

Why should boys sing?

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With so much emphasis on team sports, boys even more than girls often don't seem to have time for music or other cultural activities. Highschool choirs, if they're lucky may have just enough tenors and basses to be able to sing in four parts, and even adult choirs in North America are generally short of men.

Not so in some places, though, where singing is definitely a "guy thing". Wales, for example, is known for rugby, but also for its male voice choirs. A website about British choirs lists 53 male voice choirs in Wales (population ca. 3 million). That's ten times the number of male choirs per person than in Canada where we have only 54 male choirs for a population of 30 million. And in the U.S.A. (pop. ca. 300 million), there are only 135 choirs listed on malevoicechoir.net. In Wales, sport is often synonymous with singing; rugby players are also known for

their vocal prowess, and not just for bawdy songs in the pub after the game. Ian Hyde-Lay, past Director of Athletics at St. Michaels University School and a member of Canada's national rugby team in the 80's, told me that 9 of the 15 players on SMUS Ist rugby XV this year also sing in the school choir. And he himself has always mixed music with sports, having sung the title role of "Oliver" when he was 12.

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He added that tradition in the Cowichan Rugby Club where he was a member in the 70's and 80's included gathering round the piano in the club house after a game, and singing on the club bus. In his

travels later as an international referee he remembers particularly occasions in Fiji where "there was always a guy on a guitar, and everyone sang."

The camaraderie of a male choir is like that of a sports team. About a year ago the Amabile Boys Choir from London Ontario came to Victoria to participate in Choropodium, a national event organized jointly by the Association of Canadian Choral Conductors and the B.C Choral Federation. The 40+ boys and men, aged 10 to early 20's were obviously having a good time, both on the stage and off. One of them remarked, during a question period, that for him the choir was a big part of his social life; they didn't just sing together one evening a week, they also hung out together on weekends.

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A friend of mine in Ottawa conducts one of the few remaining church-based men and boys choirs. When I had lunch with him and some of his

choristers recently after a Sunday service it was obvious that for these boys singing is a vital part of their life. And they're also pretty serious about the floor-hockey games that take place after Thursday rehearsals.

All the indicators seem to point to the idea that boys and young men can benefit enormously from participation in choral singing. The particular quality of the treble voice has, for hundreds of years, given the special sound to British cathedral music, the Vienna Boys Choir, and numerous other choirs around the world. Research shows that encouraging boys to sing through the voice change can give them confidence in their voice and in themselves, and singing in an all-male group allows boys to discover their creative and artistic side without feeling that they need to put on a show or act up when girls are present.

The benefits of choral singing also include learning to work as a team, but in a different way from sports, and it demands self-discipline and respect for the conductor or "choral coach". Then there is the thrill of performing in front of an audience... Singing, combined with sports and other cultural activities, helps boys grow into strong,

disciplined and well-rounded men.

We serve kids best when we help them become [multidimensional](#)

Canadian tenor Benjamin Butterfield, who now teaches voice at the University of Victoria while maintaining an active performing career, spoke to me recently about his experiences as a boy chorister and what he feels are some of the important things for parents to consider. "If boys are to choose singing it starts with the parents. The choir has to be something they need for their kids." Butterfield's mother was very keen for her children to do everything: sports, drama, swimming, singing, ... it was all part of what he did. "I just got caught up in it all," he said. As a young boy he sang in the choir at Christ Church Cathedral where the attractions included the camaraderie of floor hockey and choir picnics. And at choir camps the boys would rehearse in the morning, go off swimming and canoeing, then come back and sing some more.

He was inspired by Sir David Willcocks, for many years the Music Director at Cambridge's famous King's College chapel, who made

annual visits to Victoria in the 70's and 80's. "Sir David was a people-person. He was out there interacting with everyone, inspiring them, then you'd see him playing frisbee with the kids. We need to find more people like this."

Butterfield believes singing in a choir should not be instead of sports, but it should all be "part and parcel" of the whole thing. He believes that kids must become multidimensional. "We have to persuade parents that singing is an important part of the whole package," he said. "Singing in a choir is not about being 'cool' but about achieving something. Like in a good sports team, building a choir is about building a community which draws members in."

"The camaraderie, and the sense of being able to [achieve something fine](#) is what keeps them."

Singing is not so unlike athletics anyway: the energy and focus required for singing a musical phrase can be likened to what is required to dribble a basketball to the opposite end of the court and score a basket, to run the 100-metre dash or swim in a medley relay. Energy is required to perform. Most important, says

Butterfield, is the imagination energy, for example picturing Beckham on the soccer field, a speed skater on the ice, a skier on the slope, a sports car driver on the tarmac... He uses these kinds of images all the time in his own teaching in order to convey to his students how to sing a phrase and keep the energy flowing.

“...singing is like **running to the brain** - it facilitates bilateral stimulation and whole-brain integration.”

Barry MacDonald is a Vancouver-based clinical counsellor and author of *Boy Smarts - Mentoring Boys for Success at School*. He was the keynote speaker at a Calgary Regional Consortium conference in January 2005 about teaching and mentoring boys. The conference opened with a performance by the Calgary Boys Choir. After the performance MacDonald spoke with the boys about their choral experiences and why they enjoy singing. He noted, "The boys clearly appreciated the no-nonsense structure that the artistic director provided, almost like they could relax while clearly knowing what the rules of engagement were." He also points out that brain science shows

that "because processing lyrics and melody occurs in different hemispheres, singing is like running to the brain - it facilitates bilateral stimulation and whole-brain integration." He also stated, "The Calgary Boys Choir helped to set just the right tone for the conference.... [to show that] boys are capable of being reasonable and sensitive with appropriate support. The combination of the singing and everyone's comments worked together to convey how parents, teachers and choir directors can counteract the boy code and help boys to achieve."

The Albuquerque Boy Choir in New Mexico was directed for many years by Michael Maudlin, who wrote in a letter to choir parents (1998):

Rather than rush boys into manhood, **singing teaches communication and sensitivity...**

"There is ... a need for boys to have something in common at which they can excel in addition to the usual avenues of sports, scouts, etc. At their age, and given our society's tendency to rush them into manhood, it is healthy for them to

Singing provides an immeasurable sense of accomplishment and satisfaction!

do something together that is communicative and sensitive, and of which they can be proud, including the ancient boychoir tradition itself. For a young maturing boy to do his job and know that it has been done to the best of his ability gives an immeasurable sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Our goal is to help boys make music, and magic, today, cherishing and sharing the best of their boyhood, and to help them grow into strong and sensitive men for tomorrow, as they see that successes become reality through hard work, patience and awareness of their environment. They learn that the pursuit of excellence really can be a worthwhile endeavor. [...]A boy choir is a great way to bring some balance and power into a boy's life, and for him to give back something wonderful to his family, his city, even complete strangers."

In Greater Victoria there are over 35 community choirs of which 4 are for male voices only. Most choirs belong to the BC Choral Federation which organizes an annual conference

called Chorifest on the May long weekend (this year it was in Kelowna). Despite the larger than usual number of community-based choirs and choral singers per person in Victoria, only the VIVA choirs under Artistic Director Connie Foss More and Ann-Marie Brimacombe's Westcoast Kids' Choirs in Sidney have groups for boys only. VIVA has a Boys Choir for ages 7- voice change and a Young Men's Choir for ages 10-16. The latter mixes treble voice of the younger boys with changed voices of early teens to enable singing in three and four parts. Westcoast Kids' Choirs is starting a new programme this September called "Spotlight on Boys": a small group of 6 to 8 boys aged 8-12 with unchanged voices who will work as a performance ensemble combining stage and music skills.

Does your child's school provide rich choral music opportunities – for boys?

With less music in the public school system than there used to be, some children have not yet had an opportunity to discover their own voice. Can all children learn to hold a tune? "Most can", says Connie More, "and we give them every

opportunity, and while acceptance to our more advanced groups [Chorale and the Young Men's Choir] is by interview, anyone may join the Foundation and Boys Choir." Using techniques developed by Zoltan Kodaly, the great Hungarian composer and music pedagogue, Ms. More has an impressive success rate. Some of her former singers over the past 19 years have gone on to professional music careers (examples include violinist Timothy Haig), but more importantly, whatever their career choice, they have continued to sing in choirs and to include music in their lives. "I remember more than one boy who initially snickered and acted up in rehearsal," she said, "until it became obvious that male singing is normal, 'safe' and fun."

To give boys an opportunity to try out their voice, VIVA Choirs is holding "Let's Do a Guy Sing!", sponsored by the Victoria Foundation, on Saturday, Sept. 8. Tristan Rhodes, presently Music Director at St. John's Church, and past director of the National Boychoir of America in Washington, DC will be the guest clinician.

Music-making in any form, but particularly choral singing, should all be part and parcel of developing

well-rounded men and women. Boys in particular can thrive when they are able to discover their creative side through musical experiences. Beyond the music programmes in our schools, there are several more extensive community-based opportunities for young people to "find their voices". In the words of Zoltan Kodaly: "If one were to attempt to express the essence of ... education in one word, it could only be - singing.Our age of mechanization leads along a road ending with man himself as a machine; only the spirit of singing can save us from this fate."

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For more information about the VIVA choirs see www.vivachoirs.ca or call 250 472-2655. Westcoast Kids' Choirs can be reached at 250 656-5437 or through the Panorama Recreation Centre at 250 656-7271.