

## Music as a Community

Unity. That was the only word that came to mind as I watched the choir members perform together. A chorus of unique voices that harmoniously integrated yet remained individual. From above, they were a flailing sea of waving arms, and as the beat dropped, they, too, released any tension with their dance. Two eccentric figures lead the group, a lady in a green dress blotted with purple flowers, red glasses and a flower crown upon her head. Beside her was a man wearing a colourful paisley button-up and a cowboy hat. The duo are the founders of the community choir "One Song Sing", Jane Jelbart and Mark Jackson.

During the "One Song Sing" choir performance, two flamboyant takes-on orchestra conductors stood on stage as Jane and Mark. A conductor is an excellent depiction of the duo, as they were the leaders who brought a unified vision to the music—guiding the crowd with eccentric arms to indicate the change of notes. The band then accompanied the voices following along on stage, and harmonious synchronicity filled the hall.

"One Song Sing" has been a part of the rising phenomenon with community choirs in the past five years. This spike in interest is due to not only the health benefits of participating in a choir, such as releasing positive neurochemicals but also because individuals see a significant social improvement. A connection is formed through the shared experience of singing together. As well as this, confidence in free expression has developed. Due to the large number of people singing together, it is harder to decipher an individual voice, encouraging people to appreciate the collective sound rather than be critical of themselves.

Community choirs are casual and structured for the "average person" to participate and have been increasingly growing in Australia, with the only hindrance being Covid restrictions in 2019-2021. These inclusive choirs have garnered a great deal of attention through social media, in some instances even from the artists themselves. Therefore, it is no surprise that when tickets are announced, they quickly sell out, and halls are filled with a diverse group of people, ready to all sing a popular song together.

Choirs of this nature can bring an individual to become part of a large community through music. Being a small part of something big elicits such a synergistic experience. This community accepts all, bringing them together and transforming a crowd of ordinary people into a collaborative choir. Structured as open participation, these groups welcome anybody who wishes to perform as part of the

choir. In just one hour, someone who has never sung outside their shower will be in three-part harmony with hundreds of strangers.

We can define a community as a social group where individuals share commonalities and come together, offering members a crucial social connection and sense of belonging. Through this, the idea of community music is an exemplar. These groups are significantly beneficial as they promote the belief that anyone can make, create and enjoy music by encouraging active participation. This belief has positive impacts by bringing together people of diverse cultures, ages and abilities. Choirs are an exemplar in this field as they unveil the gravity of how music as an art form can birth relationships between individuals, creating an environment of togetherness.

Community is built through music not only due to the freedom it provides but also through the transient quality of something such as the "One Song Sing" choir. This fleeting moment of euphoric liberty adds to the beauty of making music and creates a sense of community. With the structure of the "One Song Sing" choir, only one hour is allocated for learning and performing a song. For that moment, the audience becomes the performer and becomes part of the choir of voices. The sense of creating something as alluring as music not only builds a sense of accomplishment but also connects people. The idea of transience in the choir: being a part of something bigger temporarily, is also a significant part of why "One Song Sing" is so important to people.

Mark Jackson has discovered that "people are really clear about, 'oh, I wanna just do this once a month!'" It is a fair assumption to say many people do not have the means to commit to other music groups with rehearsal and performances often. Therefore, choirs such as the "One Song Sing" offer a musical outlet for, as Mark describes, "people who don't want to commit at all. But they're happy to have a drink on a Sunday arvo' and do the "One Song Sing"." This finite engagement heightens the sense of the short-lived moment. Sharing it with strangers and knowing it will soon be over makes this experience distinctive.

In addition to the ephemerality of the choir, another significant aspect of the sense of community is that it is not dependent on any individual's level of singing. Despite the group's focus being the performance of a song, it is also essential to consider the teaching of the arrangement. Mark says that one of the choir's purposes is to "foster people in their individual singing but also in their collective singing." In community choir groups, the level of singing ability is not prohibitive and even encouraged for inexperienced singers to join. Mark firmly believes that "you do not say in our presence that you can't sing. Everybody can sing." In addition, the choir arranges songs to ensure they fit "what the general population are going to be capable of", ensuring anybody with any skill level can participate. Even though choirs are about singing, singing is not all the choir is about.

This community formed by "One Song Sing" has even been able to move across onto social media, creating relationships outside the event. Posts of performances on YouTube and a local Facebook group filled with comments such as, "Sharon, are we doing this?" build the community outside a singular choir event. This was a crucial aspect of why community choirs such as the "One Song Sing" did not die out in the period of restrictions enforced for Covid-19. Mark agrees, "you use social media to help people build connections". "People share it and they're proud of it", Mark says, as he believes "they are proud to be a part of something and proud to share something joyous". This pride is why he says, "filming is an essential aspect", as it shares the accomplishment of participating in something bigger than oneself.

The "One Song Sing" choir claims they will "help you figure out music and its relationship with enjoying yourself". Watching the beaming faces of a dancing crowd makes it fair to say they have successfully done so for many people. Mark says the choir's goals are; "to build community, to help people make music together and to make a living". The "One Song Sing" choir has accomplished their goals and, as a result, has "built a much stronger connection between music and community, and how music helps build community", as Mark describes.

It is not just making music that enriches the "One Song Sing" choir. The community emerges when strangers come together, and those who have never spoken to one another sing out in harmony. That is the unity that arises from a choir, the role of community music, and that is why people leave the events claiming it as "the best shot of endorphins I've ever had!".

One of the most primitive ways to jubilate is through music, and as Mark Jackson says, "go back to the caveman analogy, we've always made music to bring us together as human beings. It is the way that we celebrate". A celebration is akin to the unapologetic joy expressed by the choir members whilst performing together.

On the day of a "One Song Sing" event, people leisurely scuffled into the hall, meeting friends or greeting familiar strangers they hadn't met since the last performance. In Newcastle Town Hall, "good to see you" and "it's been so long" filled the room. With the camera rolling and the hall filled, new and preceding singers eagerly awaited their turn to become performers. For three minutes, everyone present that day was a fraction of the hundreds of voices constellated together. Inevitably the last notes sang out, and wistfully Mark announced, "it was a beautiful thing and now it's over". The audience erupted one last time as Mark and Jane bowed farewell.