

Do you hear the people sing?

Adapted from a 'Choral Journal' article by Ron Sayer

Community choirs and their value

Recently, I had two opportunities to participate in amateur group-singing activities, which stimulated reflection on this once-popular but now infrequent pastime: the community sing-along. Looking around as each group sang, it was impossible not to notice the obvious. Here were people of all ages and stages coming together to sing the songs they sang while growing up.

Nobody seemed to care whether their neighbour was in tune or not. No one reminded the assembly to focus on tone quality or blend. They just sang – with gusto – and when it was over, walked away with palpable happiness and joy. It was clear these participants were refreshed and recharged by this communal experience.

Why have we lost this obvious cultural connection to community and our past? More importantly, can we revive it to help breathe new interest into singing today?

Going back a century or more, community singing was a popular activity, seen as inexpensive and accessible as group entertainment and socialisation for friends and neighbours. During two world wars and the Depression, singing was used specifically to promote social and cultural linkages, as well as civic engagement. It was even used by some governments as a way to foster patriotism and keep up national morale. Such was its fervour that local newspapers covered the sing-alongs, publishing photos and stories that showed anyone could join in and sing. So what happened to change this paradigm? Some factors surely to blame are the rise of television and the computer. No longer do we have the time, or the interest it seems, for gathering together to engage in the community's 'first art'.

But all is not lost. It seems there is a revival of sorts going on around the world. Israel, for example, has seen an increase in community singing spurred perhaps by a need for togetherness in the wake of Middle East tensions.

The British have seen a resurgence in mass public singing as a result of initiatives such as *Sing London* and *Sing the Nation*. In 2012, they also tackled the intergenerational divide by launching the *Song Exchange* to unite older people and teenagers through shared singing experiences. Arguably the colossus of all community sings is the *Laulupidu*, or Estonian Song Festival, which takes place every five years in Tallinn, Estonia. Dating back to the late nineteenth century, the more recent festivals have included massed choirs of as many as 30,000 amateur singers who unite to share the folksongs and national hymns of the Estonian culture.

We should learn from these examples and re-establish the importance of community singing in our own societies. Such events foster a friendly, judgement-free atmosphere for *sharing* music, by removing the audience from its customary role as receptor and instead enabling them to be the creators of the performance.

Our existing community choirs are in a unique position to advocate such an initiative; an initiative that could also provide a substantial return on investment. For example, you'll be developing a new and more devoted audience base to support your choir's regular season performances. You'll also be encouraging participation in a society that seems more intent on watching others 'living the dream' on the latest reality or TV talent show.

Immerse your community and your choir in this shared music-making experience; then take a look around. You'll see choir members and non-members all joining their voices in the noblest of art forms. You'll hear the 'sound' of uplifted spirits and fulfilled souls. And you'll be glad you took the time to hear the people sing.