

Singing for Wellbeing: Creating a repertoire of choral music for side-by- side community projects

Edward Nesbit (Department of Music), The Choir of King's College London, Joe Fort (Musical Director of The Choir of King's College London), South West Essex Choir, Andrew Sackett (Musical Director of South West Essex Choir), Samuel Buttler (Music PhD Candidate).





Photo by Laura Hinski (2024).

PROJECT SUMMARY

The *Singing for Wellbeing* project brought together Edward Nesbit (Department of Music), the South West Essex Choir, Andrew Sackett (South-West Essex Choir's musical director), The Choir of King's College London, Joe Fort (the musical director of The Choir of King's College London) and Samuel Buttler (Music PhD Candidate) in a creative partnership. The collaboration aimed to explore how choral singing can boost well-being and create a sense of community among participants, connecting people across different generations and backgrounds through the shared experience of music-making.

The project saw the community-led South West Essex Choir engage in a series of rehearsals guided by Andrew, with input from Edward. This collaboration culminated in two public concerts featuring a newly composed choral work by Edward, specifically designed to facilitate collaboration between choirs of different abilities.

The project demonstrated significant potential for ongoing exploration, with plans to further develop this collaborative model. Edward is seeking future performance opportunities for his composition and intends to write more music for community choirs. These efforts will further develop the ideas explored in this project, with the goal of expanding its positive impact on well-being and community engagement through choral singing.

HOW DID THE PROJECT COME ABOUT?

The *Singing for Wellbeing* project began at an event that brought together academics and community organisations to brainstorm collaborative projects. Discussions and ideas that were shared on that day have informed the design of this project. Once the funding was secured, the logistical planning began, including setting concert dates and organising rehearsals.

Although both professional musicians, Edward and Andrew bring quite different perspectives to the project, Edward as a composer and academic and Andrew as a choral director with experience of working with amateur musicians. The project was developed through close collaboration between the two musicians, combining their different areas of expertise to achieve the best outcomes.



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WHAT HAPPENED?

Edward composed a geographically specific, half-hour piece titled *The Genuine History of the Life of Richard Turpin*, inspired by the Essex roots of Richard Turpin, an English highwayman whose exploits were romanticised following his execution in York for horse theft. This piece was designed to be performed side by side by both the South West Essex Choir and The Choir of King's College London.

The project progressed with South West Essex Choir beginning rehearsals of Edward's composition from April to July 2024, while The Choir of King's College London started their rehearsals in June. Both choirs learned the pieces separately, with the South West Essex Choir dedicating ten rehearsals to the new work, and The Choir of King's College London preparing intensively over a shorter period.

The two choirs came together for the first time in a joint rehearsal just before their debut performance at The Chapel of King's College London on June 30, 2024, followed by a second concert at Chingford Parish Church on July 6, 2024. Samuel Buttler composed two original works, *Two Eagles and Empty Skies* and *They Shall be Comforted*; these pieces were performed by The Choir of King's College London on the 30th of June.

The project showcased the power of collaborative music-making in enhancing community well-being. There is potential for future performances of the composed piece while the possibility of ongoing collaboration between The Choir of King's College London and South West Essex Choir is also being explored.



Photo by Laura Hinski (2024).

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT'S IMPACT?

The project had valuable impact on both the South West Essex Community Choir and The Choir of King's College London. For the South West Essex Community Choir, performing Edward's newly composed piece in historic venues like the King's College London Chapel was particularly exciting. The process of working with a new, contemporary piece created specifically for them significantly increased their confidence and appreciation for contemporary music.

The project also fostered intergenerational collaboration between The Choir of King's College London, consisting mostly of young students, and the South West Essex Community Choir, composed primarily of older adults. This interaction was eye-opening for many members of The Choir of King's College London, highlighting the benefits of singing alongside an amateur choir. The exchange of experiences between the two groups highlights the importance of diverse musical interactions.

The choice of Essex-born Richard Turpin for the new composition allowed choir members to engage more deeply with their local heritage. This connection to local history and culture enhanced their sense of pride and ownership, promoting the importance of contemporary compositions in community settings.

The project's legacy includes the potential for future performances of the composed piece and ongoing collaborations between the choirs. It also opens avenues for further research on the impact of such collaborations on community choirs and provides a model for similar projects that blend professional and community choir experiences. Exploring these next steps and maintaining these connections will continue to benefit local communities while fostering broader engagement.

EDWARD'S TOP TIPS FOR IMPACT

1. Engage collaborators from the project's inception and maintain regular communication throughout the project. This ensures that the project is mutually beneficial and aligned with everyone's needs and goals, fostering a sense of shared ownership and commitment.
2. Tailor your work to be relatable and straightforward, especially when dealing with challenging material. While technical perfection is important, prioritising enjoyment and accessibility can lead to a more fulfilling and engaging experience for all participants. The joy and connection fostered through the process can be just as valuable as the final outcome.
3. Balance and respect diverse priorities and expectations. Be diplomatic in managing these differences and focus on leveraging the strengths of each group to create a collaborative environment where everyone feels valued.

FURTHER READING

1. Yoon Irons, Daisy Fancourt, Annemiek Vink, and Stephen Clift (Eds.), *Singing, Wellbeing and Health: Contexts, Perspectives, and Frontiers* (London: Routledge, 2020).
2. Edward Nesbit, *The Genuine History of the Life of Richard Turpin*, Edward Nesbit Website, 2024, available at <https://edwardnesbit.com/works/the-genuine-history-of-the-life-of-richard-turpin/>.
3. South West Essex Choir, *South West Essex Choir Website*, 2024, available at <https://swessex-choir.org.uk/>.

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