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

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I 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.

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
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 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.