

SINGING ON PRESCRIPTION

A PENZANCE MUSICIAN PROMOTES THE HEALING PROPERTIES OF MUSIC

Words by **Kirstie Newton**

On a dull Friday morning, the atmosphere in the café at Tremeneheere Gardens, near Penzance, is warm and friendly. The Dawn Chorus is in action - but at the civilised time of 9.30am. And this isn't birdsong, but the sound of African rhythms, and the close harmonies of California Dreamin'.

At the front is conductor Pip Wright. The Dawn Chorus is just one of her many projects, most of which focus on music in the community. Having sung with Levow an Bys community choir - 'World Voices' in Cornish - she was asked to take the helm in 2009, and still leads the choir on term-time Wednesday evenings at St Mary's Catholic School in Penzance. Since then, she has helped to launch the Dancing Flea Orchestra, a group of ukulele enthusiasts who meet in Townshend; and Dawn Chorus in 2013, along with many other groups and initiatives.

All are based on a 'come when you can' basis, for voices high, low and even 'I don't know', with no auditions in sight. "It's not about performance, more about being in the moment," says Pip, 48, who returned to her home town of Penzance ten years ago.

"I'm really interested in singing in the community and in harmony, rather than in personal performance. When people sing together, they let what's inside come out, and magic happens. Between us, we make something we couldn't make alone. It's all about collaboration and communication; your oxytocin levels increase, and you feel better. It cuts across all ages and backgrounds."

She speaks most warmly about Breathing Space Singing, a Friday afternoon group

aimed at people suffering from lung conditions such as emphysema, asthma and chronic bronchitis. Through singing, Pip, with the help of fellow director and retired nurse Chris Moore, aims to teach attendees good breathing habits that will make the most of their lung capacity. Inspired by and based on research by the University of Kent, and part-funded by the British Lung Foundation, the group was one of the first of its kind in the country, and is now one of the most established among more than 20 around the UK.


A moving video on YouTube features testimonials from singers who found that not only did singing benefit their breathing physically, but also improved confidence and reduced anxiety, while even the fact of having a weekly social event to look forward to had a tangible positive effect on their health. "I didn't know I could sing," says Gethan. "When someone told me I had a lovely voice, I wanted to shout it from the rooftops."

The group has been going for 10 months and shows no signs of stopping. Pip is now seeking official funding to move forward. "I'd love to see singing on prescription," she enthuses. "Singers have told me they can now walk upstairs. The more I do this, the more I see the health-giving properties of music, and the research backs it up."

Pip is a Natural Voice Practitioner: "I subscribe to the ethos that everyone has the right to sing and can sing. We don't audition - but that doesn't mean it's not good quality. There's strength in collaboration."

One of the most popular and enjoyable groups she runs is Shout West, featuring "songs the Cornish love to sing". It takes place on the last Sunday evening of the month at The Mill, where crowds have numbered up to 200. "You don't have to be born and bred in Cornwall to enjoy the Cornish music scene," says Pip, firmly.

There are many choirs and singing groups in the Penzance area, and Pip seems to be at the heart of many. At Roselidden near Helston, she has run a series of singing classes entitled Songs With Spirit, Songs For The Soul, while under the banner of Kana Kernow, she has pooled resources with fellow singing leader Claire Ingleheart to bring singing teachers down to Cornwall for workshops.

Where does she find the time and energy to do it all? "I just feel so grateful and happy to be earning a living doing something I love. Seeing people learning stuff - people in their sixties and seventies, who thought they were locked out of music - really floats my boat." 

www.breathingspacesinging.org