

Sing up!

The rise of the choir

Ensemble singing is enjoying a boom, and it's children leading the way. **Susie Mesure** reports

Anationwide choral singing boom is giving fresh meaning to the sound of music, with new choirs popping up at the fastest rate in decades.

Increasing numbers of people are starting their own vocal groups, inspired by the nation's new choirmaster-in-chief Gareth Malone, and shows such as *The X Factor*, or because they want to boost their wellbeing, mental or physical.

In the past 12 months, around 150 new groups have joined Making Music, which supports voluntary music groups, continuing its annual increase in newcomers. The growth in interest has overwhelmed the musical theatre industry, with casting directors forced to axe so-called "cattle calls" – open castings for West End shows – because they were being swamped by reality television rejects.

Next Sunday is the culmination of the UK's largest amateur singing competition at the Choir of the Year final in London. More than 5,000 singers from 138 groups entered the hunt to find the nation's best singing ensemble. Six finalists, from a Huddersfield-based junior school choir to an undergraduates' capella jazz group, will compete for the accolade at the Royal Festival Hall, on London's South Bank.

Robin Osterley, who heads Making Music, said people were more enthusiastic about singing than they had been for decades. He attributed the boom to "television shows, which have brought choirs to the forefront of people's attention," adding: "We all have an instinct to sing. The Zeitgeist is giving people impetus to go and sing with like-minded people."

Choral societies span the entire musical repertoire for the first time, with groups dedicated to particular genres, from heavy metal to show tunes. "Absolutely anyone can find a choir that suits them. There is, somewhere out there, a choir for everybody," Mr Osterley said.

There are around 25,000 choirs in the UK, including school and church ensembles. Singing is the country's most popular group activity after sport, figures show. Niall Crowley, a singer in the amateur chorus of the Birmingham Opera Company, yesterday told BBC Radio 4 that: "Choirs are the new book clubs."

Tim Rhys Evans, whose *Only Men Aloud* choral group won the BBC's Last Choir Standing competition in 2008, said singing was "now something you can boast about". Interest in singing is translating to audiences, with a "phenomenal upturn" in the number of people buying tickets to listen to choirs as well, he added.

Mr Osterley said that "vast numbers of young people" were joining

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Making Music

choirs. "It's a myth that choral singing is something that only older or middle-aged people do. There used to be a problem with younger men feeling singing isn't cool, but that's turning around. Young men are finding it less uncool."

Ruthie Henshall, a West End star of musicals from *Chicago* to *Oliver!*, said people gained "self-esteem, confidence and joy" from singing together. She said standards were improving because so many people want to sing, which is putting pressure on jobs in the musical theatre industry. Henshall, who will help to judge next Sunday's final, added: "Anything that might get people hooked on musicals is a good thing."

Academic research has highlighted the benefits of singing, and the cancer charity Tenovus recently set up a choir for 35 cancer patients, whose doctors are researching whether the positive mental attitude obtained from singing affects their ability to combat the disease.