

# Your heart's SONG



Katherine Bletcher is thrilled to find a group of people who don't ask her to stop singing

**"A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song."** The fact that community musician Maya Waldman signs off her emails with this quote by Maya Angelou is of great comfort to me. As someone who was asked to stop singing in music lessons at school because my voice was an octave lower than everyone else's, I'm certainly no chorister. But I do love singing. I sing not because I'm good or because I want people to hear me, but because it makes me happy. This is why, when I hear about Maya's singing group, I know I have to go.

**For the love of singing**

Maya is part of the Natural Voice Network, a network of practitioners around the UK whose philosophy is that singing is our

birthright and that everyone should be able to join in without having to worry about whether they have a 'good' voice. I ask Maya to tell me a little bit more about it. "To be part of the Natural Voice Network you have to believe in certain principles: everyone should have access to singing, it's a physical activity, it should be inclusive and should be taught in a way that helps make it accessible. This means oral teaching, not using written music, which can be a barrier."

So does that mean anyone can join, even if they don't know anything about music and can't sing? "Absolutely everyone is welcome," says Maya. "Every voice in this room is celebrated. Music is such an important thing to human beings, it's all around us. When we are making the music ourselves, that's even more exciting. It's

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one thing being able to watch, listen appreciate it, but I think people get a lot out of coming because the most accessible instrument to us is our voice. We become musicians straight away so we're making the music not just listening to it. Singing is sensory; it cuts through all of the intellectuality and is a good leveller. When you're singing, everyone's the same."

**Just join in**

The hall is filling up with people of all ages and everyone is given the same enthusiastic welcome. One lady arrives saying it's her first time and asks what she needs to do to join. "The most important thing is that you're here," Maya tells her. We start by standing in a circle and getting warmed up, shaking out and drumming on our bodies and then doing some simple vocal exercises to get our voices going. I feel slightly self-conscious to start with, but everyone throws themselves into it with such gusto I soon forget about it.

The first song we do is a small part of *Let It Grow* by Eric Clapton. Maya sings the first part line by line and we repeat it after her. We do this a few times until we've all got it. She then brings in the bass part and teaches that in the same way to the group that decide they want to sing it. The two groups sing together and then two more harmonies are added. I'm worried that when we sing all the parts at the same time I'll get muddled up, but the way Maya teaches means that it's easy to remember because you've repeated your part and it stays in your head.

Once we've sung standing in the circle, Maya gestures at us to start walking round. As you move past people you can hear all

the different parts and how they weave together. Already it sounds fantastic and we're only twenty minutes into the session!

**Confidence in yourself**

I feel completely elated – and surprised – that I have contributed to making such wonderful music. One of the group's members, Liz, tells me that she never felt able to sing before joining and that it's only recently she's sung out loud when the group walks around. "I always used to mime. I've wanted to be in a choir for so long and I used to teach children but I'd never sung in front of adults. It's given me so much confidence. I'm dyslexic so looking at words is hard but the way it's taught, by seeing, hearing and repetition means it's multi-sensory and that makes it much easier."

The next song we do is a Mexican folk song so we're singing in Spanish. Maya starts off by going through the vowel sounds so we understand how to pronounce the words and then we get started learning the song line by line. It's tricky in places but the group is very relaxed and there's lots of laughter and

**What are the benefits of singing?**

Maya says: "Singing helps you to connect with yourself. Singing is about voice and voice is about breath, so when you use your breath it's like a medium between what's inside and what's outside. You are able to express yourself but it also creates communication and a connection with others.

"You're using your body so posture is really important: you have to be centred and standing straight so it gives you a sense of physical wellbeing. Plus you have to think about breathing and exhaling properly which helps you to feel more relaxed.

"When you create music it makes you focus on the present. Anyone who plays music will tell you that when they play the world around them disappears. When people are here singing they just focus on being here and all the worries they might have had when they came in are forgotten for an hour or two. Most importantly, it's fun!"

Katherine's face says it all: singing is a joy





Maya leads the group in harmony

Singing is uplifting. It can help you relax, forget about feeling ill and focus on the music

Maya

good-humoured banter. There's such positive feeling in the room that it's impossible not to feel the same. I ask some of the members what it is about singing that makes them feel like this. Helen, who's recovering from breast cancer and has only recently started coming tells me, "It's so uplifting. It's something that seems to fill your whole body and soul and it isn't chemicals, which is such a great feeling for me after my treatment. I love it."

Jane, who was off work with stress when she started coming, agrees. "I found it difficult to get out of the house but coming here has really helped me. It got me gradually back into work and it's also great fun!"

#### Helping your recovery

One of the things that Maya does outside the group is work with people with respiratory diseases at the Royal Brompton Hospital. "Singing is great for people who are unwell or who are recovering from an illness. It is very uplifting and helps them to relax. When they're singing they can forget about being ill for a little while and

just focus on the music and having fun." It does wonders for your mental wellbeing as another member, Wendy, explains: "If you're isolated or feeling low it's a fantastic thing to do. It's a way of being with people without necessarily having to talk to them. You're literally working in harmony. It makes you feel part of something and puts the twinkle back in your eye."

With just 15 minutes to go, we finish up with an African folk song with four different parts. In no time at all, we sound like we've been practising for weeks and I go into the middle of the circle to hear the music swelling around me. Before I came, I genuinely couldn't imagine how anyone could teach me to sing in harmony in an hour and a half and actually sound good. When I stand in the centre of the circle, the singing is every bit as beautiful as any I have heard, because every face is full of joy, and every voice loves what it is doing.

Maya sums it up perfectly: "When people say to me, 'I can't sing,' I always respond, 'but do you enjoy singing?' Most people say 'yes' and I tell them that's all they need." ■



PHOTOGRAPHY: REBECCA BRADBURY

Find out about the Natural Voice Network at [www.naturalvoice.net](http://www.naturalvoice.net) or call 01923 444440.