



Noteworthy:
The members of
Sydney Philharmonia
Choir in full song.

STORY LISA RATCLIFF

Power of the voice

Choral singing is as good for prison as it is for the Sydney Opera House, say its proponents.

THE HEALING POWER of music was first demonstrated to leading executive coach Phil Crenigan when he was on the board of the Australian Children's Music Foundation, which runs programs in all but two detention centres across Australia that give high-risk youth a positive outlet for self-expression.

Crenigan grabbed the chance to sample the therapeutic benefits for himself when he took the stage at the Sydney Philharmonia Choirs' (SPC) *Messiah* program at the Sydney Opera House in 2005. Eight years on, he still pinches himself at every major performance.

"We are volunteers from all walks of life bound together by a love of music and the extraordinary power of the voice," Crenigan says.

Six years ago he auditioned to become a member of SPC's Sydney Symphony Orchestra (SSO) chorus. Four years ago he founded his own business, Executive Turning Point, and with less travel and greater flexibility he's able to manage his diary so there is always space to attend evening rehearsals and performances throughout the year.

SPC was created in 1920, making it one of the oldest arts organisations in Australia. It has a membership of close to 700 and offers three main types of engagement with singers: a youth choir, VOX; Sydney Symphony Chorus (an auditioned choir that supports the SSO) and Festival Chorus; and community events such as ChorusOz and the Sydney Festival.

"Participation is priceless," Crenigan says. "I'm stretched musically and there is a special sense of balance and accomplishment making a wonderful sound together. It's a powerful shared experience for singers and audience – you meet some wonderful people in the SPC family."

Singing with SPC holds up a mirror to high-performing business teams in myriad ways, according to Crenigan. The choir is all about leadership and performance, the group has a clear sense of where it's heading in every program and the roles and accountabilities are clearly understood. There is a very clear accepted leader in the artistic director, constant renewal and improvement as they work towards a performance, very high trust and communication within the team. The result is measurable by audience and critics' reactions.

Malaysian-born accountant Irene Koay CPA works at Defence Bank in Melbourne, where she has lived since 1999. Four years ago she came across an article in a magazine and decided to see if her local Creativity Australia choir needed a pianist.

Creativity Australia is a not-for-profit organisation founded in 2008 by award-winning Australian social entrepreneur Tania de Jong. Its social inclusion and community wellbeing programs aim to recognise unique voices as people of all ages and from all walks of life, from asylum seekers to CEOs, join in the pursuit of harmony.

Koay's 60 fellow choristers at Melbourne Sings typify this diversity.

"Seeing the range of people, in particular those with disabilities, who have such a positive attitude is uplifting and makes my work issues pale in comparison," Koay says.

"From 9 to 5 I'm dealing in figures and sometimes when I go to choir I'm still thinking about an unreconciled amount and am mentally tired. Being at rehearsal lifts me and changes the dynamic of my day."

Dr Debra Shearer-Dirié, freelance conductor and administrator of the Australian National Choral Association, has 20 years' industry experience. She says these days singing has a broader community appeal and there is more value placed on the benefits.

"There seem to be fewer semi-professional choirs but more youth choirs, specialist choirs focused on a particular cause such as cancer awareness," Dirié says.

"With our ageing population, numbers are healthy among older people who have more time to join a choir." ■

Creative solution

Peter Kronborg began his career as a commercial lawyer and executive. He's now a director and coach managing a portfolio of board and advisory positions, including director and deputy chairman of Creativity Australia.

He hadn't sung since school days and was assessed by the judges in his family as lacking vocal talent. He ignored them and joined Melbourne Sings, part of Creativity Australia's With One Voice program.

Now he receives a super-dose of "wellness" every week singing popular and positive world songs – with the emphasis on words rather than music, to build the English language training aspect for the 60-strong choir.

"Each week there is one place I will be guaranteed to get a dose of joy and happiness," says

Meaningful: Peter Kronborg, at right; and Melbourne Sings.



Kronborg. "It happens because of the science of singing – it improves my blood flow, my endorphins, my neural pathways and sense of connectedness to meaningful relationships in the community beyond business.

"I've met people completely disconnected from my work pursuits and that has filled me with a deeper understanding of what our multicultural community in Australia is truly

about. I'm not just dealing in CBDs and boardrooms; I'm getting a deep insight into our wonderful country."

Kronborg is also happy to report that "the judges at home have revised their opinion".

Creativity Australia operates 13 choirs in Victoria and New South Wales and there are moves to set up programs in every capital city. www.creativityaustralia.org.au