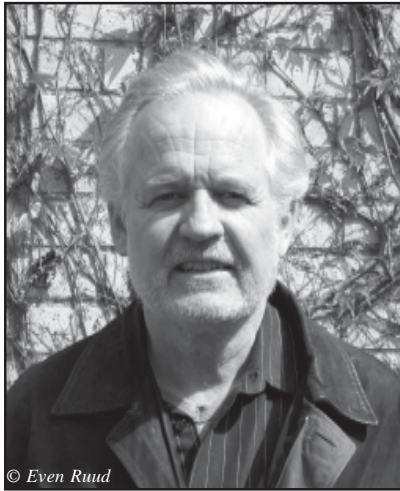




Choral Singing is good for your health



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“The choir gives me strength” a choir member said to me when I was interviewing him. A conductor told me that the choir member had suffered a heart attack shortly before a concert. When he regained consciousness in hospital, his first reaction was annoyance that he

had missed the concert. Now he was back with the choir, and he expressed his gratitude for the support that he had received from his friends in the ensemble.

E Choral singers often say that being a member of a choir has a favourable effect on their health. After a rehearsal they feel fit, their mood is better, their back is straighter, and their troubles are fewer. Perhaps the headache that was threatening earlier, or the stress that appears at the end of a busy day, has disappeared. No wonder, then, that more and more people are beginning to link being in a choir with good health.

Even the media have started to address this subject from time to time in interviews and reports. In the world of cultural politics, the promotional campaign „Culture is good for your health” endorses the positive health effects of culture. In this campaign, the central cultural authorities have tried to develop new projects that combine cultural activities and health. Research on amateur music making shows that active involvement in musical endeavors has a significant and positive effect on the quality of life of participants.

From preventive to health-promoting medicine

Nowadays we know a lot about the effects of music on development, illnesses and disabilities. The field of ‚music therapy’ seeks to further knowledge about the relationship between music and health. But music therapists often work with people with specific problems. When we link culture with health, we are thinking about the generalised effects of music. (...)

An interdisciplinary field

Investigations in this field, which link culture and music, have been initiated from different perspectives in the search to collect evidence for possible effects on health. Often the scientific, medical research has more impact, because it can present hard facts about the relationship between singing and what is happening at the hormonal level in the body.

Research shows that choral singing promotes the production of substances which strengthen our immune system. At the same time, taking measurements of the stress hormone, cortisol, shows that the level falls in situations where the choral singer is relaxed by the music in which he/she is involved. Good health is not just achieved through choral singing in itself, but also occurs naturally in a choir where the atmosphere and performing conditions are positive.

(...)

In a new Ph.D. thesis, researcher Betty Bailey, from England, used information from questionnaires completed by several choirs to establish that choral singing has an effect on what she calls ‚holistic health’. Holistic health is a matter of choral singing influencing the cognitive, emotional, physical, social and spiritual dimensions of life. (...) Being in a choir helps us to release negativity, provides emotionally positive and cheering experiences, makes us have more positive thoughts about ourselves and, as one person said, it „gives me a kind of high.” The cognitive effects stem from the fact that singing increases concentration, improves memory, reinforces self-awareness and brings a feeling of mastery as well as a creative experience. As for the physical experience, the responses show that singing is also physically relaxing, it relieves tensions in the body, relaxes suppressed feelings, reduces stress and tiredness and gives an experience of life through the rhythm in the music, which, again, leads to mental invigoration. Concerning the spiritual dimension, the singers reported that choral singing gives them spiritual experiences, and the opportunity to express core values. All these are statistically significant findings.

Choral singing and quality of life

(...) It is important for one’s quality of life to have emotional experiences, to deal with possibilities, to steer one’s own life, to have a feeling of belonging with/to other people, groups and places – and, last but not least, to see a greater pattern and meaning to life.

Belonging

One of these areas, belonging and contact, is an absolutely central concept for choral singing and also for health. (...) A choir promotes the formation of contacts. The American sociologist Putnam has shown that societies, in which activities that promote togetherness are reduced, experiences, within a short time, a deterioration in their health statistics. (...)

Vitality and consciousness

Several researchers of choral activities also report how choral singing gives people a strong sense of togetherness, a feeling of ‚going with the flow’.(...) An elderly choir member I spoke to told me how much pleasure he got from singing the traditional national male voice choir repertoire.



It gave him a strong and positive feeling of belonging to a long tradition.

Practical competence

A final point (...) is that choral singing gives its participants the feeling of mastering something, of being able to act according to one's own needs and interests. The choir gives every single choir member the feeling of being able to achieve something, of being able to master something which has a great symbolic value in society. Many people who were prevented from singing in early life, either by their own music teachers or by injudicious comments, experience intense pleasure from the new 'Everyone can sing' choirs which are now being formed in Norway and Sweden. (Editor's Note: See also the one-day workshop 'Help, I've got to sing!' at the EUROPA CANTAT XVI Festival in Mainz.)

Finally: Let us not differentiate between health and art, between artistic quality and quality of life! It has to be important to maintain multiplicity in the choral movement, so that as many people as possible can, in accordance with their own predispositions, whether professional or amateur, young or old, male or female, immigrant or native, disabled or suffering from the usual frailties, take part in choral singing. The health benefits are not insignificant side effects

of singing, and should be highly valued by the health sector. From recent Swedish research we also know that those who take an active part in cultural life, seeking out cultural events and contributing to cultural life, actually live longer!

Even Ruud, Norway

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Choral Festival Network - Choir Festival Networking Worldwide



Dolf Rabus, Brigitte Riskowski, Jeroen Schrijner and Simonne Claeyns

Fostering choir music is one of the main aims of choral festival and choir competition organizers worldwide. At this moment, a new association is being formed under Belgian law: the Choral

Festival Network (CFN) is aimed to forge links between these festivals and to improve mutual advertising and exchange. The primary external aim of CFN is to provide fair conditions for participants of competitions and festivals worldwide by establishing guidelines of transparency and fairness. CFN wants to be a seal of approval for organizations whose main aim is the promotion of choral music. The network is open to all festivals and competitions that accept these quality recommendations and want to establish and to cultivate contacts worldwide.

After the positive response with which these ideas were welcomed at an intensive meeting at the World Symposium on Choral Music in Kyoto last summer, the association was founded in September 2005 in Maasmechelen, Belgium, following a second, more in-depth discussion with organizers of major choral festivals worldwide. The acting Board consists of Dolf Rabus (Marktobendorf, Germany) as President, Jeroen Schrijner (Utrecht, The Netherlands) as Vice President, Simonne Claeyns (Tervuren, Belgium) and Brigitte Riskowski (Marktobendorf, Germany). A committee of selected experts of the international choral scene will advise on the admission of members.

During the next months a website with information databases and discussion panels will be built up. It will provide information not only for network members but also for choirs and individual singers who are interested in international festivals and competitions.

Further info?

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