

THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

Things that work

Choral singing program hits all the right notes

fiona morrow

VANCOUVER— From Friday's Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Dec. 22, 2011 6:56PM EST

Last updated Wednesday, Dec. 28, 2011 8:12PM EST

Not many people have the nerve to sing in public. But imagine being a teenage boy whose voice is behaving badly as it finds its new range – and then standing up and singing out in front of an audience.

Daunting doesn't even begin to describe it. Terrifying, more like.

Two years ago, the administration at Chor Leoni, Vancouver's much-loved male-voice choir, decided there was a need to encourage younger males to try choral singing. The first MYVoice (Mobilizing Young Men's Voices) program for males aged 12 to 20 was launched in spring of 2011 in Vancouver and New Westminster.

The 12-week program, which is free for the singers, involves weekly rehearsals, workshops and a day retreat, as well as three concerts. The budget for the 2012 season is \$40,000 and the calendar includes two public performances with Chor Leoni.

No one was sure what the response would be when they launched the program.

"I was worried," admits Kevin Zakresky, program director of MYVoice and Chor Leoni assistant conductor. "I knew that Chor Leoni had invested quite a lot – we had some grants and some quite sizable private donations – and so we really wanted the program to work."

In fact, about 70 young males signed up across both choirs – including one 10-year-old. "His big brother had joined and he was desperate to take part, so we thought, what the heck," laughs Mr. Zakresky.

The MYVoice choirs truly reflect the region's diversity, Mr. Zakresky says. "We've got waspy North Shore guys next to aboriginal kids from the east side, next to East Indian kids from the west side. It's just the whole Lower Mainland in one singing microcosm."

It was such a success, next year's program has been expanded to a third choir in Langley, and Mr. Zakreski hopes the model could eventually roll out across the country. "Next year we would like to expand to the Interior and/or on Vancouver Island," he says. "And I'm hoping that it catches the

eye of potential sponsors who could help it go national.”

The biggest take up this year was at the Vancouver location, Tupper Secondary School in East Van, where the music teacher, Mike Cavaletto, is also a Chor Leoni singer.

Making sure the program didn't conflict with existing school programs or appear too onerous for students already juggling the many demands on their time was important, Mr. Cavaletto says. Making it available to all, regardless of singing experience, was also key.

“So many people think they can't sing,” he says. “But to be able to sing is natural – our bodies are designed to do this. Yet 80 per cent of the people I ask if they sing, will say, ‘Oh no, I'm terrible. I can't sing.’”

So, does he believe anyone can sing?

“I think so. Not everybody is going to be Pavarotti – and not everyone wants to be Pavarotti,” he smiles. “There's a spectrum, and everybody is going to start at different spots and will get to different spots on that spectrum.”

“Singing is not seen as a particularly masculine activity,” Mr. Zakreski says. “So there are barriers to overcome in the first few weeks with some of the guys.

“I call them the ‘one-note Steves,’” he says. “Where they have that one note that goes ‘aaaah’ and that's it, that's the only one they can do.

“MYVoice offers the chance for ‘one-note Steve’ to become ‘three-note Steve’ and by the second season he'll have six or seven notes.”

J.C. Piedad, a Grade 12 Tupper student, joined the MYVoice program and found it relieved some of the social anxiety he often experiences.

“To be honest,” says the 17-year-old, “I'm not a very comfortable person dealing with people. But being in a group like that just opens you up and you lose that sense of insecurity.”

The fact that the group is all-male also helps, he says.

“As guys we always have this wall in front of us – the generic guy thing,” he says. “At MYVoice you don't have to abide by all these rules that apply in school. You get to be a new person.”

“I don't want to sound anti-sports in any way,” says Oliver Robertson, 16, a Grade 11 Tupper student who has signed up again for 2012. “But I think that music adds something extra, and it's not so competitive. It really has a sense of team spirit – but you don't get cut from choir.”

The benefits to his students have been much greater than simply vocal, Mr. Cavaletto believes.

“I think there is some deep connection between singing and happiness,” he says. “If you sing, if you do music, you can't walk away from that feeling worse than when you started. And that leads to confidence in all aspects of your life.”