



FINDING A NEW VOICE

When a leading soprano discovered that disadvantaged students had a fear of singing, she decided they didn't have to sit in silence anymore.

Australian soprano Tania de Jong comes from a family of inventors. Her grandfather was the Viennese sculptor Karl Duldig. Her grandmother Slawa Duldig invented the foldable umbrella in 1929.

De Jong's grandmother manufactured her umbrella successfully for 10 years until the Nazis marched into Vienna, causing her family to flee. De Jong's father and his family were hidden by a Catholic priest during the war, while her mother and grandparents escaped Vienna just before the Nazis exterminated a large amount of their extended family. De Jong says that living through this experience greatly impacted on her family, and became an inspiration in her own life. "Were it not through the creativity, ingenuity and inventiveness of my grandparents, there is no way I would be here," she says.

As a student, de Jong pursued her own creative talent, auditioning for the school musical at age 14. However, a friend advised her against it, which made de Jong doubt her own talents. She says she understands why many of us now think we can't sing. "I work with tens of thousands of people now and 85 per cent of them say they can't sing," she says.

De Jong eventually scored the lead role in her school musical and pursued a life of music. While doing a law degree, she also studied opera at the Victorian College of the Arts and became one of Australia's best-loved sopranos.

While performing in various Australian public schools, de Jong became aware of many students not being able to access any music programs. "I came across some research that showed that participation in music significantly levelled the playing field for children from disadvantaged backgrounds,"

says de Jong. "So that's why I set up the charity." She created The Song Room charity in 1999, which brings music programmes into schools all around the country. Since its inception, it has provided access to creative learning and wellbeing for over 350,000 disadvantaged students. Her work has now expanded to developing other charities, including Creativity Australia and the Creative Innovation Global conferences.

Through Creativity Australia, de Jong has developed the With One Voice choir, which brings together people from different walks of life to connect, sing and support each other. Choirs are led by professional conductors who meet weekly. Participants are encouraged to create a wish list, which allows those members in need to receive assistance from other members, including help with résumé writing or finding accommodation.

These experiences are key to de Jong's mission to help everyone find not only their singing voice but their voice in life. "I see refugees or people with disabilities whose voices have been silenced either through atrocities or abuse. It is my mission to help these people find their voice."

Under the umbrella charity of Creative Universe, de Jong's charities have reached hundreds of thousands of people. It's all about her desire to create "positive human collisions", particularly at a time when society is becoming increasingly divided and disconnected. In advising other inventors, de Jong doesn't hold back. "Just do it!" She says the key to her success has been having a good team. ▶

HITTING THE HIGH NOTES

Tania de Jong is helping people from different walks of life find their voice.

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