

LEE LI MING

PROGRAMME IN

AGEING URBANISM

Choirs for Seniors

Arts and Culture for the Elderly¹

Penny Kong

Singing in a choir has numerous benefits for older people. They experience increased self-confidence, reduced anxiety, improved posture and easier breathing. In Singapore, the longitudinal Jurong Ageing Study is conducting a clinical trial with 93 senior citizen participants to determine if choral singing can prevent cognitive decline.

Sing for Joy – Adelaide, Australia

Established in 2010, the Sing for Joy choir is a community project with the objective of promoting participatory arts to older people. It is supported by the ACH Group Foundation – a non-profit organisation which serves older South Australians through services such as residential accommodation options, nursing care and respite services.

¹ This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

The programme consists of four choirs serving older people aged 60-95 in various suburbs. Two choir leaders train participants for two hours every week throughout the year, culminating in a performance at the Adelaide Festival Centre. Participants with no prior experience in choral singing are taught choir routines and how to sing in parts and harmony.

Many members are frail and some are unable to participate in other choirs due to conditions such as memory loss. However, participants have reported positive effects on their emotional wellbeing since joining the choir. Elizabeth Trenouth shared how choir participation helped her find her voice again as she recovered from voice and memory loss caused by a serious head injury incurred from a fall. Singing has given her strength, renewed confidence and companionship, and she looks forward to practice sessions every week.

KBG84 – Kohama, Okinawa, Japan

The latest ‘idol’ pop group in town hails from the tiny island of Kohama in Okinawa Prefecture. The all-female ensemble originated as a singing group 20 years ago under the umbrella of a volunteer organisation on the island, and performed only at local festivals. About five years ago, singer-songwriter Kikuo Tsuchida, aged 58, casually

suggested that they perform in Tokyo. In 2011, the group – some of whom had never been there before – made it to the mega metropolis where they joined Tsuchida onstage for a live show. They received the Suntory Prize for Community Cultural Activities in 2013.

The group eventually signed a record deal and renamed themselves KBG84, releasing their debut single “Come on and Dance, Kohama Island” in October 2015. Since then, they have performed in Osaka and on Japanese television. In December 2016, they will be making their maiden voyage to Singapore for their first performance abroad.

KBG84 has a minimum age requirement of 80 years and currently boasts about 25 members, the oldest of whom is aged 96. Women in their 60s and 70s who wish to participate are considered “research students”. They sing about Kohama Island and nature, and dance to traditional Okinawan string music fused with Tokyo-style pop. When they are not practising or performing, members gather to drink tea and gossip, building on the close relationships they have had since they were very young.

Larimer Chorale's Singing for Seniors – Colorado, USA

Singing for Seniors began as a six-month pilot project in 2012 to promote singing as a fun hobby that benefits the mind, body and spirit. It is run as a community outreach programme for older adults aged 55 and above, and by Larimer Chorale, which is an auditioned symphonic chorus.

Participants need not have prior singing training or experience. Unlike Larimer Chorale, the emphasis is on the enjoyment of singing, so there is no audition process. The group meets weekly on Tuesday mornings for 10-week sessions that cost USD30 (~SGD43). Scholarships are available for interested parties who cannot afford the sessions. Each session-block ends with a public concert performance.

Young@Heart Chorus – Western Massachusetts, USA

The Young@Heart Chorus is a non-profit that stages original musical and theatre performances for older adults in the region. The group was established in 1982 by members who were living together in an elderly housing project. Today, none of the participants are from the founding group, but

they keep closely to the original spirit while exploring new creative frontiers.

In 1983, Young@Heart staged their first production in Northampton, MA to four full houses. Since then, they have conducted numerous overseas tours to Europe, Canada, Japan, Singapore and Australia. Within the United States, they perform on college campuses, in community centres, and at festivals. A documentary film by Walker George about the Chorus was released internationally in 2007.

Currently, the thirty Chorus members are aged 73 to 89 and have varying levels of experience in the performing arts. Some have professional or extensive amateur experience in theatre or music, while others have never performed before in their life. The group is accompanied by a live band and meets two to three times a week for rehearsals.

Songs are selected by matching them to individuals, or based on the lyrics that would be interesting to members. The goal is to challenge members by picking music out of their comfort zone. For example, they sing a wide range of music from punk classics by The Clash and The Ramones to contemporary tunes by Sonic Youth and Coldplay.

Box 1 gives an overview of community initiatives by Young@Heart.

Box 1: Young@Heart Community Initiatives

- **The Young@Heart Prison Project** – Began in 2008 at a local prison. Since October 2014, Chorus members have been visiting the Hampshire and Hampden County Houses of Correction once a week to rehearse new songs with a dedicated group of inmates. Free concerts are held every 6 months in each prison for inmates and prison staff where inmates perform backed by the Young@Heart team.
- **The Y@H Intergenerational Mash-Up Concert Series** – An ongoing series of collaborative concerts featuring the Chorus with the best elementary, middle and high school music groups globally. While the concerts are publicly ticketed events, students at local urban and rural public schools receive complimentary invites.
- **Community Concerts in Western Massachusetts** – Young@Heart performs at local facilities at a flat rate of USD2000. These private concerts last 2 hours and are usually held on Mondays and Thursdays from 10am to noon.

Source: Young@Heart Chorus,

<http://www.youngatheartchorus.com/>, Accessed 23 November 2016.

Sources:

How Seniors Can Benefit from Singing, <http://www.retireathome.com/how-seniors-can-benefit-from-singing/>, Accessed 22 November 2016; *Sing in a choir, keep dementia at bay?*, <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/sing-in-a-choir-keep-dementia-at-bay?login=true>, Accessed 22 November 2016; *Raise your voice*, <http://www.australianageingagenda.com.au/2012/10/23/raise-your-voice/>, Accessed 22 November 2016; *Sing for Joy*, <http://www.ach.org.au/sing-for-joy>, Accessed 22 November 2016; *KBG84, group of singing Okinawan grandmas, enjoys growing fame*, <http://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20160228/p2a/00m/0na/006000c>, Accessed 22 November 2016; *Heaven can wait for KBG84, Japan's geriatric pop queens*, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2015/07/10/music/heaven-can-wait-kbg-84-japans-geriatric-pop-queens/>, Accessed 22 November 2016; *The Singing for Seniors Program of the Larimer Chorale*, <http://www.larimerchorale.org/singing-seniors>, Accessed 22 November 2016; *Young@Heart Chorus*, <http://www.youngatheartchorus.com/>, Accessed 23 November 2016.