



Sing from the Soul

Singing makes you feel great. For the vocally shy and karaoke king alike, the benefits run deep. **Jules Olsen** gives us the 'do re mi' rundown of why we should all be singing from the rooftops!!

Everyone, at some point, will have experienced the sheer exhilaration of belting out a favourite tune in the car, joining a group chant at a sports match, or even indulging in a crazy bit of whooping on a fairground ride. The point is not necessarily about the sound you are making but about setting your voice free – and this is one of the most powerful and liberating experiences you can have.

Contrary to popular belief, singing is a completely natural way of using our voice – just as speaking, crying, laughing, wailing or even screaming is. It is one of the many ways of expressing ourselves and communicating with the world. We start experimenting with different sounds as babies, both to exercise muscles and to express our needs and emotions. Young children have a sing-song quality to their voice, which suggests it is a natural state. Singing, in fact, predates the spoken word, so our first communication is likely to have been much more musical in tone than modern day speech.

And guess what? Singing is really good for you. On a physical level, it is a great body workout as it uses some of the major muscles groups. It encourages deep breathing, increasing oxygen intake and is an aerobic exercise, meaning it is good for the cardiovascular system. Most importantly though, is its connection to our emotional wellbeing – for example, some people with dementia, who struggle to remember day-to-day things or communicate through ordinary speech can remember whole songs from their childhood. This suggests that there is a much deeper emotional connection to singing than speech. A really good sing can be a huge emotional release, and help relieve stress and anxiety. It releases endorphins that make you feel good – a bit like eating chocolate, but without the calories! And if you ever need a good hangover cure – singing does it every time!

Group singing in particular can be very nurturing and therapeutic. In some cultures, singing continues to play a vital role in rituals and binding of the social group. Even in this country, before the arrival of TVs, radios and the technological age, singing round the piano at home or at the pub would have been a regular pastime for many people. Work songs were commonplace, helping ease the tedium of repetitive jobs, or for tasks that needed co-ordination. War songs relieved loneliness and reminded people of home. Further back in history, slavery songs were about hope and freedom – or maybe protest – whilst folks songs told local stories, welcomed in seasons and gave

thanks to the harvest. But the key aspect of this traditional type of group singing lies in its inclusivity, giving people a sense of belonging and community, whatever their circumstances.

Suppressing our natural urge to sing is not only bad for us as individuals, but also detrimental to society as a whole. Families, schools and communities could all benefit from more singing and its supportive and healing values. Imagine a mother singing quietly to soothe an ill child – it's the most natural thing in the world. Some of my own happiest childhood memories are singing sea shanties with my Dad when on car journeys.

So, what's stopping us all from bursting into song? Unfortunately, it's often negative programming from childhood; I've lost count of how many times an adult has phoned me and tentatively admitted a lifelong desire to sing, despite being told they 'couldn't' sing from an early age. Much of my 1-1 work is about building confidence and persuading people their voice is ok.

Can everyone sing? Yes, if you can speak, you can sing – but it's important to remember not to draw comparisons. Your voice is your own unique instrument and will never be the same as anyone else's. You don't need to be a classically trained soprano – as with all types of activity, there are different levels of ability. Some of our best and most popular singers are not pitch perfect, but they give us honest expressions of emotion that captivates listeners. Of course, if you want to achieve excellence and make singing your profession, you need to train and practice. However, just to sing for personal pleasure, a few pointers and a willingness to try is all you need.

Singing comes in many different forms; chanting, choral, rock, pop and, with the current singing revival, there are many groups, choirs and workshops to choose from. It is a very personal experience, so try different things until you find what feels right for you. If you are really nervous, then find a supportive teacher or a small informal singing group to get you started.

Singing is your birthright – so go on, share the joy and set your voice free.

Jules Olsen is a Bristol based vocal coach, for more info on her workshops, choirs or private tuition go to www.julesolsen.co.uk