



Guidebook 1: **The Ageing Voice**

This guidebook focuses on the voice as an instrument. What happens as we age? How can we maintain and sustain our voices? What happens if we do?



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Ageing Voices Introduction

Singing connects us. Lullaby, vesper or pop song chorus. Week nights in school halls and community centres. Across pub or kitchen tables. In the cultural palaces. Interweaving voices coming together in song reflect and reinforce the threads of national life we're woven into.

In Ireland the fastest growing section of the population are people over 80. People living well in their 60's and 70's are a growing percentage of the population which will continue into this century. Traditionally attention has been given to the individual voice as it develops from baby's coo through teenage mumble to adult voice. Now that many of us are lucky enough to live longer and singing brings such pleasure, isn't it time attention is given to the older and the ageing voice?

Fun, therapeutic, social, and stimulating singing already takes place in groups, choirs, health centres, even hospitals. Older adults who sing might be fit as a fiddle or challenged by illness. Innovation connecting singing with care is happening across Ireland. With Ageing Voices we are sharing learnings from the practices of these groups in order to encourage other like-minded people to get involved and bring the joy of singing to their community. We are on a mission to map and connect a network of these great people who have quietly evolved these groups over many years. We thank those with the wisdom to start the work we are now continuing.

Dominic Campbell
Creative Aging International

Dermot O'Callaghan
Sing Ireland



Dominic Campbell



Dermot O'Callaghan

Introducing Our Ageing Voices Guidebooks

Sing Ireland and Creative Aging International have come together to create a range of resources that will encourage and explore singing into older age, with support from The Creative Ireland Programme.

We believe that singing is invaluable. That it is a vital tool in the health and wellbeing of older people in our communities. That is why we have created four guidebooks that have been designed to give people the tools they need to create, run and nurture singing groups for older people within their communities.

1.

The Ageing Voice. This guidebook focuses on the voice as an instrument. What happens as we age? How can we maintain and sustain our voices? What happens if we do?

2.

Special Interest Choirs. Here we look at choirs in the community that are friendly to, and made with, people living with conditions like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's. These choirs support people, their families, and carers.

3.

Community Connections. This guidebook shares learnings from projects where cultural leadership has been connecting organisations through song in pursuit of care.

4.

Singing For Care. Our final guidebook discusses singing in healthcare settings and is particularly focused on sharing the experiences of groups led by nursing staff and care staff who sing and share their singing with those in their care.

Each guidebook will provide you with information, expert advice, recommendations, case studies and resources, to guide you through the process of setting up and running a singing group for older people. Our resources are continuously being developed, so if you have information to add, or need specific details please contact Sing Ireland or Creative Aging International, we'd love to hear from you.

Singing for Health and Happiness

Why singing is so important as we move into older age.

We should state at the beginning that singing is important in older age for all the reasons it is at any other age. It's about connection and belonging, it's about finding a place for your voice amongst others, it's about listening and being heard, facing challenges and building confidence.

/ Singing's secret weapon is joy.

Singing is physically good for you. Your heart, lungs, and vocal cords get a work out every time you sing. The brain blossoms with the challenges of learning new parts and adapting to sing alongside others. The endorphin release of performance or the dopamine of practice are all fantastically good for the brain and the body.

Singing into older age can help to keep the body fit and healthy, to keep the mind sharp and the voice strong. It is an exercise regime that keeps you active. As we age group singing and choirs can begin to seem like a daunting prospect. Aspects of growing older can become obstacles that stand in the way. From failing hearing and eyesight, to unsure bladders and reduced bounce, our bodies can hold us back. Transport systems and architecture that are difficult to navigate make getting to practice more of an ordeal, and that's before we have to think about reading small fonts, standing for long rehearsals, remembering the words. These many challenges are often individually tiny but they can add up. However each and every one of them can be easily addressed by considerate choir members and thoughtful choir



leaders, and overcoming them will lead to enhanced confidence, self-awareness and mental strength in our participants.

/ The value of the social interaction, support network and friendship that comes as part and parcel of joining a choir cannot be underestimated.

The challenges of isolation, the insidious subtleties of ageism, the despair of loneliness can all be addressed when a singing group is vitally connected into, or is, the connector of its community. Our case studies illustrate that even the most difficult moments of ageing and vulnerability, like life with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or living with Parkinson's, can be lessened and life enriched by a supportive singing group, led with attention and developed with care.

Choirs nurture care. As this programme develops we're recognising that a choir's social function in communities and workplaces should not to be underestimated for their mental, physical and social benefits. They operate in parallel to formal health care services and in some enlightened initiatives offer models of collaboration between agencies that bring care to the heart of the republic.

Older age is filled with innovation as we adapt to physical and emotional changes. A wide repertoire of song helps all of us find the resilience needed for life's inevitable challenges. As more of us live longer lives perhaps we also need to make new music to help us explore this unprecedented experience.

Michael Dawson

The Vocal Expert



Michael describes himself as ‘a Conductor who is fascinated by the human voice’. Intrigued by ‘Vocology’, Michael has dedicated himself to this relatively new area of science, studying how we can use our voices to sing longer and more effectively. As a Fulbright scholar, Michael had the opportunity to intensively study the human voice in the University of Southern California (including dissection of a larynx!).

As CEO of the Irish Institute of Music and Song, Artistic Director of Fingal International Festival of Voices and Director of Maynooth University Chamber Choir, Michael is enthusiastic about the mechanics of singing – and in particular older ageing voices. He thinks people can, and should, go on singing as long as possible.

/ “We’ve seen that a deterioration in the voice can lead to a lower quality of life as we get older.”

Bringing the latest in US voice research to Ireland can only be a positive for all those offering access opportunities to quality music education. Dawson believes that voice-related quality of life research is as relevant to Irish singers as anywhere else.

As one ages, the voice changes in a number of ways in line with physical changes. It loses elasticity resulting in muscle atrophy, more collagen may develop, people may have decreased lung capacity and calcification of cartilage may inhibit elasticity.

In simple terms, our ‘vocal folds’ is where all the action happens. Michael says if we treat them well with exercise and lots of water – we can maintain our voices into older age. Even conditions such as vocal fold paralysis are treatable by medicine and exercise.

He advocates for older singers to become more self-aware of their own

voices as they age. He believes a basic understanding of how the mechanics of how voices work is useful to support older people and help to keep them singing for longer.

/ “We are what we do repeatedly.”

In terms of repertoire, Michael suggests that Choir Directors can use this understanding to inform effective voice rehearsals tailored to the ageing voice. By using a range of vocal tract, breathing, body alignment and posture exercises prior to singing, one is engaging core muscles, co-ordinating airflow and supporting the voice process. Doing these on a continuing basis, not just at choir practice, but at home as well, Michael suggests, will have huge impact on our overall well-being and prolong our ability to sing.

/ “Stay within a comfortable range and move up in a gentle way.”

Additional advice Michael suggests is to acknowledge the changing range of the older voice and to be flexible and willing to adapt. But this not to suggest that older people should be discouraged to use the full range of their voices. He recommends a balanced approach in encouraging singers to find where they are comfortable (e.g. a move from a soprano to an alto).

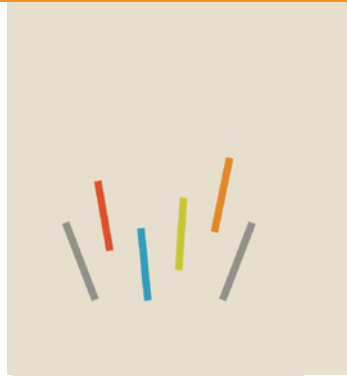
It’s clear Michael has a passion for encouraging people to sing – he stresses the uniqueness of sharing the emotion of a song with other people when you sing together.

/ “As a nation of storytellers, singing is simply another way of telling stories.”

He firmly believes that the voice ‘can show us who we are’ and suggests that this is especially significant for older people in maintaining their role and visibility as they age.

Catherine McGuinness

The Singer



Catherine was six years a Supreme Court Judge, the first woman to be elected a High Court Judge, former Senator for University of Dublin and past President of the Law Reform Commission, current Chair of NUI Galway Governing Authority and Honorary President of Sing Ireland.

Catherine is recognised as one of the greatest champions and advocates for the voice of the child in Ireland and is a past patron of the Irish Refugee Council. Whilst Catherine was ensuring the voices of those most vulnerable and excluded in our society were being heard, in the background and what is very much less known about Catherine herself, is that her own life rather surprisingly is also very much a ‘lifetime in song’.

Catherine comes from musical family and has sung from a young age. She sang in school choirs, as a soloist at the FEIS and gradually became interested in the more technical aspects of singing. At one point she was informed ‘You are an Alto – you will always be an Alto’. Interestingly at eighty-five, Catherine is very much still an Alto.

While at Trinity, Catherine continued singing with the College Choral Society and then joined the Culwick Choral Society – where it is fair to say she found her ‘tribe’ as she has been there ever since! There are about 100 members and the choir is a mix of ages. Like many choirs, Zoom rehearsing is happening currently, but Catherine is looking forward to being able to get back to the day when normality returns.

Catherine believes there is so much more to being in a choir than meeting to rehearse once a week. She describes

singing together as having the potential to ‘create’ something new together. On a personal level, she suggests the experience as ‘mentally restorative’.

“You can go to rehearsal feeling low, angry or grumpy and come out feeling ‘cleansed’.”

Her opinion is that choirs in general are hugely important in terms of their social contribution to communities around the country and that this deserves more recognition. She makes the interesting observation that older singers themselves have value and benefit to choirs – their experience and knowledge of music/lyrics can be of huge help to younger singers. Catherine believes that older people should sing, not only at choir rehearsals, but as part of their everyday life, not only for the practice, but also for the joy it brings.

Catherine mischievously relates that at a recent check-up, the Doctor suggested to her she had the lungs of someone ‘much younger’ and she wonders if this is down to singing for over 70 years! It’s perhaps quite possible there is some truth in this.



Recommendations

The ageing voice is an instrument that needs to be kept fit and healthy. Although it is impacted by the process of growing old, it does not necessarily have to deteriorate. There are lots of ways to keep your voice in shape. Here's just a few of our recommendations.

1. Practice, practice, practice

As the larynx grows, the vocal folds become longer and thicker and the pitch of the voice drops. Vocal fold changes will lower the pitch of a voice and vocal quality can become rougher and breathier. Exercises and practice can help to keep the vocal folds flexible and coordinated.

2. Sing little and often to keep your voice fit

“Use it or lose it” is the recommendation most often heard. Voice exercise is as important as any other and a lot more fun. Sing a little and often, don't leave warm ups for the start of rehearsals but encourage yourself to sing a little everyday as you go about your business.

3. Sit up and sit straight

The voice launches from your posture. Gently stretching out the ribcage, breathing fully in and out, and stretching up through your spine will improve your voice and your humour. If you need to sit while you sing, keep both feet flat on the firm and don't slouch.

4. Hydrate like a fish

Water, water, water. Keep those vocal cords lubricated. Drink in the morning before rehearsal and continue through the day.

5. Be good to your voice and it will repay you

The body is remarkably resilient. Taking up vocal exercises, gentle warm ups, and water can remedy loss.

“Your voice is very resilient, it will heal itself” Kathleen Tynan, Head of Vocal Studies and Opera, Royal Irish Academy of Music.

6. Keep singing and stay positive

Your sense of self is intimately tied up with having and keeping a voice, so one of the great benefits of a little singing is better mental health. So be sure to sing throughout the day. Vital organs receive hydration more quickly than your vocal folds, so drinking a lot of water helps enormously.



Conductors and Choir Leaders



7. Get to know your members

When we're dealing with older choirs it is good to remember that choir practice is not just about singing for your members, the chat and the cup of tea afterwards is just as important. Getting to know your members is vital.

8. It's all about respect

Older singers have lived all the rich and varied lives you can imagine, and then some. So be careful not to patronise their intelligence or experience.

9. Don't be boring!

Please do the math when you're thinking about the type of song people might be familiar with. As one contributor commented "don't make me sing those maudlin songs!" Perhaps change arrangements to suit the changing voices. Try new things, ageing is about innovation. Learning something new at any age is life enhancing, and the qualities of an older voice are many wonderful and varied, so don't get stuck with the same old songs; experiment.

10. Ask and listen

Finally every individual is unique, as are our challenges. Talk, ask questions and most importantly listen, to find out what small change or support might make an enormous benefit.

Additional Resources

A wide range of resources is available and more are developing. Take a look at some of the links and videos below.

Additional resources regularly updated are available at **www.singireland.ie/participation/ageing-voices-resources** including

The Aging Voice panel discussions
www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ErcA6e6nN4&feature=youtu.be

The Ageing Voice panel discussion, featuring people mentioned above can be found here


Choirs near me
Members Directory **www.singireland.ie/training-membership/directory**

Vocal warm ups and exercises
Video resources including warm ups etc
www.singireland.ie/content/files/video-resources-for-choirs-2020.pdf

General online resources
www.singireland.ie/content/files/Sing-Ireland-Online-resources-2019.pdf



Notes



Get Started

Singing is fun, therapeutic, social, and stimulating and is a great tool to help older people keep active and involved in the community. If you are currently involved and would like some advice or support, or if you are considering starting a choir in your area, please get in touch.

About this Initiative

Sing Ireland is the national development agency for group singing in Ireland. We lead, enable and connect communities of singers in Ireland.

Creative Ageing International celebrates ageing. We work creatively with communities, companies, individuals and organisations worldwide to transform for the better how we view and approach old age.

In the early stages of the pandemic both organisations connected on **www.dawnchorus.ie** with the aim of connecting isolated older people through song. This started a conversation about the wider role of group singing and its connection to the growing number of older people in Irish society.

This led to involvement with generous support from the Creative Ireland programme. This five-year programme connects people, creativity and wellbeing is an all-of-government programme committed to the vision that every person in Ireland should have the opportunity to realise their full creative potential.

Ageing Voices was conceived as a way for all of these agencies to work together to ensure that choirs aimed at our older generation have the support, resources and expertise they need to keep singing.

Written by

Dominic Campbell, Dermot O'Callaghan,
Rebecca MacLaughlin, Aisling O'Callaghan

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**CREATIVE AGING
INTERNATIONAL**

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