

Your Brain On Music

I had the pleasure before Christmas of attending the West Kelowna Silver Song Group, a session of singing and music which is the brainchild of the Sing For Your Life Foundation. Now in its fourth season, regular sessions are held at three locations in our area to offer a unique and protected model of participatory music-making for older adults. The model is driven by the latest developments in the field of Creative Arts and Health.

I gathered with the forty or so participants that had come out on a cold winter's day to join in the joy and merry making that comes with singing and socializing. The group is led by musically experienced facilitators and several volunteers are there to assist with the hour and a half session. I noticed right away that the participants were happy to be there and a festive atmosphere pervaded the room. Coffee was on and some delicious goodies were out for all to enjoy. Chatting with several people before sitting down, I discovered that I was the newbie, and that many of the others present attended the sessions regularly, not because they have to be good singers, but because it makes them feel good. "I love it. Wouldn't miss it.", was the gist of their comments to me. Music books were available for each person and a couple of most jolly fellows, Robin and Dan were the leaders for the day's group. We started off with a couple of Christmas songs to get our voices woken up. As the session went on, various musical instruments were added in for people to play. Beautiful sets of hand chimes, easily managed by all, percussion instruments and tambourines were given to individuals to add in to the merrymaking, with a big dose of encouragement from the volunteers and the rest of the group. What I noticed was the exuberance of everyone, including myself, as the session went on. Lots of laughter filled the room and as I looked down the row of singers, everyone's foot was tapping on the floor most enthusiastically just as mine was. I could feel an abundance of energy moving in my body and those around me and soon the whole room was a-rockin, because music has a way of connecting us to memories that help us feel good and happy. It was obviously working with this crowd as I looked around at the smiling faces and smiling is very catchy you know. When everyone around you is smiling, it's hard not to.

I have been reading a book called "This Is Your Brain On Music" by Daniel Levitin. I am very interested in how music forms a connection for those who have dementia that creates a positive effect on their well being. It is evident that even as memory loss progresses in Alzheimer's disease or other forms of dementia, the remembrance of music that was loved by the individual remains intact. That is quite incredible and offers a way to reconnect through the emotions with an older person suffering from disconnection with the present and with their loved ones. Daniel writes that: "Research has shown that it is the teen years that are the turning point for musical preferences. As adults, the music we tend to be nostalgic for, the music that feels like it is "our music", corresponds to the music we heard during these years. It is because these are the years of self-discovery, and as a consequence, are emotionally charged; in general, we tend to remember things that have an emotional component because our amygdala and neurotransmitters act in concert to "tag" the memories as something important." I recently bought a harmonica for one of my clients who is very musically inclined but now experiencing the symptoms of dementia. He hadn't played this instrument for many years. I was amazed to see him pick up the harmonica and play it like a pro, remembering all of the songs that he used to play when he was very young. It brought such joy to his face and to mine, seeing him feel this reconnection to something that helped him feel empowered and joyful. The brain holds many mysteries for us still to discover. Visit the Sing For Your Life website at www.singforyourlife-canada.org and also check out www.musicandmemory.org for more information on this subject.

So if you are 60 or older or have someone you think would benefit from using singing and music as a way to increase overall health and at the same time experience the benefits that joining together with others can bring, give one of the free Silver Song Group sessions a try. You won't regret it! Call Joan for more information at 250-764-8808. The three local group locations and session dates are:

Okanagan Mission Activity Centre, 4398 Hobson Road, Mondays 1:00-2:30pm: Jan 19, Feb.2, 16, Mar 2, 16, 30, Apr 13

Downtown Kelowna Canadian Italian Club, 770 Lawrence Ave, Tuesdays 10:00-11:30am: Jan 13, 27, Feb 10, 24, Apr 7,21
West Kelowna, The Heritage, 3630 Brown Rd, Wednesdays 10:00-11:30am: Jan 7, 17, Feb 4, 18, Mar 4,18, Apr 8,22

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