



Sing ALONG

Love to sing? No matter your ability, joining a choir promises to lift your mood. And for those who don't know their tenors from their sopranos, the Lalala Choir is a place where anyone can learn to sing

Words: **Róisín Healy** | Photography: **Clodagh Kilcoyne**

We've all been in a choir at some point in our lives, though for most of us our choral days date back to school plays and Christmas carols.

Aside from long car journeys, morning showers and the odd end-of-night singsong, there aren't too many opportunities to really test your vocal chords. Yet singing is something we all associate with being in a good mood, so it isn't at all surprising that adult choirs are growing in popularity in Ireland.

The Association of Irish Choirs (AOIC) has details of choirs across the country, as well as festivals taking place throughout the year.

Meanwhile, workplace choirs have become a great way for colleagues to unwind and bond, and even practise at a competitive level, taking part in the Workplace Choir of the Year Competition in association with Lyric FM.

However, it can be daunting for a novice to approach a choir, with many of the well-established groups in Ireland requiring application forms, previous experience and even auditions. Many have waiting lists and often are seeking particular voice types, and of course a newbie to choral singing may not know if they are a soprano or an alto. Music teacher Sam Kavanagh always felt passionate about making music accessible to anyone, but it was

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actually friends who encouraged him to set up his own choir last year.

“The philosophy of music being for everyone has always been an interest of mine as a music teacher – just that idea of getting as many people as possible involved. But it was actually my friends who approached me about starting a choir, because they were having trouble finding one that didn't require auditions or the ability to sight-read and previous choir experience,” says Sam.

“There are also a lot of children's choirs out there and the story I keep hearing is if you miss that boat there aren't many options to get started.”

SPREADING THE WORD

And so Sam set about finding a space and spreading the word about the Lalala Choir. The group were to meet at The Fumbally Stables in Dublin for a 10-week season and learn to sing together with Sam's guidance.

“Fifty showed up the first night, and like with anything there was a drop off, and we had 35 regulars

then. No one gets turned away by us. In fact, this is where the turned-away people can go," Sam explains.

"The first season was all about improvisation, which levels the playing field. Improvisation is helpful for people who have never been in a choir before or who have never even sang in public. If you can't read music, if you don't know if you can sing high notes or low notes, it doesn't matter because they can sing it however they want. These musical games helped people to relax and to realise that they can sing and be a part of the choir."

Many of us love to sing but wouldn't feel confident about doing it in public or, worse, have been told we shouldn't.

"The horror story I keep hearing from people is that they were in choirs in school and the teacher told them to mime. I just want to hunt down those teachers and yell at them. It isn't about whether you can or can't sing. Learning to sing in a choir is a skill that must be learned like anything else. And by the end of the 10-week season our choir is able to sing, and it doesn't sound like a bunch of random people thrown together, because they have learned to sing together," Sam says.

The atmosphere at the Lalala Choir's practice sessions is fun and relaxed. After warm-up exercises requiring lots of stretches, funny humming noises and sillier facial expressions, the singing starts, and for the first few minutes Sam turns off the lights so that no one feels self-conscious and everyone focuses on singing along.

"The main problem I find with groups who are new to singing and not used to singing together is confidence. Once they get comfortable and realise that they are contributing to the group and having fun, catching the right pitch just happens naturally," Sam says.

One negative aspect Sam finds is that people can assume that just because it is a community choir, that the music won't be great.

"The term community project has unfortunately become synonymous with not very good. People assume it is going to be rubbish and that bothers me. We can produce quality music. Just because every-



one and anyone is welcome doesn't mean the music won't be great."

The group are currently working on their own adaptation of traditional Irish folk songs, teaming up with singer Riona Sally Hartman and jazz and folk musicians for a performance at the Smock Alley Theatre on 12 March. Working together towards this common goal is really bringing people together.

"It's a very welcoming and diverse group anyway, and as weeks go on you see friendships forming. That's the great part about practising every week and doing a performance together. It's first and foremost a music project, but with a really enjoyable community aspect too."

Choir member Gillian Caldwell agrees that the fun atmosphere and friendships are a huge draw. "The room is always full of energy, we're like giddy schoolchildren. But the people here are some of the best people I have ever met, and have become instant friends. It is about more than just singing." 🌟

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CHOIRS AROUND THE COUNTRY

CORK

The Bravehearts Choir

Open to anyone whose lives have been touched by cancer
www.braveheartschoir.org

GALWAY

Ignite Gospel Choir

A welcoming choir open to anyone
www.ignitegospelchoir.org

BELFAST

The Big Belfast Choir

A light-hearted choir that will run its first boot camp this year
www.meetup.com/U-Can-Sing

LOUTH

Setanta Choir

Long-established choir with a varied repertoire
www.setantachoir.ie

WESTMEATH

Mullingar Choral Society

One of the largest and longest established choirs in the country
www.mullingarchoral.society.wordpress.com

BECOME A CONDUCTOR

The **AOIC** will run a six-day choral conducting course from 7 to 12 August. Prices vary depending on experience and number of days attending, and early-bird prices are available for bookings before 30 May. Visit www.aoic.ie for more information.