

A brief evaluation of *Vocal Flourish*, a York choir for people with dementia

By Ali Cummings, independent evaluator

Introduction

Vocal Flourish was set up in York in February 2015, funded by Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) as part of their programme Dementia without Walls.

The choir now has 20 members, of whom six come as couples, seven are living on their own in the community, and one continues to attend after his wife moved into residential care. The choir is directed by Ruth McCartney who is a teacher of singing, both privately and in schools, and also has her own choir. The session runs from 11-1 every Friday morning in term time and is held in the large hall at Lidgett Grove Methodist Church in Acomb, York.

I visited the choir in February 2015 for its first session and revisited in December 2015 for the purpose of this evaluation. I also re-contacted Emily Abbott, project manager, in October, to catch up with the news about their concerts, the links with the Foton Centre in Bruges, her plans for the future, and an update on how specific critical incidents had been responded to over the year.

Session content

On the day of my visit, there were two volunteers, one experiencing early signs of dementia, one recently retired from teaching. Emily and her assistant Lorraine were in attendance and joined in in the second half. Emily was there early to welcome people individually as they arrived, to give out the packs of song sheets (lyrics) and to stay to chat at the lunch club with seven members afterwards. Lorraine and a volunteer from the church organised the coffee break. This lasted half an hour and was clearly an important opportunity for members to move to the tables at the back of the hall, sit and talk to each other.

Ruth stated that her aims for the choir are exactly the same as for any choir, the only difference being that she might choose more accessible material for this particular group.

These aims are:

- ❖ Tuning
- ❖ Ensemble
- ❖ Diction
- ❖ Resonance
- ❖ Overall good choral sound

This session was to reinforce the preparation of the last four sessions ready for their Christmas concert. Her specific objectives today were to:

- ❖ Build confidence to sing well at the concert
- ❖ Remember the words of 'our' songs (learnt without word sheets)
- ❖ Rehearse the new songs composed specifically for the concert and tackle some of the challenges in these pieces

Warm ups

The first half hour was spent on a well practised sequence of physical, breathing and voice exercises, to the accompaniment of a CD. Many of these are found in Peter Hunt's community choir handbook, 'Voiceworks' (2001)¹, where he recommends spending 20-30% rehearsal time on warm ups, to encourage

- ❖ Open, balanced physical posture to allow full use of breath
- ❖ Engaging the brain (eyes and attention) as well as the body
- ❖ Attention to tuning, pitch, phrasing, dynamics and holding a part

The following were additionally designed by Ruth for this group:

- ❖ A game to encourage mobility of facial expression ("Show me a.... happy/sad/frowning/surprised face"). Formerly Ruth had noticed how hard it had been for members to produce/ identify different expressions. They now manage this rapidly and accurately.
- ❖ Disco dancing to the song 'Happy' raised energy and mood, and brought in a strong element of rhythm to the session. Everyone enjoyed moving to the beat on the spot and watching each other dancing.
- ❖ Exercises to music to encourage cross lateral awareness (e.g. alternately tapping the raised right knee with the left hand and left knee with right hand).
- ❖ Prompting five - note scales with fingers held up.

Ensemble and part song practice

The choir then seamlessly progressed to 'our songs' i.e. the songs they have learnt to sing in parts without word sheets ('Holdere, Holderah' and 'Over my Head') and sung these familiar songs with gusto, clearly used to rotating the different parts. I gathered there has been a little resistance from some of the group to singing without song sheets to hold, but there was no evidence of forgetting the words to these songs, helped by having the key word changes

¹ Hunt, P. 2001 *Voiceworks, a Handbook for Singing*, OUP

emphasised by Ruth, singing along with the group. It may be that some members feel more confident with a song sheet to 'hide' behind.

Work to improve sound and technique

Moving on to the repertoire for the forthcoming concert, the following areas were given attention:

Singing first verse with teeth clenched (Away in a Manger), using all the mouth muscles to form words: second verse was much clearer.

Ruth sang while choir hummed tune, to remind them of the 3 parts for 'Donna Nobis'.

Choir is teased about 'car park' vowels and asked to notice what happens to jaw ('nuh' to 'nah') when altering/lengthening sounds.

Pitch training ('Amazing Grace'): after one verse checking pitch on piano. Only dropped one tone this week, last week it had been four tones. On next verse only dropped a semitone: progress! Reminded to lift eyebrows and lighten sound to resist dropping pitch. "Stay bright!" "You look lovely!"

New carols: some clarifying of how to fit in words. No correction of melodic minor inaccuracies today (nearly end of session). Ruth accompanied on piano.

'Warm down' with familiar song in two parts: (Give me joy in my heart, keep me singing) Words adapted to promote Vocal Flourish and always sung at the end of session and concerts.

Engagement of participants

Throughout the session there was complete involvement from every member in the activity and a palpable sense of 'we are here to work.' The mood was energetic, cheerful and upbeat and there was plenty of laughter and jokes. There were no discernible lapses in attention or wandering off for any reason. Fellow choir members noticed when somebody had not got the word sheet for a particular song and offered their own or reminded their neighbour to turn over a page.

The choir were very disciplined and responsive to instructions. There was no resistance or doubt about their competence to hold a part or remember a tune. They remembered not to cross their legs when sitting, or if they did, immediately corrected themselves. They sat/stood

promptly when requested and particularly loved the dancing, making a great contrast to some members' bent-over postures and hesitant gait when entering the room.

There was excellent recall of the words to 'our songs' without word sheets.

In 'Amazing Grace' they were stopped by Ruth, because they were picking up speed and everyone subsequently made a conscious effort to hold back. They recognised they had done this and made more effort to follow the conducting beat to keep this tendency in check, because Ruth expressly wished it to be sung very slowly.

There was an especially good volume and quality of sound in 'Ding Dong Merrily' and again in their 'own' song at the end. At this point that elusive choral effect happened, where the whole is so much greater than the sum of the parts, and they were all part of a confident ensemble with its own life and energy.

Feedback from choir members

During the coffee break and afterwards at the lunch club I was able to gather feedback from 8 participants. I asked them about what they got out of the choir, what it meant to them, why they came along and what they thought the main benefits were. Emily had introduced me to several members as they arrived, and made a point of re-introducing me to the whole group at the end of the session, explaining that I was evaluating the choir as a submission for part of my MA in Community Music at York, and would be gathering comments from them to include in the evaluation that would also be shared with JRF.

Health benefits

Mrs A: I have emphysema: the doctor says it has helped my chest. It's good for me. (This lady's daughter had tried to dissuade her from attending today because she was very tired and not very well, but she insisted on coming along because she knows it benefits her, and she feels she's needed in the choir)

Miss B: I feel very strongly that doctors should recommend it more for depressed and isolated older people. Better than a pill any day to help you enjoy your life again.

Social benefits

Mrs C: It's like a substitute family for me. Both my children live abroad so I don't see them very often. You meet nice people here who like the same thing as you.

Mr and Mrs D: Well, it's the highlight of our week. We look forward to Fridays.

Miss B to Mrs E: I've noticed you've got easier with yourself since coming here. You talk to people and you're more relaxed and open.

Mrs E: Well yes, I was a bit careful not to talk too much at first. But I like the people here. We have music in common.

Mr F: I used to bring my wife every week but now she's in residential care sadly. I just seemed to keep coming. I like to come still.

Confidence building

Mr D: I'll have a go. I don't know all the words mind you. But I give it a try.

Mr G: The diagnosis of dementia 13 months ago has changed my life. I've got involved in so many activities. I have made so many friends. I've spoken at conferences. I've written articles. I've been abroad to conferences for Joseph Rowntrees. It's opened doors for me.

Mrs A: Did you hear that taxi driver? He said it was a really good sound. He really liked what we did.

The music

Mr D: I never sang before, not properly. I enjoy it, yes. I practice at home.

Mrs D: Now you go round the house singing to yourself.

Mr E: I never sang before but I really enjoy this. It's the company, and the music: both are important. And I do like to dance.

Mrs C: I've always loved music. My son was a chorister. My grandparents had a piano in the lounge and we children all sang round it. Everybody did then. Music is with you for life.

Mrs A: My grandchild came to our concert and at the end she was crying: she had tears just falling down her cheeks. I said 'Oh no, what on earth has happened? What's wrong, sweetheart? She said 'I'm so happy!' She was just so happy to see me singing!

Assessment

1. Use of the space

The hall is very large, giving the choir the experience of singing in a performance sized space, but made more reassuring and friendly by having the semicircle of chairs at one end (facing the stage), and near the door. A suggestion would be to encourage the choir to change places after the break and sit next to somebody different/ in another section. It would be possible in this space to suggest walking around while singing your part to really hear the other parts. The physical exercises could have been performed away from the chairs, again using the large space. It might be helpful to give the opportunity to individuals to come out to the front and hear the ensemble as a whole. Perhaps they could have a go at conducting to get an increased sense of the choral effect and how a choir responds to gestures and body language. It might be useful to practice on the stage before a performance to rehearse coming on, standing and bowing in a performance space, and looking at the audience to project the sound across the hall.

2. Timing and structure of the session

Keeping to a familiar pattern in rehearsal and especially devoting a third of the session to a sequence of practised warm ups helped build confidence to sing. The half hour coffee break was important to rest voices, an incentive to walk to the back of the room and continue social interaction and bonding as a group. The optional lunch club following the session is a valued chance to talk and eat with other people.

The pace was brisk and purposeful throughout and members seemed to be able to draw on energy reserves for their final 'flourish' in their last song.

3. Any weaknesses?

There was some difficulty managing the song sheets, since all the typed words looked similar and this led to some confusion turning and returning over of pages for some people. It did provide a chance for members to assist each other find their place, but perhaps coloured pages for different songs would be easier to manage.

4. Strengths

Overall this session fully achieved the objectives of continuing to reinforce choral skills and develop the choir's sound both generally and specifically for the concert in two weeks' time. Expectations were high and the group responded to this.

There was confidence in ensemble and part singing and clear ability of the choir as a whole to remember the words of learnt songs without song sheets. The learning of new material was largely secure, especially in the repeated choruses. The choir managed to keep going with these new songs even after minor mishaps.

There was a growing sense of group identity and confidence in themselves as a choir, and it is clearly important to individuals to be a member of this choir and to work hard for excellent performance as well as the enjoyment of singing and each other's company.

Suggestions for Development

Create a visual image or logo for Vocal Flourish and reproduce on badges/ stickers/song sheets, to promote choir and group identity.

Different coloured pages and clear folders for song sheets to avoid losing place in bulky pack of similar looking lyrics.

Encourage the choir to “tell the story” especially in the new songs (for example “What part of the Christmas story are you relating to the audience here? Can you convey the wonder of the angels’ appearance to the shepherds?”). Encourage looking up over the copies and out at the audience, even when keeping half an eye on reading the words. Consider projecting words on PowerPoint onto screen behind conductor for performances.

A quick warm up exercise after the coffee break would help to refocus and re-engage in music making.

Consider including exercises involving a level of vocal improvisation and/or use of percussion instruments for novelty and creativity.

When demonstrating side to side steps and arm movements, the leader could turn her back so she’s orientated the same way as the group rather than facing them (mirroring is confusing).

Practice a group bow at the end and standing and sitting together, following one person’s lead.

Potential networking to involve health and social care professionals could be developed. Printed concert tickets and/or a personal invitation to drop in to the weekly session could be sent/given to members’ own GP/ health professional.

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