



Anna Humberstone in action with Hummingsong choir

## Harmonise for health

**Aoife Moynihan takes a look at the benefits of singing and discovers why it's time to take your voice out of the shower and into a choir.**

**H**ave you ever considered joining a choir? Research has shown that the physical and social benefits of singing with others are endless. You don't have to be pitch-perfect, either, with so many non-audition community choirs out there.

Marianne Rigby is vice president of the Australian National Choral Association (ANCA), which currently has about 300 choirs registered.

"There is a choir for everyone in Australia, whether you are a beginner, an experienced musician, someone who can read music, someone who learns by ear, someone who loves Taylor Swift or Bach," Marianne tells *NL*. "Through choices of music styles and lyrics, choirs build empathy, tolerance and understanding of other cultures. It is a way to change the world!"

Marianne says that singing is a 'natural human activity' that many of us have forgotten and is our first natural instrument. She says singing in a choir builds social connections and may reduce stress and depression. It also releases 'feel good' endorphins so singers feel uplifted and relaxed simultaneously, and leads to better lung function, as all that deep breathing dispels stale air and oxygenates the blood.

"Heartbeats of people singing in a choir actually sync in response to their breathing and the rhythm of the music," says Marianne.

It even improves memory and concentration.

"Singing is one of the few activities that utilises both hemispheres of the brain and builds synapse connections across the brain," Marianne explains. "Research has shown that children who study music do better at school and are more collaborative."

Creativity Australia is an arts charity that runs the With One Voice (WOV) program, with over 25 inclusive community choirs and 1,000 members nationwide.

Creativity Australia told *NL* that Swinburne University conducted research on its WOV choirs and found that 98 per cent of participants experienced less stress, 91 per cent improved social bonds, and 66 per cent felt less depressed after joining the choir.

Liz Lecoanet has been leading the WOV choir in Chatswood since 2012 and says anybody can 'rock up'.

"We're a no-pressure choir," Liz tells *NL*. "People don't need to come every week if they have other commitments, so there's no stress."

Liz's choir has about 45 members (about a third are male), and they have lots of fun singing anything from Handel to contemporary songs. They often hang around after rehearsal to share food and chat and they have a wish list where choir members can help each other out.

“The wish list is where people write down something they want, need or are grateful for, anonymously or not,” explains Liz. “I share it with the choir.” It might be that someone wants to swim with dolphins, needs a job or even a new fridge, and others help if they can.

Liz says that choirs give people an opportunity to talk to people outside their usual circle, chatting to people from different socioeconomic backgrounds or cultures.

“If you are from a different culture and have just arrived in Australia, it’s a lovely way to mingle,” she says.

She explains that research has proved that singing with someone else is better than singing alone; it’s been proven mathematically.

“It’s all about the harmonics,” she explains. “Every note has a vibration, and every vibration has different harmonics. When you sing with somebody, the same harmonics within your voice and the other voice are amplified and the lesser harmonics fall away.

“Voices become stronger and more cohesive, so we sing ‘better’ with other people – whatever that means,” Liz laughs.

WOV often performs at the Chatswood Interchange.



Recently, Liz was playing her keyboard, and choir members began singing as they arrived, as did passersby.

“The choir just walked up and started singing with me,” says Liz. “But because they didn’t have choir T-shirts on, people who didn’t know we were a choir joined in too. It was like a flash mob. It was fun.”

Liz advocates for singing to be prescribed by doctors for its health benefits, like exercise.

“All the benefits of singing can be prescribed: cardiovascular health, improved lung function, enhanced immune responses, mental health benefits, cognitive



Liz Lecoanet likes to take her WOV choir out into the community

enhancement - all the stuff that singing does, just the same way that exercise is good for you," Liz says.

Music teacher Anna Humberstone, from Frenchs Forest, established her first Hummingsong choir in 2012. It has since 'taken on a life of its own,' growing to 16 community choirs for women with a total of 1,100 singers across Sydney, the Central Coast, Newcastle and Melbourne, including the Alkira choir in Willoughby.

"It was meeting a really necessary need in the community," Anna tells *NL*. It felt like a really safe place for connections with other women. (The fact we don't do auditions) made it

less intimidating and accessible to people. The extensive range of repertoire rather than being very focused on a particular style was also very appealing."

Pre-COVID-19, Hummingsong had six choirs, but since then, the number has more than doubled, and they've even had to establish wait lists for newbies.

"People felt isolated during COVID-19, and they realised how important it was to be engaged in the community," Anna says. "Being part of something bigger than yourself is one of the major powers of being in a choir. It's not just about the music. It's the impact you can have bringing energy into a space with other people - it has a

ripple effect that you can't quantify."

Anna says numerous choir members have reported improved mental health as a result of feeling connected through choir. One member from overseas really missed her family and said that choir had changed her life.

"She said it was that cross-generational feeling, and being in a choir made her feel connected to women who could be her mother, aunty, niece, or neighbour," Anna explained. Choirs are life-changing."

Maybe it's time to take your singing out of the shower and into a choir and reap some health benefits yourself. **NL**