

# Being in a choir transformed our lives — can it help you?

As the Proms gears up for Choral Day, the Times asked some of the amateur stars to share their experiences of group singing

How much of an impact can singing in a choir have on your life? Who are choirs for and what should they perform? How can we get young people into opera and classical music? These are all questions that come to mind when thinking about singing in a group. As the BBC Proms hosts a Choral Day, five talented amateur singers, ranging from 12 to 61, talk about their experiences of being in choirs.

*Olivia Mujuru, 12, from High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, sings with Garsington Opera*

My dad is a construction site worker and my mum is a fashion designer. Everybody's always singing at home. I like to listen to Rihanna or Beyoncé. I have three brothers and they like rap music more. When I was in year four we went on a school trip to Garsington Opera and watched a performance. My mum played us classical music as kids, but we'd never been to or listened to opera before. Then in year nine, I did an opera workshop with Glyndebourne at school and it was really fun, so I auditioned with Garsington and got a place. This year I'm doing my fourth opera. I have two solos in my second one, *The Moon is Listening*. People see me and are like, "Oh, she's so small, I'm not supposed to hear her." And then when I sing they're like, "Oh my God, she's so loud." I love being in a choir. People are really friendly and it's nice doing harmonies. I want to have a career as an opera singer — or a footballer.

**Garsington Opera performs A Midsummer Night's Dream on September 10**

## **'It's like a team sport for non-sporty people'**

*Che Ramsden from Surrey, 35, works in retail strategy and sings in the Fourth Choir*

My mum's parents grew up under the apartheid regime in South Africa where they were classified as "Cape-coloured" and both of them belonged to ensemble groups within their community. I think even my great-grandparents led a community choir. So many things were closed off from them, so it was about making their own entertainment. And my grandmother used to play the cello at

City Hall on what were referred to as “coloured nights”. So I grew up in a musical family and caught the singing bug early. I sang in the church choir and I was a choral scholar at university.

Singing in a choir is like a team sport for non-sporty people. It’s a vulnerable experience because you’re using your body to contribute to the overall sound and you’re forced to listen to everyone else. When I joined the Fourth Choir in 2015, my partner and I had been in a civil partnership for a year and a half, but the process of needing to come out at work and all that stuff was really overwhelming and full of anxiety. We knew other queer people our age, but there were no older examples. Lots of people in the choir in their fifties or sixties have been living out and proud lives. Being part of that community is completely life-changing. It gives you so much confidence to be yourself.

*Max Lawton, 25, from Newcastle, works in Waitrose and sings in Voices of the River’s Edge*

I was in choirs at junior school, but stopped. Then when I was 13 I started struggling with anxiety, depression and doubt and I found singing through my music teacher, who thought it would be good for me. It was a great way to channel all those things. I think Paul McCartney said singing is a way to express things you can’t say and I found that to be true. At Leeds Beckett University I couldn’t find a choir I liked and I was quite into drinking. I graduated, moved back to Newcastle and was on the lookout for something to do with singing when I saw an advertisement for this new choir for 18 to 35-year-olds. When people think of choirs, they tend to think they’re for older generations. In this one we all have common things we’re going through, which provides a sense of unity and togetherness. I like when we do folk music from Newcastle like *The Water of Tyne*. Singing is a form of storytelling people have done for time immemorial and it’s nice to carry on that tradition and be in tune with your ancestors.

*Cedric Dent, 61, from Detroit, Michigan, is a music theory professor at Middle Tennessee State University and sings with the Jason Max Ferdinand Singers*

I’m from Detroit, Michigan, and moved to Nashville, Tennessee, in 1989 because I was a member of a performing group called Take 6 that got a record deal in Nashville and to date has won ten Grammys, performed for five presidents, Nelson Mandela and worked with artists like Stevie Wonder. Both my parents were church soloists and directed church choirs. My mum used to teach us traditional three-part harmony and we would sing Negro spirituals and hymns. I met my wife through singing. We attended churches on opposite sides of Detroit, which sometimes worshipped together. If you were to poll the most famous pop

and R&B singers, most of them would tell you they started singing in the gospel choir at church. I get choked up singing *Keramos* by James Q Mulholland and *World, Oh World* by Jacob Collier. It's a great benefit to be a part of a choir because of how it crosses all faiths, cultures, races and brings people together.

*Jeremy Piper, 49, from Cardiff is an education consultant and inspector. He sings with the BBC National Chorus of Wales*

I trained with a music specialism for primary education and have run choirs wherever I have been. They've all been totally inclusive. At my last school, we created a choir of nine primary schools and a secondary school. It's really helped support a huge number of children to go on to do the things that they wanted to do. I've worked with children with a range of needs and disabilities who have all been able to play an active part. We would sing pieces like *Zadok the Priest, Happy*, things in Welsh like *Dewi Sant*. We'd make it fun, singing songs in different accents or taking a song and then singing it in a couple of different genres or seeing how long you could hold a note for. Being part of a choir gave them confidence.