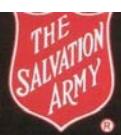


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Singing for joy

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REVIEW





With one voice

HOW COMMUNITY SINGING IS TRANSFORMING LIVES.
BY FAYE MICHELSON.

The Macquarie Dictionary—‘Sing—verb (i): to utter words or sounds in succession with musical modulations of the voice.’

Nathalie Mbala:—‘Sing: to open my heart to be happy, to be relaxed, to forget all my problems. It’s like an open door where you can see only flowers before you.’

■ For many, singing is something you do in the car while you’re listening to the radio or your iPod, or an activity you had to do at school.

But for Nathalie Mbala, who left Cameroon, in Africa a few years ago to find a better life for her family, singing is more than a creative outlet. The hour she spends each week with the Melbourne Sings choir is a place to find friends and a sense of belonging in her new homeland.

The choir is part of Creativity Australia’s With One Voice pilot program, a partnership with Sofitel Melbourne on Collins, Allan’s Music and number of government agencies.

Creativity Australia’s founder and leading Australian soprano,

Tania de Jong, launched the not-for-profit organisation in November 2008 with the mission to introduce creative programs into the community.

‘The Melbourne Sings choir brings together employees from Melbourne businesses and disadvantaged people and migrants from the Fitzroy and Collingwood housing estates,’ Tania says, adding that there are now six community choirs. The newest, in Sunshine, started this month.

‘The choir programs are unique in that they deliberately build and bridge social capital. They bring together people of all ages and from all walks of life, cutting across socio-economic, cultural, generational and even linguistic barriers in the pursuit of harmony.’

‘Indeed, a significant proportion of our participants are recent migrants to Australia, and the choirs provide important opportunities to develop networks for friendship, belonging and employment. This has already led to some of the migrants gaining employment through improved self-esteem and skills developed through our programs.’



Nathalie heard about the choir through a program she was attending at the Brotherhood of St Laurence. She joined because she thought it would be a way to make friends in her new homeland, and perhaps help her find employment.

That proved to be the case. Soon after, she had a job interview, and was mentored by some of the executives and coaches in the choir. Two weeks later she came to choir practice beaming—she had been offered the job on the spot.

Her self-confidence has blossomed under the encouragement of her fellow choristers. She is now a spokesperson for the choir, speaking in front of hundreds of people to introduce the choir and tell her story at events including the Diversity@Work Awards Dinner, Parliament of World Religions, Moomba and the Global Foundation Australia Unlimited Conference.

'The choir really had an important role in developing my confidence,' Nathalie says.

'I say thanks to Tania for her support and all the members of the choir. Now I feel as if I belong.'

Creativity Australia has started a number of other programs including The Royal Children's Hospital Choir, which is designed to bring staff from different departments together on a regular basis, and Mind over Music, which assists young people with emerging mental health issues.

Other With One Voice choirs that have started this year include Greater Dandenong Sings and Maribyrnong Sings, supported by Fosters in the Community, which focus on single migrant mums.

'Since Creativity Australia's launch, the programs have transformed the lives of hundreds of people across Victoria.

Participants have shared their stories, and moved thousands of people with their heartfelt performances,' Tania says.

'The concept appeals to companies and government agencies that not only want to foster their own culture, teamwork, wellbeing and innovation, but see a social mission in encouraging their staff to engage with disadvantaged people in the wider community.

'With the urban population explosion imminent, it will be more important than ever before to build social capital and strong communities, not just bricks and mortar. When many diverse voices come together as one voice, the outcomes are transformational.'

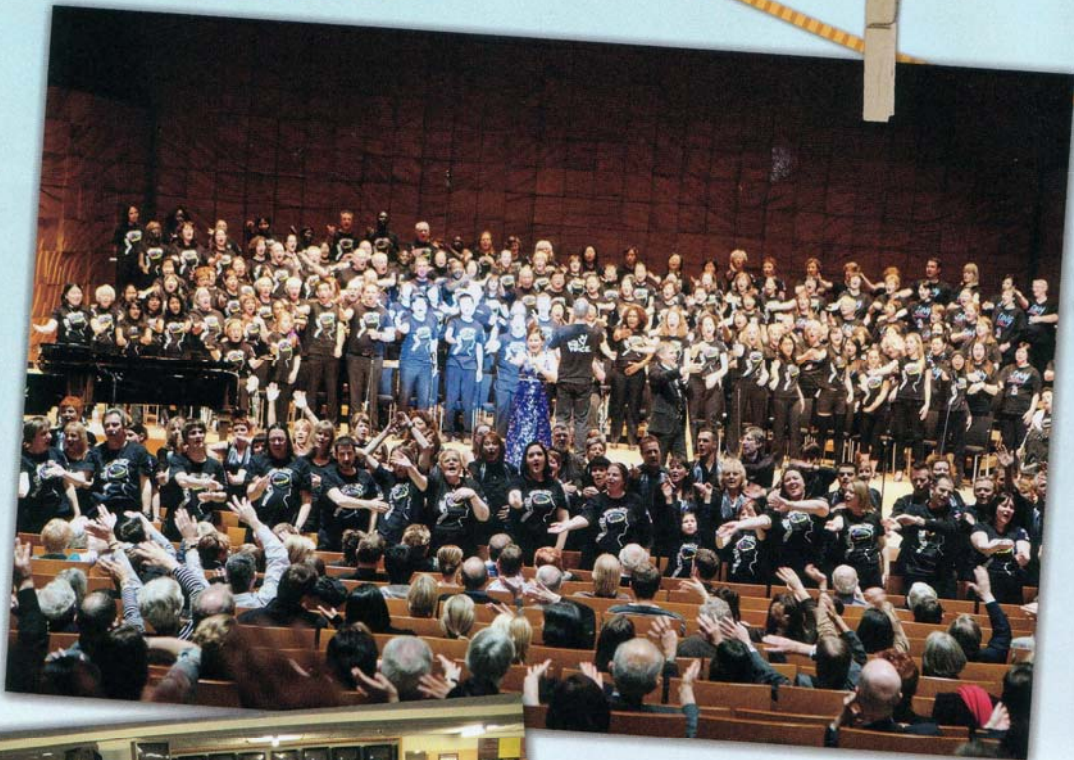
The Salvation Army's Colin Fischer understands the power of music. The 79-year-old started his musical career as a boy in his local Salvo band, going on to play music in a military career that spanned 35 years, including serving as Director of Music, Army.

Over his career he worked with bands, choirs and musical theatre—experience that has been helpful in his latest musical venture. He leads a male choir as part of The Salvation Army's Canberra Recovery Services Centre, a residential program for alcohol-and-drug-dependent men.

Every Tuesday for an hour the men gather to enthusiastically sing songs such as 'Delilah', 'Snowy River Roll', 'I'm a Believer', 'Get Me to the Church on Time' and 'Amazing Grace, My Chains Are Gone', led by Colin and accompanied by local Salvo officer (minister) Captain Laura Gittins on the piano.

Or, at least they're mostly enthusiastic, Colin says.

'Some of the men aren't keen on it. Some take a while to accept it because men don't sing, especially Aussie men. Some of them haven't sung since they were at school.' >>



» The choir is one of the 10-month recovery program's compulsory activities, which also includes working in the local Salvos Stores and gardening.

Colin started the full-time choir two years ago, after holding Christmas carol singing at the centre for a few years before that to help coax the men into the festive spirit. He believed it would be a good activity to hold on a regular basis.

'At the beginning no-one wanted to be in the choir, so that was a challenge. They would just stand there and not sing but, being an old army man, I just persevered,' he recalls.

'We learnt a scale, then a song. But, by the nature of the program, there is always someone new, and eventually as participants finished up and new men came in, they just accepted that the choir was part of it.'

Numbers constantly fluctuate, ranging from between 25 and

33 as participants come and go from the program, but Colin says that during the 10-months of the choir some of them learn to carry a song well.

'We sing in unison, but occasionally there's someone not singing on pitch because there's always someone performing in the choir for the first time,' he says.

'At one recent event at a retirement village, a lady came up to me and said she'd loved the harmonies. I thought, "God bless her, if she thinks it's harmony, I'm happy with that". There are the occasional challenges of people not singing on the note, but it still sounds lovely.'

Colin is happy to be able to use his musical talents in a way that help others, seeing it as a way of sharing his faith.

'The reward for me is seeing what the music does for them; one of things they talk about is how singing is great for their self-esteem,' Mr Fischer says.

'The choir has sung at a couple of very important places. We sang for Drug Action Week at the Legislative Assembly, and at the Australasian Therapeutic Communities Association conference in Canberra last year, in front of 250 people.

'They were so nervous before they performed, but when they got a standing ovation at the end of their first song, those guys were 10 foot tall. That's the reward for me—seeing their faces when they sing.'

For more information, or to join a With One Voice choir, go to www.creativityaustralia.org.au or phone (03) 8679 6088.