

# FIND YOUR VOICE



Thanks to a new wave of zero-pressure choirs, you can sing your heart out and enrich your social life in the same breath.

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**O**n Tuesday nights, a group gathers at a bookstore in Auckland's Ponsonby. Others meet on Wednesdays at a Pt Chevalier hall – and at venues in Remuera and Howick, too. On Thursdays, folks turn up in Devonport, Mt Eden and Hobsonville. Further afield, they convene in Christchurch, Nelson, Tauranga, Whangarei. They're getting together to sing.

When was the last time you crooned beyond the confines of your car or shower? Maybe you sung in a choir as a child but now think you're not up to scratch, or perhaps you've never had the chance to experience the true bliss of harmonising with others. The next-gen no-audition, no-commitment choirs could be your jam. They've got nothing to do with who's got talent. They're all about having good old-fashioned fun while belting out some bangers.

Long considered the domain of dorks and divas, group singing has become an accessible, inclusive health and happiness hack. It's a geek-chic way to de-stress, make friends and live your 'Don't Stop Believin'' dream. And it's being met with a chorus of approval.

When Auckland musician Max Maxwell started Sing for Joy in 2009, it was one of Aotearoa's first casual choirs for all-comers. A decade on, he leads two that are in good company with groups up and down the country, some of them spin-offs from

overseas, including Auckland's SHE Choir, which has sister squads in the UK, Germany and Belgium.

Canadian sensation Choir! Choir! Choir! and Australian celeb-magnet Pub Choir are blueprints for new-to-the-scene Pub Sing, which proved such a crowd-pleaser in Wellington it has recently spread to Auckland. Here, dancing-in-the-dark event The Dark Side takes the trend to the next level with Dark Side singalongs, at which you can warble *and* dance like no one's watching. There are opportunities everywhere for everyone, including those who 'can't' sing.

If that's your concern, Max has good news – bum notes are no big deal. "When people say they can't sing, they're actually saying they can't sing in tune, and what's really going on is that they can't hear whether they're singing in pitch or not," he says. "The ear can be trained to hear pitch. With a combination of exercising that 'muscle' and gaining confidence, singing in pitch will come."

No-audition choirs welcome anyone of any skill level to join, while no-commitment choirs allow you to attend when the mood takes you and pay a one-off charge or koha on the night. There are few Adeles or Whitneys here, but the result is no less rousing.

Musician, actor and founder of Pub Sing Katy Pakinga says it's the It activity because of what it isn't: stuffy and elitist. "I wanted to create something that was casual and super fun. We're a choir, at the pub. There's always an element of 'What have we got ourselves into?', but once we realise we're all there for the same reason, the music brings strangers together to create the most unbelievable sound. It's relaxed and no one's judging anyone because we're all just there to sing for the hell of it."

This is musical mindfulness that anchors you firmly in the moment. And when the gang's all there for the journey, not the destination, no one cares if you're new.

SHE Choir member Catherine Morris recalls her initial apprehension, but says she soon shook it off. "I was a bit nervous at first as I'd only ever sung at school. I didn't have

the confidence to audition or sing alone, but with this you can be part of it making whatever sound you can because the group has your back. Singing brings balance and joy to my week; it's a creative release. I'm always surprised how much my energy levels are lifted afterwards. Everything's just better."

Ain't that the truth. An antidote to modern malaise that leaves you as high as a kite, there's a reason why choirs are dubbed glee clubs. Be it reduced anxiety, depression, stress and loneliness; improved immune-system function, posture and sleep; or a boost to the lungs and brain, the physical and mental health benefits are extensive.

"There are two main spirit-raising things going on," says Max, who likes to think of choirs as 'singing communities'. "It's scientifically proven that singing releases endorphins, and it's sociable."

The social aspect is linked to another neurochemical that's triggered, the oxytocin involved in bonding. Researchers believe it's part of the reason why singing is so ancient and universal, woven into our DNA. And it makes choirs fertile ground for connection. "Unless you belong to a team of some sort, it can be hard to find that camaraderie," says Catherine. "The richness of a group where all are welcome is fantastic."

As you experience the buzz of mastering breathing, rhythm and harmony, your self-esteem is boosted too. "If you grow in confidence in singing in a choir, you'll grow in confidence in speaking out, and along with that goes a lift in self-worth," says Max. "I've learned that as you find your voice in a choir, you're also finding your voice in the world."

Don't worry that it's not good enough for anyone else to hear. Just sing, sing a song. "What have you got to lose?" says Katy. "No auditions, no obligations, no pressure – it's the perfect way to give group singing a try."

Along with the primal, spine-tingling pleasure of singing in unison, there's something so freeing about getting swept away on a melody – and surely there's nothing cooler than someone having a great time. •