



CARRY ON

While choirs may not be meeting in

Whether it's in the shower, or while doing the housework, singing makes us feel good – and the benefits are even greater when we sing with others!

However, the coronavirus means social closeness has become a distant prospect. Even with lockdown behind us, it may be a long time before choirs can sing together in person – the risk of virus transmission is too great. But, we can feel united with a new trend: virtual choirs. Through online services such as Zoom, YouTube and Facebook Live, people are getting together to sing. Gareth Malone explains...

'IT'S ALL ABOUT HAVING FUN'

Gareth Malone's latest fab idea saw the TV chormaster leading warm-ups and singing sessions live on YouTube. Tell us about your *Great British Home Chorus*... 'The idea started when I was filming for the BBC in Europe. Italy had shut down and we had to leave Germany as borders had begun closing. Then the UK went into lockdown and I thought, 'What am I going to do if everything gets cancelled?' I had recently had a garden studio built, and it was while I was sitting in there that I had the idea to try running online singing workshops.'

How did it work? 'During lockdown, I went live on the YouTube channel of

Decca Records to host a singing session: warm-ups, songs, you name it. On Wednesdays, a special guest would join us – from Richard Beadle, the director of *Hamilton*, to actor Kristin Scott Thomas. The sessions are on YouTube, so people can sing along at their leisure.'

How did you find leading a virtual choir?

'It was strange at the start. Before lockdown, my garden studio was a private space where there had never been cameras, then, suddenly, the world was watching me. At first, it felt like a one-sided rehearsal. I'd say, "Okay, now sing this," and just have to trust that people were singing. But once I had the videos back and people sent me clips of themselves singing with sheet music, it was lovely.'

What are the advantages of virtual choirs?

'A collective endeavour creates a sense of community that really helps when it comes to loneliness and mental health. Taking part in a virtual choir gives a sense of structure, which I think is vital. And, of course, singing simply makes you feel good!'

What if it's out of people's

comfort zone? 'The great thing about a virtual choir is that no one can hear you! The sound delay means there's no way everyone can sing in time together, which is very frustrating, but perhaps it's an advantage for less confident singers. It means everyone can give it a go. Ultimately, the pleasure involved is more important than the product. It's all about having fun.'

Gareth Malone's *Great British Home Chorus: The EP* is out now on Decca Records (all profits go to NHS Charities Together). His singing sessions can be found on Decca Records' YouTube page.



'Singing together makes people feel good'



Gareth's brainwave brought some light relief to lockdown

SINGING!

person, modern tech means that you can still raise your voices together...

MY STORY

'My virtual choir immediately lifts my spirits'



Jo Gale, 46, from St Albans, joined the St Albans Rock Choir five years ago. Now, the group has gone virtual... I've always loved music; growing up, I was in all my school productions. As an adult, joining a choir was something I liked the idea of doing, but life seemed to pass me by, and I never managed to do it. When my relationship of 23 years fell apart in 2014, I was in turmoil. I've long struggled with my mental health, and the separation sent me into a very bad place. I knew I needed an outlet, some way to rebuild my confidence and happiness. So when ITV showed a TV series called *The Choir That Rocks*, it felt like a sign.

Deciding to join Rock Choir was one thing, but going was another. Three weeks running I drove to the church for rehearsals, but each time I was so nervous about walking into a roomful of 100 strangers that I panicked and immediately drove away.

On the fourth week, I finally plucked up the courage to go in – and I was so glad I did. The choir leader, Abbie, greeted me with warmth and kindness, immediately putting me at ease. Everyone I spoke to was so welcoming and I've since found some great friends. I've performed in St Albans Cathedral and in front of the castle at Disneyland Paris. My anxiety has reduced, and singing has helped my confidence – so much so that last year I even sang a solo in front of the whole choir! When the pandemic hit, our sessions continued via Zoom. Every Thursday evening, we all logged on at 7pm, our normal rehearsal time, and had a chat, then Abbie took us through a warm-up

before we muted our microphones and started singing. Almost the whole choir joined in – that's more than 100 people singing from their homes! One week, we had a cheese and wine night; on another, we had a 'funny hat week'. It brought structure to my weeks and gave me something to look forward to. Now lockdown is over, we're still

'Everyone was so welcoming and I've since found some great friends'

meeting once a week online. It's a shame that choirs will be one of the last things that will get back to normal after the pandemic, and it does sometimes feel a little strange singing in my house

alone. But even if I'm having a low day, being back with Rock Choir immediately lifts my spirits. ABBA'S *Super Trouper* really gets the smiles going, while *I'll Be There* by Jess Glynne feels so poignant. The words resonate a lot, because even apart, we're connected. rockchoir.com



HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

Three inspiring virtual choirs for you to join...

● THE SOFA SINGERS

Set up by musician James Sills as a response to isolation because of the coronavirus, you're encouraged to 'sing as though no one is listening – because they won't be!' After each session, there's a virtual tea break, where you can video chat, followed by open-floor slots where brave

individuals can share a song, poem or story. It's free to join and sessions are open to all. thesofasingers.com

● DANCESING

'The choir that keeps you fit' is run by former Scottish National Ballet dancer Natalie Garry. Initially physical classes, her new initiative, *danceSing* On Demand (£20 a month), is

an online service that brings music and fitness to your living room. There are hundreds of classes, including singing workshops and dance fitness sessions. dance-sing.uk

● **LIFEFULNESS LIVE**
Inspired by Italians singing loud and proud from balconies, sign up to be put on to a free



video singsong with people in your area on Wednesdays at 6pm. You can stream the events on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or YouTube, and there's the chance to book singing sessions for companies, bringing you closer to your colleagues, no matter where you are. lifeliveness.co/get-involved