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Tuning into good health in the bath

A growing body of evidence is emerging to suggest that belting out a tune is good for our physical health

IT DOESN'T matter whether you're skulking at the back of the choir, letting loose with an aria or two in the bath or taking your turn in the karaoke bar, singing undoubtedly lifts the spirits. Now a growing body of evidence is emerging to suggest that it is good for our physical health too.

The benefits traditionally linked to singing relate to stress reduction and mood enhancement. We all recognise that general sense of contentment that envelopes us when we relax and belt out a tune.

Now it seems the tradition of meditative chanting, practised for millennia, has been endorsed by psychologists as an effective way of enhancing our sense of wellbeing and helping us focus our minds. A recent study undertaken at the University of Stockholm attributes this response to the oxytocin release experienced by people as they sing.

So convinced is Mental Health Ireland of the benefits of singing to our mental wellbeing that it has, for several years now, teamed up with the Association of Irish Choirs to organise concerts and singing sessions throughout the State.

Leaving mental health aside, the physical benefits associated with this intensely aerobic activity are now being acknowledged. It seems that John Harvey Kellogg, inventor of the cornflake,

got it right in the 1930s when he proclaimed, "Singing promotes health, breathing, circulation and digestion."

Benefits now recognised include improved efficiency of the cardiovascular system, as more oxygen is taken into the lungs, and the effective exercising of all major muscle groups in the upper body. In addition, improved airflow in the upper respiratory tract helps prevent the proliferation of bacteria associated with colds and flu.

The Royal Brompton Hospital in London conducts *Singing for Breathing* sessions for patients with respiratory problems. The hospital's respiratory consultant, Dr Nicholas Hopkinson, says: "What is clear is that patients are breathing more slowly and breathing from their diaphragms rather than upper chest, both of which are very beneficial in conditions like emphysema and pulmonary fibrosis."

Plans to extend this programme by opening the sessions to patients with severe asthma and children with cystic fibrosis are now being implemented.

Therapists and clinicians are discovering that singing may even improve neurological functioning, thus hastening recovery after strokes and heart attacks.

To this end, Chreanne Montgomery-Smith of the UK Alzheimer's Society founded Singing for the Brain, a musical group for patients with dementia, memory problems or Alzheimer's disease, after observing the positive effects that singing had on elderly residents in a care home where she worked.

In Ireland, Hilary Moss, arts officer at the Adelaide and Meath and National Children's Hospital in Tallaght and a qualified music therapist, oversees singing sessions in the hospital's age-related and psychiatry units.

"We have professional traditional musicians who play and sing on a voluntary basis every week.

"There is a great social benefit to singing together for the patients and it

gives them an opportunity to chat about memories. Songs are a great way of validating memories.”

The health benefits arising from incorporating singing into our daily lives are myriad. Several studies have concluded that singing increases our immunity and resistance to disease.

One such study, undertaken by researchers attached to the University of Frankfurt in Germany, tested choral members after they sang Mozart’s *Requiem* and found that they exhibited measurably higher levels of both immunoglobulin A, an antibody that plays a critical role in mucosal immunity, and cortisol, important in the regulation of blood sugar.

A number of health authorities have embraced these findings and put health promotion programmes in place.

In 2007, the British Government announced funding of £40 million (€46 million) for a national singing programme, *Sing Up*, designed to get every primary-school pupil singing regularly.

ELEANOR FITZSIMONS

TUNING IN: WHERE CAN WE SING?

MUSICAL SOCIETIES

There are dozens of musical societies throughout Ireland. The website of the Association of Irish Musical Societies (aims.ie) allows budding singers to search for the society nearest to them.

CHOIRS

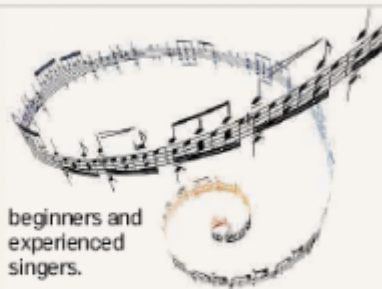
The Association of Irish Choirs (aoic.ie) organises and oversees the vibrant choral scene in Ireland. It runs classes and events nationally and offers information and advice to choirs throughout Ireland. A comprehensive website allows anyone interested in joining a choir to search by county and choose from the hundreds performing at all levels of proficiency.

LESSONS

If you feel that your voice is just not up to scratch, there are a number of singing courses on offer throughout Ireland. Here are just three:

■ Walton’s School of Music (newschool.ie) in South Great George’s Street, Dublin 2 offers a beginner’s course, *Introducing Singing for Adults*.

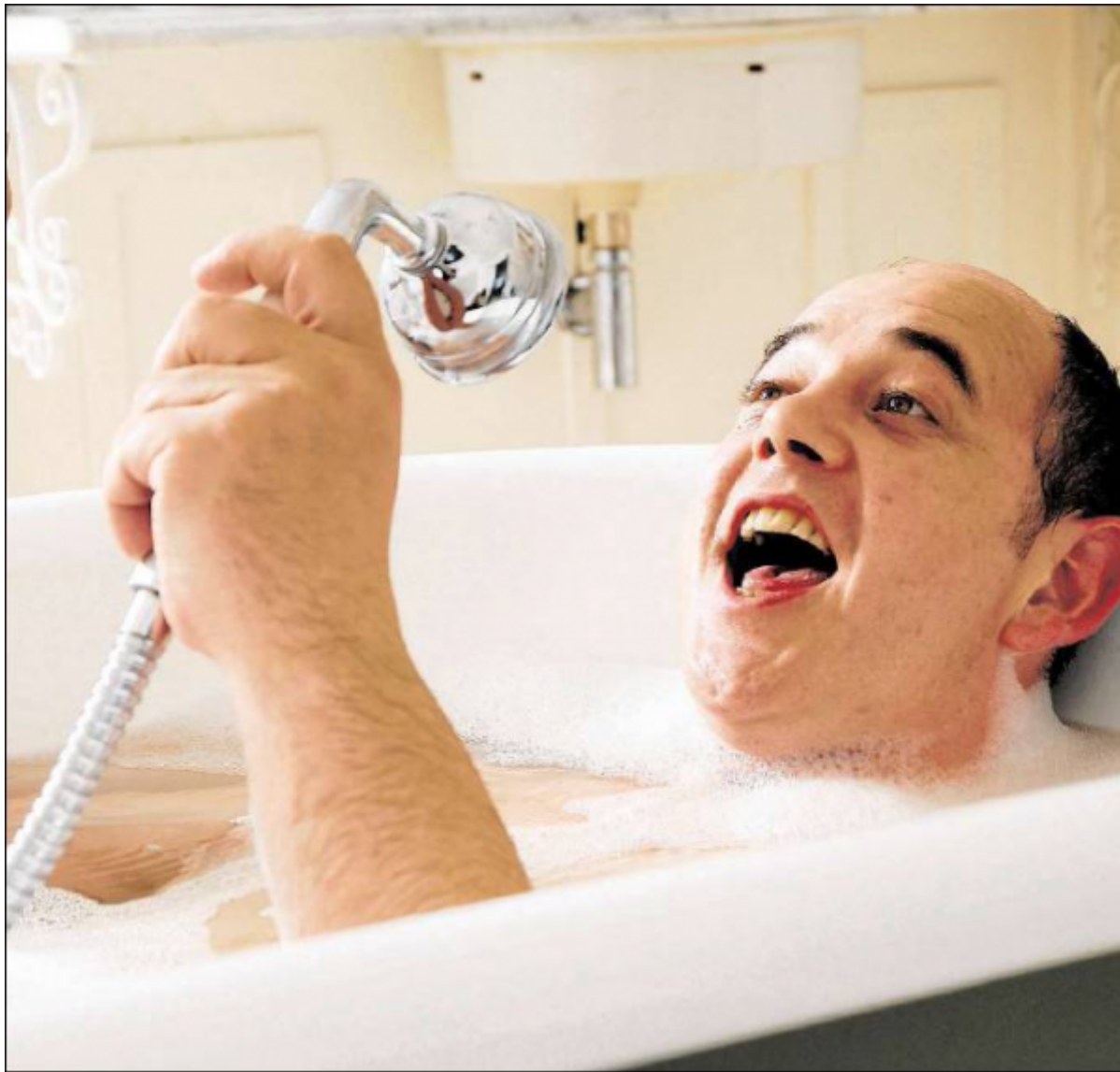
■ Rathgar School of Music (rathgarschoolofmusic.com) on Grosvenor Road, Rathgar, Dublin 6 offers 10-week courses in *Individual tuition in Classical Singing* suitable for



beginners and experienced singers.

■ Cork City Music College (ccmc.ie), Drinan Street, Cork, is running a new course for under-18s called *Popular Singing/Performing*, focusing on songs from musicals, the pop charts and even television shows.





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