

The Australian

This (singing) life

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LIKE stray notes looking for a nice chord, the newcomers hesitate before entering the hall, and merge into invisibility by reading the notices on the wall.

"I can't actually sing, you know. I just thought it might be nice to join a choir," nearly all of the phone inquiries begin.

I call everyone together: the seasoned singers in animated conversation; the new people tense, silent and debating whether to flee before we begin. We form a circle of souls from all walks of life -- young, old and the odd baby -- and warm up our voices with gentle tune-ups. We ease our way into singing traditional rounds, creating instant and surprising polyphony. The tension in the newcomers dissipates and a few smiles flicker. Thoughts of fleeing vanish.

No one is reading music notation. The singers are just listening and imitating; their voices weaving a tapestry of sound and their bodies moving spontaneously with the rhythm. The harmonies bubble up and burst forth, like divers exploding up through the surface of the water. I see lightbulb moments in the new singers as they intuitively recognise the ancient way people have learned to sing in groups for thousands of years.

I look into their faces as they sing: the frazzled young mum pleased to have a breather from her toddler; the visually impaired young man who bounces up and down with excitement when the harmony hits a bullseye; the bright eyes of the woman who has found a son given up to adoption decades ago; the youthful bass with a brilliant voice whose life has turned upside down since a serious accident; the friendly soul deeply enjoying life now her cancer is in remission; the bubbly soprano who really just wants to sing her beloved Noel Coward but happily sings Macedonian dance tunes instead. They all throw their hearts into singing their song into goosebump territory; that glorious moment of quiet after the music stops, the reverberation dies away and the singers smile and rub their arms.

This focus, this utter immersion makes singing in a choir so exhilarating and, for many, so healing. There is no room in our heads to think about anything else. The breathing becomes easier and deeper, the chords richer and more tuneful. It dawns on the new choralists that all their voices are valued; the warblers and growlers -- the strident and the breathy -- the wobblers and the lyrical. When we sing together we just hear the magical whole, so much greater than the sum of its parts.

It isn't long before our stray notes have found not only their chords but a warm community. Exquisite polyphony resounds around the hall, the singers are flushed with satisfaction, and I wonder at this beautiful, vibrant sound emanating from people who think they can't actually sing, you know.
