



The voice of our Memory

Singing sessions for people with dementia and their carers

In 2011, Koor&Stem, the Flemish organisation for vocal and choral music, asked composer Hanne Deneire to become project leader of “The Voice of our Memory”, an initiative that aims to provide a bridge between the choral world and the care sector. A highly necessary one, as dementia is expected to be one of the major public health challenges of the coming decades. One in five people will eventually develop some form of the illness. In the meantime, music and singing provide unique instruments to improve the quality of life for people living with dementia. Hanne Deneire introduces the project.

How do you sing with people suffering from dementia? How is it different from singing with any other amateur choir? How do you select the repertoire? Apart from the singing, what else should you provide for the ‘contact singers’ in your choir? We spent a year searching for the answers to these questions. Observations in several care homes in Flanders and in contact choirs organised by local governments offered valuable insights into this new form of singing together.

We introduced the term “contact choir” because we needed an appropriate name for these types of choirs, and we did not like the negative connotation of ‘memory choir’. A contact choir is a setting created to facilitate singing together, and to enhance contact between elderly people, people with dementia, their families, informal carers, volunteers and caregivers.

As people age, the flexibility of their vocal cords decreases, which causes their voices to sound lower. Therefore, make sure the songs you select are transposed to a lower pitch, so that everyone can sing along without having to strain their voices.

As they grow older, people tend to talk and think more calmly, adopting a slower pace of living. Therefore, if you want everyone to feel included during the rehearsal, you may need to adjust your pace. Incidentally, the whole session should be held in a relaxed atmosphere, allowing the participants to share their thoughts, as some of the songs will undoubtedly bring back plenty of memories.

It may also be a good idea to adjust the pace of the songs themselves. Although this may sound funny to young people's ears, it will allow the participants to hear and sing each and every word of the song, which they often remember well.

For this project, we recorded a CD containing 20 well-known songs, which were speeded and pitched down to make sure they are easy to sing along to. The words may sometimes sound a bit strange, but that is all forgotten once you see the contact choir in action. The participants derive so much joy from being part of the choir and get to develop unique contacts along the way. They clearly enjoy the attention, while the choir also allows them to be themselves and to try out something new, inspired and motivated by the music. Before or after the singing there are plenty of opportunities to meet with fellow-sufferers, or for carers and family members to share experiences.

Visiting Foton in Bruges

On a cold but sunny afternoon I received a warm welcome at the Family Care ('Familiezorg') Centre in Bruges. On these premises, the Foton contact choir meets every month to sing together. The choir is made up of a unique mix of people with dementia, family members and volunteers. As stated clearly on the invitations, every participant is welcome to bring a partner to the rehearsals.

The choir is part of the Family Care organisation, an independent organisation that provides home care services (to people with dementia living at home), and coordinates the local Foton Centre of Expertise on Dementia (similar to a Dementia Service and Development

Centre). The organisation's main strength is its well-founded view on the possible benefits of singing with people suffering from dementia and its effective communication to its target audience.

This is a perfect example of a contact choir. Before and after the actual rehearsal, we are able to witness the warm interaction between the participants. They do not avoid the subject and feel free to talk openly about their experiences and the obstacles they might have come across. You can also drop in on other days for a cup of coffee, or for a proverbial 'cup of comfort': the doors to this house are always open. The Foton volunteers are available during rehearsals, but also before and after, creating a warm atmosphere and welcoming environment for the choir participants. This project can definitely serve as an example and inspiration to many communities.

Singing with people suffering from dementia recognises the need of these people to be included and involved in society. It allows them the opportunity to re-establish interaction with their own partners, but also with friends or with fellow-sufferers, focusing on their remaining abilities as opposed to their disabilities.

For this project we developed a practical guide, a CD, scores and song books. With the guide 'The Voice of our Memory' we aim to provide inspiration and tips to anyone who would like to start a contact choir. It is not our intention to dictate the course of action, our only goal is to offer some ideas on how to get started. Target audiences range from volunteers, sons/daughters to staff members, choir singers and directors. These are only basic outlines, it is up to you and your creativity to fill in the gaps.

'The Voice of our Memory' was initiated by the Centre of Expertise on Dementia and Koor&Stem, the Flemish organisation for vocal and choral music, in collaboration with the following partners: the regional Centre of Expertise on Dementia West-Flanders-Foton, Imelda Hospital and care home 'Den Olm'. The project is supported by the Province of Antwerp, CERA and the Forum for Amateur Arts.

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