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1/26/2020

Preaching to the Choir

We live in a remarkable age. Just think of all that we have access to right in our pocket! In the last 5 years, music streaming has matured and become a \$3.5B industry, accounting for over 75% of the music we listen to. Millions of songs by thousands of artists are no more than a few clicks away on your phone.

Just a few short years before that, to play your favorite song when you wanted to required that you purchase a physical CD and play it through a CD player, your car, or your computer.

Back in the stone age when I was growing up, you needed to buy a vinyl LP record to play on your record player, or at least a 45. Remember them? When I was a little kid, my parents let me play their 78 records on my record player. That's when I first became familiar with Frankie Yankovic (no relation to Weird Al, although the two have collaborated.) Interestingly enough, some of my favorite recordings were of the Spike Jones band, which accounts for my rather eclectic music tastes. If you don't know who these people are, I invite you to Google them when you get a chance.

Before that, you had to wait until your song was played on the radio. Waiting. Remember waiting? It's hard to imagine people used to wait a week and gather around the radio to listen to their favorite program, but that's what my parents' generation did.

Observed tendencies

One of the things I noticed as I was growing up was that as listening to music became more accessible, the experience of making music became less of a pastime. People of my generation stopped participating in music because they were self-conscious of the sound of their own voice. I, on the other hand, reveled in listening to groups that sang in close harmony, and sang along, trying to learn each of the different parts that were being sung. It started when I was 9 and first heard the Kingston Trio, but I was a big fan of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young when I got into high school. Imagine my surprise when my son came home with the "Déjà vu" LP...the same album I purchased about 50 years earlier! Yeah, LP's are in now.

This tendency of treating music as a passive art instead of an interactive experience has always bothered me. It's unfortunate that less and less people are participating in music once they reach adulthood. They are missing out on an amazing experience.

Studies

Have you ever wondered what happens when you sing with a group? Why does music have such a strong influence on us? A number of studies done in the past few years that have validated that my gut reactions of the benefits of music were well founded. Here are some of the studies that have been released:

- A study performed in Sweden in 2015 found that when people sing together, they start to breathe together in the same cadence. Not only that, but their heartbeats start to synchronize with one another.
- A study released in 2019 found that singing reduces cortisol levels and releases dopamine. This combination was found to reduce stress and anxiety levels by 65%. Participating in music ensembles is now being prescribed to help patients of all ages to reduce their stress and improve their overall health.
- An Ohio State University study found that singing releases prolactin, which helps regulate the immune system.
- Music was found to be one of the few “whole brain” activities that we can participate in. Students who participated in musical activities performed better in the classroom than their non-musical peers.
- A study of senior singers found that those who sang experienced less depression, made fewer doctor visits each year, required less medication, and were more involved in other activities.
- When dementia and Alzheimer’s patients are encouraged to sing along with songs from their youth, they sometimes respond with wide-eyed wonder and exhilaration, and sing out in a way that not only surprises those around them, but themselves as well. Right now in England, a dementia patient’s recording of her singing “My Way” is topping the charts.

It is clear that singing and participating in music helps keep you healthy, improves your outlook, stimulates your brain, and helps you engage with others in community, regardless of your age. I highly recommend it.

Responses from people

If you’ve ever had to be at church on a Wednesday evening, you may have been frustrated to find that no parking places are available in the park lot. Each Wednesday night, I gather with about 100 of my closest friends in the auditorium to rehearse the Rock Voices choir in preparation for putting on three concerts a year. Our motto is “Healing ourselves and others through singing.” As we start each season, I am greeted by some rather tenuous handshakes of new people who inform that they haven’t sung since grade school and are not sure that they can do it. After every concert, at least three or four new members of the group come up with tears in their eyes, and are just so exhilarated from successfully putting on a concert! They can’t wait for the next season to begin. I’ve performed in many remarkable venues with some astounding groups and musicians, but nothing can compare with the elation I feel from realizing that I’ve just changed a person’s perspective on music. Music is no longer just a passive experience for them any more...they need it to be an interactive one!

To end our sermon, I’d like to have you all sing one verse of Amazing Grace without looking at the music. We’ll sing it without accompaniment, and I encourage you to sing a harmony part of your own choosing.