

Singing with elderly people

Lecture given by **Helga Draugelates** (Ottobrunn-Munich) for ECPCM, September 22, 2017 in Strasbourg.

About myself

Already at the age of 12 I was allowed to start with choral singing which I have been in touch with ever since. During my studies at Stuttgart, Frankfurt and Lucerne with concert diplomas in my main subjects Cembalo and Singing I was engaged as choral voice trainer in nationwide choirs and work weeks. Two worlds – that of the international soloist and the one of amateur chorister. Sixty years ago I started with singing weeks for children, young people and families and in the last 14 years all my energy has been concentrated on the singing week „Plus-minus 60“ of the evangelical church choir association in Bavaria and for one and a half years of the choir „Ecumenical Vocal Circle 65plus“ of our church district Munich South-East.

What urges me to sing and make music with elderly people?

The increase in the percentage of old people in choirs is not a completely new phenomenon. Quite often, the choir has been growing old together with its leader, or the leader looks for a solution for those singers who do not satisfy his demands any longer. In church choirs there is no restriction of age. Singers in the ordinary church choirs are honorary parish members, mostly very active. Whereas the value of singing rises, the capacities decrease. The choristers, after years and decades of membership may finally admit that they are no longer able to meet the demands of the choir leader and their own. Shortcomings in hearing and eyesight - all this standing, concentration and energy become less. That is why new offers for elderly choir singers are becoming welcome. The aim is not great concerts any longer, but just making music together.

Singing week for seniors

I invite you to accompany me for a day and to participate at the senior singing week.

Advertising and organisation are located in Nuremberg at the association of evangelical church choirs in Bavaria. Participants come from Germany and Austria. 99% of them are experienced former choristers. The average of age this year was 78 years, the oldest singer (and besides still an outstanding violonist) was 93, our youngster 61.

I welcome each participant personally. At the beginning everybody is given a ready-made booklet of music each sheet numbered all the way through, a nameplate and a detailed agenda for the day or the week. Participants are wondering what I have chosen this year. This depends on the number of voices and especially the number of male singers who have enrolled. Everybody is also given a copy of „Weitersingen“. Formerly we also sang from „Kleine Melodie“. The evening is finished with a common evensong for several voices.

Each of the five days begins with a short worship, a hymn and a prayer. Then we start with voice training as a warm-up. Those who have difficulties with standing may remain sitting. Exercises make allowances for the aging voice: the lips get drier, the height is lowered, the breath becomes shorter, the tension of the body gets less.

Then follows the first piece of music. The voice of the soprano should not exceed f or g. To find suitable literature requires a lot of time. I have found a lot with CPDL of Wikipedia (Choral Public Domain Library) for music free of cost. And also the archive of „Kreuznacher Kantorei“ together with some other collections on the Internet. I've also got to know quite a few new compositions at the meetings of ECPCM which I used for singing weeks. Jürgen Pfister published three volumes with compositions for 3 voices at Strube, both sacred and secular. Quite often, it is even possible to sing with five voices, among them three female ones when there are twice as many altos as sopranos.

Before I start with a composition I give some information about the composer and maybe about the poet. Explanations about the composition, its form, style, historical background may follow.

I try to find out as quickly as possible what I can expect from the participants. I want to further their capacities, fill them with enthusiasm, by honestly praising them. A little gesture with thumb up may be sufficient. I like to start with a new composition first by syllables and then with each voice individually. Then all together with syllables. All can join in with all individual voices. Then I add the voices in different combinations.

We speak the text of the voices beforehand in the rhythm of the music and with long vowels.

Remember: soundless breathing-in. Texts in foreign languages, e.g. in Latin, Italian or English, should be pronounced very slowly and distinctly beforehand.

After about 90 minutes a small break. After this „tutti“-rehearsal the choir is divided up, some go dancing, others go on singing.

Our experienced senior dance leader makes sure that there is a lot of enjoyable movement together with concentration, upright and relaxed walking. She is always pleased to see how fast people with a musical background can retain the steps corresponding to the music.

In the parallel group we rehearse difficult parts, or a female choir is formed due to the surplus of women. Men do not mind, they may listen or read a newspaper in the meantime.

At 3 o'clock p.m., after an extended lunch break, we go on with a longer more difficult composition. Having chosen a sacred piece for the morning, we now sing a secular one in the afternoon. I like to work in the „sandwich technique“, that means I stack the choral work on the bass voice.

I like to sing with the choristers in different combinations with the instruments at hand. If double chorus singing is not possible, a choir is played by instruments. With songs with several stanzas there are preludes, interludes and postludes.

In between times there are of course breaks for fresh air and movement. Then the choir is divided up again and the groups for dancing and singing are reversed.

After supper the instrumental group rehearses depending on the cast with strings and wind section.

There are instrumental sections for double chorus singing or like this year a mass by Valentin Rathgeber with instruments obligato. Literature goes from Lasso to Scott Joplin.

At 8 p.m. the choir meets once more for easy prima vista music such as from „Weitersingen“. If the participants have any wishes, they are welcome. The evening programme varies from video lectures to a dance with musical interludes. After this individual groups of people will meet to enjoy a glass of wine from Franconia with small talk.

In this way five days are spent with making music in a relaxed, enjoyable atmosphere. Of course my emphasis is on pure intonation, flexible dynamics and good pronunciation. This year, we even sang a choral work by Handel for four voices by heart on the first day – just imagine! At the beginning of the week most of the singers wondered if we were ever able to do it. And then we did it, incredibly well.

At the close of the sing week we go to an old romanesque church to sing the sacred pieces, and after that we do all the pieces worked on just for our entertainment in the great hall of our venue.

Participants report that at the end of the singing week they are able to sing up to a third higher, or that they have enough breath to walk up to the next floor. We leave with a beaming face, looking forward to seeing each other again next year.

Ecumenical Vocal Circle 65plus in Ottobrunn

Ottobrunn is a city east of Munich with 21000 inhabitants, three Catholic parishes with choirs and a Protestant congregation with a lot of musical activities.

The idea to found a choir for elderly singers came two years ago from the four choir leaders and our Dean. All four church musicians found that they did not have enough time to start a choir for elderly people, but they knew about my long experience with senior singing. They did not want to send their oldies out of their choirs, but they secretly hoped that those who were less good would change into the 65plus choir.

We rehearse in the hall of our Protestant church where there is a good grand piano.

Singing is free, my fees being paid by the four parishes according to the rules for evangelical church musicians.

Advertising is made by posters in all parishes, in the town hall, the homes for elderly people, and in the press.

Everybody can come, no matter if they are Protestant or Catholic or neither.

Rehearsals take place twice a month, 90 minutes in the morning with a small break.

Infos are sent by e-Mail.

In the first rehearsal there were 32 people, nowadays there are about 60 to 70 singers, in ordinary rehearsals always more than 50. The area is not only Ottobrunn, but reaches 30 km around and up to Munich.

We sing three times a year in a service of one of our parishes.

Of course there are many things to consider beforehand with the minister and the organist when we sing in a service.

People are so relaxed and enthusiastic when singing, and they forget their sorrows. They all enjoy it greatly.

Singing with the Senior Club of the parish.

We sing folk songs; there are booklets with texts, but seniors have learned many texts in their youth by heart, more than young people do today. These songs are their treasure. It is normal that many texts of old folk songs in the last stanzas also deal with death.

We sing at the home for elderly people, in the summer and at Christmas time, relieved by song intermezzos or readings by my pupils. Singing with the children's choir on the different floors of the home is a special and nice attraction.

I think my approach to the many elderly people with enthusiasm for singing is also influenced by the fact that I myself belong to this generation. Music is in fact my elixir of life!