

Have you ever been told

you cannot sing, been made to mime in the school choir, or else sent to the back where no one can hear you? Humiliated into silence as children, some people never dare raise their voices in song again. Now, however, it seems that growing numbers of repressed singers are being persuaded to unleash the potential of their underused vocal chords as a new appreciation of the joy and power of song spreads across the land.

One sign of this was the success of the BBC's *Last Choir Standing* in 2008, but there are other encouraging notes. "Sing the Nation" formed part of the celebrations for the London Olympics, and the Government is spending £40 million on "Sing Up", a four-year programme for primary-school children, with composer Howard Goodall as National Singing Ambassador.

The latest to give voice is the cookery writer and novelist Prue Leith, whose new book, *Choral Society*, is "a story of love, friendship and singing" featuring three fiftysomething women who meet in a choir. The idea grew from Prue's own visits to a singing teacher with two friends, which made her feel "incredibly happy".

This is good news for Brian Davies, founder of Good in Parts, a Leeds singing group to which I belong, that for over 10 years has been presenting an eclectic repertoire. Since *Last Choir Standing*, Brian has seen numbers swell from 15 to 40. Other groups report a similar buzz. Brian is one of a nationwide group of teachers, the Natural Voice Practitioners Network, formed in 1997 to honour vocalist Frankie Armstrong, who pioneered workshops based on traditional styles. The credo of this approach is that "each person's voice is as unique as their fingerprint". It is the teacher's job to release – rather than to force or train – that unique and natural sound.

The network now has some 200 member groups with names as wonderful as Sing Owl! (Cumbria), The Feral Choir (Scotland) and Singing for the Terrified (Ireland) – a reflection of each teacher's unconventional approach. Songs are taught live, without sheet music. Participants learn harmonies by ear, one part at a time, before putting it all together in a great chime of voices. The primary aim is to encourage the timid.

When dealing with such a personal thing as the voice, warmth and encouragement from the teacher are crucial. Brian drew inspiration from a workshop in 1998 with Faith Watson, the leading Natural Voice Practitioner. Faith, who has run "Singing for Larks" workshops for 20 years, comes from a family where joyful song was part of daily life. Her "training" was Music O-level – and spontaneous singing.

"It was just something you did," she says. "My sister and I had to do the washing up. We got bored, so we sang." Her enthusiasm is infectious. Brian Davies recalls: "I was really taken by what she managed to get out of the group – all amateurs – in just one workshop. Here we were, singing these songs in four-part harmony and making a really lovely sound." He went straight back to Leeds and formed his own group, specifically to "enable and empower" people to sing.

In 2001, it was Brian's turn to inspire me. That was



The Good in Parts group raising their voices and their spirits in Leeds. Brian Davies, above right, is the inspirational founder and director of the group. Journalist Barney Bardsley, centre right, found comfort and strength through the choir



when I discovered that singing can heal. I was in my mid-forties, and my husband was critically ill. I was buckling under the strain of being a full-time carer and had injured my back. When I spoke, it was barely a whisper – emotional stress locks up the throat. A friend persuaded me to go singing with her. I spent the first few sessions squeaking my way through songs, embarrassed and shy, but slowly and surely my voice became deeper and stronger, and my back recovered. The strangers became friends, and the weekly practice shone like a

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beacon through the dark years of my husband's illness. It also helped me to recover after his death in 2004.

I am by no means alone in this. Julie Lawrence found a singing group an unexpected support when her mother fell ill with cancer in 2007. Julie was deeply involved with her care until her death, and says: "I kept coming to singing. I had to keep doing something for me, not work or family. When singing, you have to concentrate and you can't think about other things. I felt the singing was therapeutic, knowing that you are part of something that produces a wonderful sound."

For Mike Petty, who works at the Eden Project in

Cornwall, and sings in the Eden Choir, singing has been a life-saver. "It got me through an extremely bad winter in 2006. My wife was dying of cancer and singing was the one thing I carved out for myself. I absolutely had to do it; I never missed.

"I got so much pleasure from it. It was partly physical – a good sing makes you feel fantastically well – but also emotional. It was also being with nice people. But mainly it was the sheer joy of the sound we made."

The effect of singing on health and wellbeing is of particular interest to Professor Stephen Clift, co-director with the clarinettist and conductor Grenville Hancox of the Sidney De Haan Centre for Arts and Health at Canterbury Christ Church University. In a survey involving hundreds of choral singers in 2008, Prof Clift found that half had health problems such as raised blood pressure, stress-related illness, arthritis, or mental health difficulties. "In all of these cases," he says, "people found that singing was very helpful."

Prof Clift advocates "singing on the National Health", and the idea has been taken up in the South East with Silver Song Clubs, aimed at older people and supported by Primary Care Trusts. Singing is cheaper than medication – and a lot more fun. "It is a very uplifting activity and generates a great deal of pleasure. It's like having a little injection of happiness," he says.

Singing offers relief from stressful and fractured lives, both at a personal and a wider level. Music teacher Catherine Mellor says even the singing of a football crowd is stirring. Connection can be made in the

unlikeliest of places. She worked with hard-bitten teenagers in a Leeds Remand Centre and unexpectedly reduced them to tears with a rendition of *Where Have All The Flowers Gone?* "Every week after that those girls would say, 'Sing us that song again, Miss.'"

Some people long to sing all their lives, but think they never will. Anne Power of Manchester Larks sang when young, "but I didn't get accepted for the school choir and my brother poured scorn on my voice". At 67 she moved to Manchester and joined the Larks. Ten years later, she is in three singing groups, revelling in the "freedom and joy and pleasure" it gives her.

"You are not thinking about your problems and you feel free of the clutter of everyday life," she says. "It's also incredibly sociable. It's so lovely to sing with other people, and we laugh all the time." ■

Prue Leith's novel Choral Society (Quercus, £17.99) is available post-free for £15.49 from Saga Books, page 157

SITES FOR SINGERS – AND HOW TO FIND A CHOIR NEAR YOU

To find local choirs see www.naturalvoice.net (01923 444 440) or www.singforyourlife.org.uk (01303 298 546).
Other sites: www.bbc.co.uk/lastchoirstanding
www.frankiearmstrong.com
www.goodinparts.org.uk
www.singingforlarks.co.uk

The Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health has a special interest in documenting the positive effects of music on older people – go to www.canterbury.ac.uk/centres/sidney-de-haan-research/index.asp