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Wellbeing

## Keeping body and soul in tune

From church choirs to karaoke bars, singing has always lifted people's spirits. But could it be good for their physical health too? Alice Wignall finds out



**Alice Wignall**

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Last Choir Standing: Sense of Sound perform to stay in the competition. Photograph: Guy Levy/BBC

"The only thing better than singing is more singing," said Ella Fitzgerald. Perhaps such a statement is to be expected from a world-famous artist with an era-defining voice, but she wasn't the only one to wax lyrical on the benefits of a good vocal performance. "He who sings frightens away his ills," said Cervantes. Even John Harvey Kellogg - Mr Cornflakes himself - had this to add in 1931: "Singing promotes health, breathing, circulation and digestion."

Singing might be fun, might be joyful and uplifting, might inspire poetry and paeans. But could it actually be good for you? Oh yes. It seems that Kellogg was on to something.

Singing is also in fashion at the moment. BBC1's Last Choir Standing has taken it on to Saturday-night television, while this month the Sing The Nation project organised a programme of group singing events around the country that culminated in a nationwide singalong on August 24 to mark the Olympic handover from Beijing to London.

Last year, the government announced £40m of funding in the National Singing Programme to get every primary-school pupil singing regularly. And there are, apparently, now more choirs in this country than there are fish and chips shops.

But there is also an increasing interest in the physical, psychological and emotional benefits of singing. In December of this year, the charity Heart Research UK will run a Sing for Your Heart week to raise money and also to highlight the health benefits of singing. And in September the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health at Canterbury Christ Church University will host a conference to explore the role of music and singing in health, social care and community development.

The Sidney De Haan centre undertakes research and provides evidence to support their aim of getting the NHS to provide "singing on prescription". Professor Grenville Hancox, director of music at the university and co-director of the centre, says, "We are convinced that it is a powerful tool. Research we've just done involving international choirs and over 12,000 people identified several particular benefits of regular group singing, including specific examples of people who say it helped them recover from strokes or heart attacks."

The research available on singing identifies some key physical benefits. It exercises major muscle groups in the upper body. It is an aerobic activity that improves the efficiency of your cardiovascular system and encourages you to take more oxygen into your body, leading to increased alertness.

Aerobic activity is linked to stress reduction, longevity and better overall health. Improved airflow in the upper respiratory tract is likely to lessen the opportunity for bacteria to flourish there, countering the symptoms of colds and flu. Singing also aids the development of motor control and coordination, and recent studies have shown that it improves neurological functioning.

But the benefits of singing extend beyond the fizzing of synapses and the whizzing of oxygenated blood cells. "There is an increasing appreciation that the way people feel about themselves is going to have an impact on the budgets of the NHS," says Hancox.

"If people are content they are less likely to encounter physical problems." He points out that feeling better through song is not a new discovery. "There is evidence to suggest that in their infirmaries, monks used to sing to each other as part of the healing process. And other cultures use singing constantly as a means to live."

There is nothing like singing for generating that feelgood factor. "It's almost indescribable," says singer and singing coach Helen Astrid. "It's an incredible endorphin rush. You feel like you've got a spring in your step. You feel like you're being totally true to yourself. It is like making love in a way. You're using your whole body, everything is involved."

But as well as the sheer pleasure of opening your mouth and belting out a tune, there's also evidence to show that singing can have a tangible impact on your sense of wellbeing in a variety of ways. Professor Graham Welch, chairman of music education and head of the school of arts and humanities at the Institute of Education, University of London, says: "There is currently a lot of interest in wellbeing and social inclusion and an increasing interest in how music in various forms can support a sense of being part of society and increase your self-esteem. A great deal of research is being done into music and medicine and how music can ameliorate pain."

Indeed, research published in the *Journal of Music Therapy* in 2004 suggested that group singing helped people to cope better with chronic pain.

Colette Hiller, director of Sing The Nation, is convinced that singing with other people can help individuals connect to each other, and to their environment. "Think of a football stadium with everyone singing," she says. "There's an excitement, you feel part of it, singing bonds people and always has done. There's a goosebumpy feeling of connection." She cites some research in Italy that demonstrated a link between the vigour of local choirs and the level of civic engagement.

Nikki Slade, who runs chanting and voice-work classes for everyone from City bankers to addicts at The Priory, believes that the benefits of singing are linked to the primacy and power of the human voice - and our basic instinct to use it. "People are naturally free and expressive," she says, "but it's something that has been lost on a day-to-day basis."

You need only watch the evolving behaviour of your friends at a karaoke night - from shy microphone-refuseniks at the start of the night to stage-hogging stars by the end of it - to see that, basically, everybody wants to sing. Though some find it harder than others to take the first steps. Madeleine Lee, a singer/songwriter, singing coach and practitioner of "holistic song therapy" (which uses voice work to help individuals confront insecurities and explore their creativity), says she has worked with clients in their 80s, helping them to finally realise a lifelong urge to sing.

She says, "There is no such thing as not being able to sing. It's the most natural thing, but you can be so conscious of it.

It's a question of unprogramming all those voices that say, 'You can't do that' and 'You can't sing.'"

One of Lee's clients, Jo Finnigan, agrees that singing happily can have powerful implications for the rest of your life. "I could already sing," she says, "but Madeleine helped me not try so hard, to be able to sing effortlessly and openly. It felt much more a part of me and that carried into my life. I felt more confident about being myself."

But it's not only in the realm of holistic medicine and alternative healing that the basic power of singing is acknowledged.

"The point about singing is that it is something we all did when we were born, regardless of colour, creed or anything else," says Hancox. "All the billions of us on the planet sang and for the first nine months of our lives relied on the manipulation of our voice's pitch to meet our basic and fundamental needs."

Advocates of singing lament its diminishing role in our lives: from the days when we sang round the piano in the pub and to pass the working day, to soothe babies and to mark moments of celebration and sorrow. Singing is sacred and everyday, ritualistic and spontaneous. It makes us better, and makes us feel better. And we should all be doing more of it.

"Even if a person does it only once a month, it makes an extraordinary difference," says Hancox. "It's a staggering thing".

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