

All together now: singing is good for your body and soul

As scientists show that choir practice is healthier than yoga, Sarah Rainey – who does both – praises the power of song



Since joining a choir, Sarah Rainey has felt healthier and happier Photo: Geoff Pugh



By [Sarah Rainey](#)

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After years of singing in the shower and warbling my way through karaoke duets, 18 months ago I finally joined a choir. Every Thursday evening, I head to a church hall in Marylebone, central London, where, along with 30 others – mostly women, the occasional bloke – I spend 90 minutes belting out Motown, gospel and pop classics, from Abba to Bon Jovi. I'm more of a keen amateur than a wannabe soloist, but even the odd off-key note or wrong lyric can't detract from how good singing makes me feel. I leave every session uplifted, buoyed by a flurry of endorphins flooding through my body.

So it comes as no surprise that scientists have shown that not only does singing in a choir make you feel good, it's got health benefits, too. Researchers at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, found that choristers' heartbeats synchronise when they sing together, bringing about a calming effect that is as beneficial to our health as yoga.

The scientists asked a group of teenagers to perform three choral exercises – humming, singing a hymn and chanting – and monitored their heart rhythms during each. They showed that singing has a dramatic effect on heart rate variability, which is linked to a reduced risk of heart disease.

“Song is a form of regular, controlled breathing, since breathing out occurs on the song phrases and inhaling takes place between these,” says Dr Björn Vickhoff, who led the study. “It gives you pretty much the same effect as yoga breathing. It helps you relax, and there are indications that it does provide a heart benefit.”

Having done both yoga and singing, I'm inclined to agree. Panting one's way through a downward dog just isn't as soothing as a floaty aria; nor does contorting oneself into the shape of a cobra make you feel quite as good as a burst of Aretha Franklin. Yoga may supposedly be relaxing, but it's also sweaty, tiring and often painful. Singing, on the other hand, never fails to leave me feeling fabulous. But is it really better for your heart?

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Over the years, scientists have found that crooning has a number of health benefits. The Gothenburg researchers proved that with singing we can train our lungs to breathe better; similarly, a study at Cardiff University in 2012 found that lung cancer patients who sang in a choir had a greater expiratory capacity than those who didn't. Singing has also been shown to boost our immune system, reduce stress levels and, according to a report published in the *Journal of Music Therapy* in 2004, help patients cope with chronic pain. A joint study by Harvard and Yale Universities in 2008 went one step further, claiming that choral singing in a Connecticut town had increased residents' life expectancy.

“Singing delivers a host of physical and emotional benefits, including increased aerobic exercise, improved breathing, posture, mindset, confidence and self-esteem,” says Jeremy Hywel Williams, who leads the Llanelli Choral Society in Wales. “While singing alone is good, singing with others can be even better.”

It explains why we Brits are flocking to choirs in our thousands. There are more than 3,000 groups listed on the British Choirs on the Net website, and the body that runs my choir, Rock Choir, has over 16,000 members in 250 communities nationwide. There are said to be more

choirs across the country now than there are fish and chip shops. Gareth Malone, the preppy choirmaster credited with reigniting our interest in choral singing through his BBC Two series *The Choir*, helped a new generation of singers realise the benefits of making music; his Military Wives Choir had a Number One hit in December 2011.

Tom George, a Rock Choir leader in Surrey, says singing takes his members' minds off physical and mental illnesses. "We receive many emails from members telling us how Rock Choir has helped them," he adds. "People recovering from depression, arthritis, surgery, dealing with the effects of cancer and many other ailments find it a real tonic and have even suggested it should be prescribed on the NHS."

Do choristers agree? David Webb, 30, part of the Amore quartet that serenaded the Queen during the Diamond Jubilee Pageant, equates singing with a session at the gym. "Using your whole body as you sing is massively important," he adds. Rachael Brimley, 25, from Bedfordshire, whose vocal group Les Sirènes was named the 2012 Choir of the Year, agrees: "The discipline of breathing often feels like a good workout, as you are using the core muscles and focusing your energy to achieve a great sound."

Alex Bucktin, 25, a graphic designer from Harpenden, joined a choir in March and says singing has helped her sleep more soundly. She adds: "I have done yoga and pilates, and singing uses so many muscles and so much concentration on your breathing that it exerts your body in the same way." Suzie Jennings, 30, a London-based resource manager, says she has slept better since she started singing last year, and has noticed a positive mental effect. "A few months ago I was made redundant on the day of choir practice," she explains. "I went along feeling pretty depressed, and while singing didn't solve my employment issues, it made me feel a million times better."

Choral singing has been used as music therapy in hospitals, care homes and hospices for decades. "Singing enables people with dementia to access memories and joy in times when communication is faltering," says Sarah Teagle, co-founder of the Forget-Me-Not chorus, a charity for dementia sufferers.

Can as much be said for the downward dog? Those living in Los Angeles don't have to choose between the two: vocal yoga is the latest trend in the US, combining the health benefits of both in a single class. Back in the UK, no such newfangled activity exists – but joining a good old-fashioned choir can provide benefits aplenty. The science doesn't lie: singing really is better for your health than yoga. And, in the words of Ella Fitzgerald, "the only thing better than singing – is more singing".