

## Sing out, sister

What happened to the snarling, cynical JULIA LLEWELLYN of old?  
Answer: she joined a choir

**W**e're sitting on the low school benches, tapping our feet to the beat. 'Have you met Miss Jones?' we bellow. 'Someone said when we shook hands...'

'Click your fingers during the intro,' shouts Dom, our leader. He bashes out the opening bars on the piano again. Fingers snap. 'Have you met...?'

Welcome to Choir One: about 30 of us - including just two men - in a school hall, singing jazz, rock, gospel and world music in three-part harmony every Thursday evening.

Then there's Choir Two - Tuesdays, at another school, with a more traditional ethos. Mendelssohn, Rutter, Haydn, with an occasional foray into Rodgers & Hammerstein. Again nearly everyone is female, and, at 43, I'm one of the youngest. Recently, an alto peered over the top of her bifocals and inquired, 'Is it hard to find student accommodation in London, dear?' Yippee!

Friends find my choir-singing hilarious. I suspect it's because in daily life I'm a sardonic type. But belting out *Something Inside So Strong* is utterly devoid of irony.

The truth is, despite my curled-lip tendencies, I have never been able to resist a rousing chorus. At school, where I fancied myself as one of the cool kids, I none the less was compelled to join the choir - even though none of the good-looking boys participated.

I tried to keep a snarl plastered on my features as I stood in front of the school warbling an ancient English folk melody, but inside I was experiencing that utterly uncool emotion: joy.

'When I'm singing Fauré's Requiem, I feel as if I'm driving a Ferrari round Brands Hatch,'

I confided to a friend. I braced myself to be mocked, but he looked awed. 'I'd love to feel that way about something,' he replied.

After school, however, singing was forgotten. I was a student, I had a busy job. But after my children were born I experienced a growing need to 'feel that way about something' - something unconnected to work or family.

A friend's father was attending Choir Two. I asked if I could tag along. 'We're very old,' he warned. I explained I wasn't looking for

**The sound of voices bouncing off each other in harmony is the perfect antidote to days spent at a computer**



Julia singing Mozart's Requiem

a boyfriend; I just wanted to exercise my lungs.

It's the antithesis of *X Factor* culture, a culture I'd been immersed in for too long. It's not about being young or beautiful or having a tearjerking backstory. It's for people who've always sung into their hairbrushes, and who need respite from thankless jobs, elderly parents, young children.

To misquote T S Eliot, I am not Mariah Carey (nor Callas) - nor was meant to be. I am a member of the chorus, never to be

promoted, and it doesn't matter. My sight-reading's poor, my range weakened after decades spent in smoky nightclubs but no one sits in judgment (apart from the woman who always covers her ears if she's placed beside me).

Every week I have to force myself to go. The children shriek as I hurry them through bath time, my husband complains he's being abandoned. But every week I go, only to return two hours later smiling and humming.

I'm not alone. All over the country, choirs are booming. Eager, generous Gareth Malone has become the pin-up for those sick of sneering, laconic Simon Cowell. Research has shown that singing boosts levels of oxytocin - the love hormone - in the body and can ease all sorts of nasties from irritable bowel syndrome to the symptoms of Parkinson's.

For me, the sound of voices bouncing off each other in harmony, or suddenly changing key, is the perfect antidote to days spent writing novels at a computer, where my only human contact is via email or Twitter. I talk to people I wouldn't otherwise meet, who aren't represented by avatars. When one of us comes in at the wrong moment, we pat each other supportively on the shoulder.

Sometimes, I wonder what happened to the snarling, black-clad teenager, who despised cheesy pop and corny dance routines. My schoolgirl self would be aghast at a vision of herself, devoid of eyeliner, hollering *Beautiful Day* by Elbow.

But I also know that secretly she'd be dying to join in. Even if the one thing choir still doesn't offer - and never will - is good-looking men. ●

*Ten Minutes to Fall in Love*, by Julia Llewellyn, is published by Michael Joseph at £7.99