

Hallelujah! Singing is good for your health

Mary Bowers - August 30 2011 12:01AM

Mary Bowers improves her physical and mental fitness with Britain's biggest choir

Find your inner heavenly host," Mary King says, waving her arms around and smiling as 200 people raise their heads over their manuscripts of Handel's Messiah. They are oblivious to the couple, a few feet away, who are slouching on a sofa and slurping wine, while a girl is grinning, distracted from her coffee and laptop by the group.

We are in the atrium of the Royal Festival Hall, having a very public rehearsal. I am surrounded by a sea of altos. Five minutes earlier I had stuck my tongue out at one of them, staring her in the eye as we sang some arpeggios from the back of the throat. We had done several variants of the exercise, from the excited labrador to the lazy St Bernard.

This is the latest outing for Voicelab, an initiative run by King at the Southbank Centre. She has trained choirs to work with the band Elbow, worked with Billy Bragg, taught Ewan McGregor and Patrick Swayze to sing in the West End and is fine-tuning the cast for Shrek the Musical.

But her greatest passion is to get the also-rans to sing. Massive Messiah is a drop-in choir. On Saturday, its numbers could swell to as many as 750 — there could be as many people performing in the Royal Festival Hall as there are watching. King believes that singing the music is just as good for health and wellbeing as hearing it.

"It's an incredible physical high," she says. "It's like going for a run. It produces endorphins. There could be several reasons. It could be that there's inclusivity. They are bound by a common purpose. But these people could feel better by knitting or reading a book together. Or it could be that music engages them in something emotionally, something that's artistically rich. Then there are the physical delights of singing: breathing lower, letting the diaphragm work, your belly and shoulders relaxed. You pour out the music."

Singing is good exercise. King, who is immensely cheerful, relaxed and slim, could be a poster girl for its benefits. The disciplined breathing involved in singing, with the tensing and relaxing of muscles, is much like that emphasised in Pilates. Although little research has been done on the subject, it's likely to be a calorie-burner too.

"It's absolutely about fitness," King says. "There are a large number of large singers but that's more to do with what they put in than what they burn off."

The emotional and psychological benefits are more familiar. "If I was suddenly to break into song it would be because some kind of emotion would be building that couldn't be contained by speech. Singing is a refinement of the two basic instincts: one is to cry and one is to laugh. When you are in a choir you can lose yourself in the music and leave your stuff at the door."

Last week King had the Voicelab singers waltzing across the floor, much to the delight of the onlooking crowd. Steve Allen is a publican who has taken part in sessions for three years. He decided to take singing lessons again at the age of 54, having abandoned his choir in his early twenties. Choral singing is part of lifting his spirits.

"After a performance it's quite euphoric," he says. "I've always felt quite self-conscious but you get used to it. It's quite a confidence booster. I just get such a buzz."

"If you look at performers you'll see that when they sing their blood pressure goes up, their heart rate goes up," says John Rubin, a consultant ENT and head and neck surgeon, and

former president of the British Voice Association. “If you were to do an EMG [muscle test], they would be using a lot of the muscles in their legs and abdomens. I have no doubt there’s some toning going on there. And there does seem to be some evidence that groups of people coming together is good in helping stress.”

So much so that researchers at Canterbury Christ Church University’s Sidney De Haan Research Centre, which examines links between health and the arts, is evaluating the possibility of arts on prescription.

Many neuroscientists believe that singing can have a physical healing effect. Singing uses the right-hand side of the brain, whereas speaking uses the left. Some autistic children who are unable to speak are able to sing.

In America, stroke victims who have lost the power of speech have slowly recovered their powers of communication through singing, a process known as melodic intonation therapy. Singing is used in the treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease to increase lung capacity and ease the symptoms of bronchitis and emphysema.

Sufferers of Parkinson’s disease, who in the early stages begin to lose the ability to speak clearly, are able to sing their thoughts instead. And specialist choral groups have helped dementia sufferers. Singing for the Brain, an initiative that began in Berkshire and has grown to 35 groups, enables sufferers to tap into music that has a particular resonance, while also learning new songs. Its founder, Chreanne Montgomery-Smith, says that for many patients music has been a key to unlocking memories — and that in lifting people’s spirits singing also lifted the stigma of a debilitating illness, allowing patients to open up. “It’s tapping into something they can do because their memory for music is well preserved until the end,” she says. “If you make people believe in themselves, great things can happen. They are surprised that they can learn, and this opportunity to make beauty is a very powerful help to people who are stigmatised and marginalised.”

Montgomery-Smith says that for sufferers of dementia, who are often dismissed as a lost cause, music has become a great way to manage their illness. “A lot of families find that they have many pleasurable, sociable times after singing, which they haven’t experienced before.” It is also a great aid to physical health. “It engages all parts of the brain. It’s a key to movement and a key to speech. It deepens the breath — which, since elderly people use only a third of their lung capacity, is terribly important.”

King believes that everyone can be taught to sing, even if some people take longer to train than others. Being tone deaf, she says, can be caused by a multitude of problems, from hearing impairments to a loss of confidence.

“When we are at school, if somebody has challenges of pitch it’s much easier to say, ‘Johnny, shut up’. There’s this thing of ‘because you’re not very good, don’t do it at all’. It’s something that we British do.”

For the less naturally talented, King recommends getting a singing teacher or joining a choir that has a suitable style. World music has plenty of repetition and only two or three harmonies — or join a big choir to learn from more confident singers.

“Lots of people think ‘I’m not quite brave enough’ but you can be quite anonymous,” says Zara Nunn, who has also joined the Massive Messiah. “You can sit at the back and flex your muscles a bit.”

And singing for health requires loss of self-consciousness rather than honing of pitch. “You can do it with a disc in a car,” King says. “The strong but wrong, the loud and proud, open-throated deliciousness: I admire that.”

Dr Rubin agrees: “I’m a great believer in just singing in the shower.”

Halfway through the rehearsal, a very tall man in a beige overcoat walks down the central aisle between the tenors and basses. He seats himself in the front row. Instead of ejecting him, the choir members exchange swift glances, then carry on.

“Apparently he explained to the person next to him that he was completely deaf,” Allen says later. Whether or not he could hear, he seemed perfectly content sitting among the singers, who, some engrossed in their copies of Handel and others mesmerised by King’s enormous grin, all belted out cries of “Glory to God!”

Voicelab’s next event, Big Sing!, will be on Sunday. Rehearsals will take place on Saturday and Sunday. E-mail voicelab@southbankcentre.co.uk