

The Linguist

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The Linguist



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Editor Miranda Moore

Email: linguist.editor@gmail.com

Sales Sarah Heaps

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7940 3100; Email: sarah.heaps@iol.org.uk

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- CL (Translator) (Chair)

The Chartered Institute of Linguists, Saxon House,
48 Southwark Street, London SE1 1UN; Web: www.iol.org.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7940 3100; Email: info@iol.org.uk

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Tuning the mind

Community choirs are increasingly popular, but can they support language learning, asks Jessica Moore

On Monday nights, between 8pm and 10pm, a beautiful sound flows from the Inter Faith Centre in Queen's Park, Northwest London. It's unfamiliar. Uplifting. Not at all what you'd expect to overhear on a residential city street. 'Our community choirs sing in a range of different languages,' explains Catherine Dyson, Founder and Director of Vocality, which currently runs eight a cappella choir groups at locations in London and Surrey. 'There's a wealth of music out there – the little bit of our rock and pop that most of us are used to hearing is just a drop in the ocean. World music is often perfect for singing unaccompanied, because a lot of it has been passed through the oral tradition, through communities, from person to person.'

Songs in languages as diverse as Zulu, Shona and Georgian are taught, using, says Dyson, 'as little paper as possible'. The choir leaders sing their hearts out, teaching by example. The choirs have an all-welcome approach and a fun-loving attitude that's evident in the sounds they produce.

It's a risky strategy. 'People are often frightened of singing in different languages at first,' admits Dyson. 'We tell them what the songs are about, but the words are unfamiliar. We rarely sing in French or Italian, or other languages that people are more likely to have some knowledge of. In many ways, that actually makes it easier – because you don't have to think about the words: you associate the sounds with the rhythm of the music.'

'Singing in a range of languages can be a greater challenge, but it makes for a more interesting programme,' agrees Charlotte Eaton. Having worked as a choir leader for Vocality, Eaton recently established her own multi-language community choir in Dagenham, East London. 'The important thing about the songs we choose is that they're from other cultures. We would never

translate them and sing them in English – the music and the words are so necessary to each other. You'd never get the same feeling by singing in translation. The African songs are a good example. You get the "mba" and "nga" sounds, which we rarely use in English. It's soft, percussive – the way you're using your mouth changes.'

For the choristers, many of whom are beginners, this additional challenge quickly becomes a pleasure. Motivated by the 2006 BBC documentary *The Choir*, Dennis Spencer-Perkins – a bus driver from Dagenham – helped Eaton establish their local choir. 'Everyone who comes thinks it's going to be really hard singing in all these languages, but it makes us put more emotion in, somehow,' he says. 'Sometimes a song's really powerful

I was using songs in my lessons but I worried it might not be helpful. I was surprised how little research there was



and you feel the energy coming through. It's like at football: we all sing as one.'

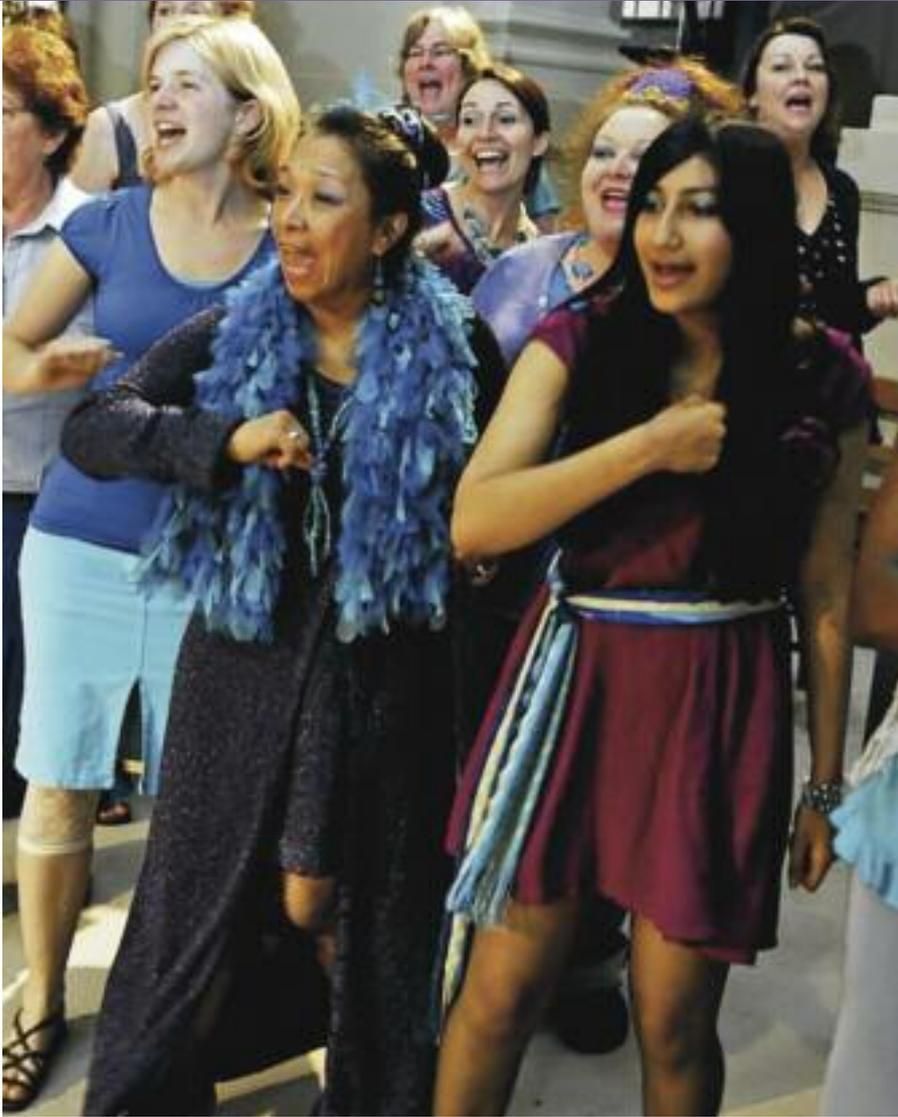
It is a learning curve, however: 'In English, you use certain muscles, but in different languages, you use different ones. You might have to roll your tongue, or pronounce a "j" like an "h".' An understanding of context helps. Spencer-Perkins adds: 'If you know what a song is about – whatever language it's in – you understand when your voice might go up or down, a bit sad or lively, whatever it is. It's story-telling.'

The absence of a core language also has a levelling effect. 'You can have a choir with people from 20 different nations in it – so you might have people who speak the language of one of the songs,' says Eaton. 'I can ask them the best way to pronounce the words.' Dyson agrees: 'We do get people saying "I speak Swedish and it's not pronounced like that", or whichever language it is. That means the people in the choir can contribute and then it becomes a community project in a greater sense. Everyone can contribute.'

Far reaching benefits

There could be other benefits of singing in a different language. Karen M Ludke, a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, has found strong benefits for singing when learning a second language. Her postgraduate and doctoral theses sought to evaluate whether listening to songs and singing in a new language could help with language learning, compared to more traditional teaching methods.

The results of her studies are remarkable. In a classroom-based intervention in French lessons at schools in Scotland, Ludke says: 'There were much stronger findings than I expected. Singing is fun and motivating, but the results also showed positive effects on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. We



SINGING LESSONS: *The Vocality summer concert last year (above); and a student in Ludke's Hungarian study (left)*

taught one group through music and songs and another with visual arts and drama during their French lessons. After six weeks of instruction, the singing group's performance had improved more in the French tests than the control group. This is especially interesting because we didn't test them on the specific words of the songs or dialogues; it was general French skills, such as listening, speaking, pronunciation, reading and writing.'

For her doctorate, Ludke set English-speaking adults a series of strictly controlled tests. Three groups were taught 20 Hungarian phrases using a 'listen-and-repeat' method. One group learned spoken phrases, a second learned rhythmically spoken phrases and a third learned sung phrases. 'Overall, the people who learned through singing did better in the five Hungarian tests, and there was a significant difference between them and the other groups' performance for the two tests where they had to speak in Hungarian.'

What makes Ludke's research more inspiring is the nature of the 'eureka moment' that prompted it. 'I was in Cantigas Women's Choir in New York City, where we would often sing in different languages,' she explains. 'I was also teaching English as an additional language to adults, and when I was walking home from choir one night, I had a flash of insight that I should research the links between singing and language learning. I was using songs as a tool in my lessons, but then I got worried that it might not be helpful: songs sometimes have quite unusual grammar, and I wondered whether that might, potentially, hinder their language learning. I looked into it and I was surprised at how little research there was. I couldn't find any studies comparing groups that had been taught material from a new language with singing and without.'

Her research, conducted at the University of Edinburgh, informs the 'European Music Portfolio – A Creative Way into Languages' project, which runs workshops and provides downloadable resources on teaching languages through singing and musical activities. 'A lot of that is targeted at primary

school children, but the activities are really adaptable – you can use them for different classrooms and teaching environments,' she says.

The otolaryngologist Charles Limb, a self-professed music addict, has conducted equally interesting research. In order to explore the effects of musical improvisation on the brain, he put jazz musicians with portable keyboards into an fMRI scanner and recorded their brain function while 'trading fours' – a musical 'conversation' in which musicians take turns to improvise a passage of music. The areas of the brain that engaged were those used in language and communication.

New sounds

While multi-language choirs don't aspire to teach their members any of the languages in which they sing, they can offer an introduction to the types of sounds those languages create. 'There has been a link between music and languages for a long time,' says Elizabeth Lake MCIL, an interpreter, teacher and trainer. 'If you're using an entirely new language, it's easier if it's put to music, as you've got something to pin it on and associate it with – and if you're learning a tune at the same time, you're doing two things at once, which interests me because of my interest in simultaneous interpreting.'

Eaton feels these choirs can also extend an understanding of culture. 'Teaching in a range of languages adds to my feel for different types of people. A good example is that this term my Dagenham choir is doing a Shona funeral song, which is a celebration. That's interesting culturally. It's a South African language, and they sing about sending someone off to a really good place. It's not how we would generally view death.'

Dyson adds that it also gives choristers new confidence. 'Being able to stand up and sing does a lot for people, and I think doing that in different languages gives them even more confidence. It opens minds.' But for all the philosophising, what's important, says Dyson, is the music. 'We're all about enjoying yourself and enjoying sound,' she concludes.

See www.vocalitysinging.co.uk for more on Vocality; www.lifebulb.org for details of the Dagenham and Barking choir; and www.emportfolio.eu for information on European Music Portfolio workshops, methods and downloadable resources.