of feel-good benefits. So what is it about singing with others that is so rewarding?

"Community singing has been an essential part of human culture for at least 50,000 years, probably longer," says Frankie Armstrong, founder of the Natural Voice Practitioners' Network (NVPN), which holds



Tom Carradine at the old Joanna, accompanying singers at his sing-along at Wilton's Music Hall, London

singing workshops encouraging people to find their own voice. "It played a central role in people's lives and can't be replaced by being sung to: being a consumer just isn't the same as singing together."

Tom Carradine thinks that singing is a basic human need and that communal singing is an integral part of many cultures around the world – it's just that in Britain we have lost sight of it. "Things weren't always like that," he says. "Pub pianists were popular until the 1970s and of course in there was the Victorian music hall and, pre-wireless and television, family parties would almost inevitably end up around the piano."

Could Britain once more become a nation of singers? As more of us discover the uplifting feeling you get when you sing in a group, the signs are that it might. "You lose yourself in the sound and the crowd becomes one voice," says Tom. "When everyone in the room is singing, you lose inhibitions. My audiences always leave on a high."

Which makes you think that perhaps we should all try to make singing a regular activity, rather restrict than it to the annual rendition of *Away In A Manger*. ☺

WAYS TO SING

Go a-carolling

Get into the festive mood by singing a few carols. Check out local churches – the more architecturally splendid the better for soaring vocals – for candle-lit concerts.

Get into the groove

Rock Choir runs more than 300 choirs nationwide, all of which meet weekly to sing pop, Motown and chart hits. No audition is necessary and you don't need to read music. rockchoir.com

Sing at work

Bond with your colleagues by singing together. Music in Offices currently runs 22 office choirs, each with a professional conductor. Set one up in your office. musicinoffices.com

Release your natural voice

No need to audition or read music at one of the workshops run by The Natural Voice Practitioners' Network (naturalvoice.net). All songs are learnt by ear and sung in a circle.

Sing choral classics

Starling Arts (starlingarts.com) runs three choirs in London – no audition necessary. British Choirs on the Net (choirs.org.uk) lists choirs by geographical location.