

Sing it loud and proud!

At any age, joining a choir is great for the body, mind and soul

WENDY HELFENBAUM
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Sixteenth-century Spanish poet Miguel de Cervantes noted: “He who sings frightens away his ills.” Today’s scientific studies confirm that raising your voice in song offers a myriad of physical and emotional benefits.

McGill neuroscience professor Robert Zatorre’s research published in the journal *Nature Neuroscience* revealed that our brains release a surge of dopamine — the feel-good chemical — when listening to music we love.

McGill psychology professor Daniel J. Levitin and his postgraduate research fellow, Dr. Mona Lisa Chanda, showed in the April 2013 issue of *Trends in Cognitive Science* that actively producing music through singing lowers stress levels.

A study published in the journal *Music Perception* found that singing can help seniors suffering from certain neurological disorders, like aphasia and Parkinson’s disease, because it improves posture, increases lung capacity, tones abdominal and facial muscles, and stimulates circulation.

Group singing, in particular, has a positive impact on the mental health of older adults, according to a study out of George Washington University, which found that seniors who sang in choirs reported fewer incidents of depression.

Being in a choir provides seniors with social support, fosters a sense of community and builds self-esteem, said Marie Beauséjour, volunteer co-ordinator of the Every Senior Choir, a joint project between the Montreal City Mission and St. James United Church.

“Singing together is a complete exercise for the mind, body and soul.

“Our singers are so enthusiastic, and it’s really rewarding to work with them,” Beauséjour said.

“Every little effort we put forth to organize workshops,

introduce new songs or help them with breathing exercises is so appreciated, and they improve so quickly.

“We have a very inclusive atmosphere, and we’re focused on singing about peace, love and hope.”

Every Senior Choir’s musical director, Thierry Jacques-Soudin, may only be 22 years old, but the trained French hornist brought a wealth of musical knowledge, training and enthusiasm when he began leading the 12-member group last year.

“I’d been looking for a volunteer opportunity that matched my skills and that enabled me to give back to my community,” said Jacques-Soudin, who is currently studying composing and conducting. “Everyone here is so open to learning, and they always have smiles on their faces. Each week, I witness how much good singing does them.”

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COURTESY OF EVERY SENIOR CHOIR

Thierry Jacques-Soudin (left) leads Every Senior Choir in a practice session.



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And while they are enjoying a busy lifestyle today, they appreciate the peace of mind in knowing that Chartwell offers flexibility and choice to help with changing care needs in the future. Until that time, they'll continue to follow where the music leads in their new Chartwell home.

BRUCHIM HABAIM



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COURTESY OF EVERY SENIOR CHOIR

Twelve-year-old Sami (far right) likes to join in the adult rehearsal session of the Every Senior Choir, led by Thierry Jacques-Soudin (back row, left), because he finds its repertoire challenging.

CHOIR | A way to feel connected

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Every Senior Choir's bilingual repertoire covers everything from spirituals to popular music, and the members are currently preparing for a May concert.

Craving more edge to your music? Find your inner rock star with the Cummings Centre's Rock 'n Soul choir, which is open to anyone 50 and older. Thirty-five singers, many of whom had never sung publicly before, signed on to belt out Motown classics like I Heard it Through the Grapevine and My Girl when the choir launched in the fall of 2012. A year later, two additional choirs opened to meet demand, said Keren Ludvig, director of program services.

"We have two young, dynamic musical directors — Chris Barillaro and Ian Lebofsky — running the choirs, and people don't have to audition or have previous singing experience," she said.

Allan Becker, 70, sums up his choir experience in two words: comfort and joy.

"I'm an empty nester, and about 60 per cent of my social contact dis-



MARKO KULIK, CUMMINGS CENTRE

Allan Becker (front row, second from right) participates enthusiastically in the Cummings Centre's Rock 'n Soul choir. "Something about singing in a group makes you feel connected," he says.

appeared the day I left industry; being in the choir basically makes up for it," said Becker, who signed on last January. "The music reminds me of my youth, and all the fun I had. Plus, this is one of the few activities that's interactive on an emotional and physical level.

"There are 2,000 lectures I could go to, but then I'd just sit in a hall. You can take up a hobby, but that's pretty lonely.

Something about singing in a group makes you feel connected."

Becker discovered that sharing a love of music with a room full of people is incredibly beneficial.

"We all leave the rehearsal hall at the end of the evening on a high," he said. "I can't recreate this feeling in any other activity that I do. It's one of the most life-changing experiences that I've ever had."

WANT TO SING ALONG?

Check out the following:

Every Senior Choir — The bilingual choir welcomes seniors age 55-plus from all backgrounds. No experience or commitment necessary. Rehearsals take place Sundays from 1:30-3 p.m. at St. James United Church, 463 Ste-Catherine St. W. People can join anytime, but a new session begins in September. More info at 514-844-9128, ext. 203.

Rock 'n Soul Choir — Register now for spring sessions beginning on April 30. The West Island branch meets Mondays 7-9 p.m.; the 10-week session costs \$80. The Montreal branches meet Wednesdays from 4-6 p.m. or 7-9 p.m. Nine sessions cost \$70. Call 514-342-1234, ext. 7216 for information.

Montreal Welsh Male Choir — No need to be Welsh, but members must be male. The choir meets Tuesdays at 7 p.m. at the Mountainside United Church, 687 Roslyn St. in Westmount. New members can join at any time, but new sessions begin in September and January. See www.welshmalechoirmontreal.qc.ca

Island City Chorus — One of many chapters throughout the U.S. and Canada governed by the Barbershop Harmony Society based in Nashville, Tenn. The choir is open to men 18 and older; many members are seniors. Ability to read music is an asset, but not mandatory. Meets Mondays 7:30-10 p.m. (except holidays) at the Dollard-des-Ormeaux Civic Centre, 12001 de Salaberry Blvd. Contact Berel Weiner at 514-777-9409, bweiner@videotron.ca, or Alan Mahoney at 514-453-7897, alan.mahoney@sympatico.ca

Voices for Hope Community Choir — A 70-voice daytime senior choir, under the direction of Douglas Knight, performs two concerts annually. The choir sings in four-part harmony, usually Broadway, pop or movie music. Rehearsals take place Wednesday afternoons at Cedar Park United Church, 204 Lakeview Ave., Pointe-Claire. See www.cedarparkunited.org/music/voices-for-hope/