

'You see the most extraordinary things unfold'

The Daily Telegraph Thursday 12 October 2017

Julia Llewellyn Smith reports on the choir that's revealing the remarkable benefits of music-making for people living with dementia

It's a sunny autumn morning and in the basement of the Wigmore Hall in central London, a group of elderly, smartly dressed men and women are laughing, chatting and - in some cases - dancing together, while at the front of the room John Southgate, 83, a retired jazz pianist from Hampstead, sits at a piano, his fingers flying over the keyboards, playing a note-perfect be-bop tune.

Southgate has had Alzheimer's for eight years, but while his day-to-day recollections are shaky, his musical memory remains near flawless.

"The moment you hear music, the memories come flooding back," says his wife and carer Kate White, 68. "John's musical orientation compared to other things is amazing. For example, he no longer knows how to get to the loo, but he plays wonderful jazz and the performer part of him is still very alive. We've learned how to really emphasise his capacities and not dwell on the things he can't do so well and make him feel he still matters to the world."

Southgate is a member of Singing With Friends, a choir established at the beginning of this year for people with dementia. Around 30 people aged between 60 and 90 and their carers meet weekly at the Wigmore Hall to enjoy both the social and the increasingly well-documented physical benefits of singing together.

Researchers from the Wellcome Collection's created Out of Mind Hub, which investigates the effects of the creative arts on dementia, are observing the choir - which, unlike many similar projects, is ongoing, rather than short-term - as they work out how best to harness music's benefits for the 850,000 people living with dementia in the UK, a number set to rise rapidly as the population ages.

The hub's findings will feature as part of a long weekend of music and discussion at the Wellcome Centre that will be broadcast live on Radio 3. Alongside events such as a live broadcast of *The Early Music Show*, looking at how music helped monks to remember long swathes of prayer, *Why Music? The Key to Memory* will explore the ways in which music can challenge and heighten our experiences, including, for instance, "earworms" - those songs that get stuck in your head for ages - and why your taste in music is dictated by what you listened to between the ages of 15 and 21.

"There are lots of really terrible

myths about people with dementia," says Paul Camic, professor of psychological and public health at Canterbury Christ Church University, who has led a recent study monitoring the choir's heart rates and stress levels.

"We want people to see that those with dementia are not - to be frank - all oddballs on their way out. Some people think we shouldn't pay any attention to them, that we should just lock them away because there's

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nothing we can do for them, when in fact they are worth working with: they are as human as any of us, even if they can't always articulate the way we do."

Using hormone tests and heart monitors, Prof Camic's team discovered that levels of the stress hormone cortisol in choir members significantly reduced after singing, while in questionnaires they reported themselves feeling happier, physically better and more optimistic. But Singing With Friends, who also

perform this weekend, need no academic evidence to be sure that singing has improved their lives. Kathy Goodwin, 72, a retired school PA who was diagnosed with dementia two years ago, attends every week.

"It was very difficult in the beginning. We really had to concentrate to do anything, but we got through - everyone was so fun and so kind," she smiles. Goodwin's carer, Elsa Texeira, attests: "Coming here makes such a difference: you can see straight away that Kathy is brighter and happier."

Today, Issy Adams, the choir leader, is teaching a new, Elizabethan tune: *A Robin, Jolly Robin*. "It's quite wordy, so if you can't remember everything, just sing 'la, la, la,'" she says. "It's about a robin talking to his friend, so what shall we call the other robin?"

"Batman!" someone shouts and the room explodes in laughter, before launching into a beautiful version of the song. Previously, Adams has led the group in a haunting round of *Dona Nobis Pacem*. One man chooses to whistle, another waves his hands in response to the tune. "Humour's a central part of the group. There are always unexpected elements and we celebrate that," Adams says later.

"There's a real freedom that comes with these people's disinhibition."

A former choral scholar at Clare College, Cambridge, with a huge breadth of musical experience, Adams is determined not to patronise participants. "I didn't want to fall into the trap of thinking the choir could only sing songs they knew long ago. I wanted them to be challenged," she says. "People will volunteer for solos, I'll have them singing in three parts and in different languages."

What's striking is how quickly the group picks up even unfamiliar tunes and lyrics. Scientists have noted that the repetitive nature of music learning is stored in the part of the brain responsible for "muscle" memory,

while dementia tends to ravage our episodic memories relating to specific events in our lives.

According to Prof Camic, singing and listening to music also have the potential to revive long-buried memories. "A song often triggers emotions, and if something has emotions associated with it, it is more likely to be recalled," he explains.

"With dementia, memories become more challenged and difficult but emotion stays right until the end, with people responding more to music than probably any other art form."

"You see the most extraordinary things unfold when people are exposed to music that could never have been predicted - people reciting

poetry, recalling childhood memories. It can be very positive and it can be very emotional," says Hermione Jones, who set up the choir as part of the Wigmore Hall's Music For Life programme. "It can be incredibly useful for care staff, giving them new ways to connect, unlock and discover new ways of engaging with them; particularly with people who can't really communicate verbally any more, it's a wonderful way to help other people get to know them."

However, Jones is at pains to point out that the choir, which also numbers a retired opera singer, benefits everyone – even those who struggle to retain the simplest tune. "Just being in the room and enjoying its energy is enough to help most people," she says.

The choir has already performed once at the Wigmore Hall, receiving a standing ovation. "They really rose to the challenge and afterwards there was such a buzz," Jones says. "They feel such a lot of pride in knowing they can still contribute."

"Performing makes John feel he still can bring joy, and that makes me

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feel I can go on when we're having a bad time, when he's been up several times in the night," says White, as Southgate launches into a riotous duet of *Chopsticks*, with his daughter Ela, a jazz singer, who every week travels to the Wigmore Hall from her home in Brighton to sing with her father.

White enjoys the regular interaction the choir brings as much as her husband. "A lot of shame is associated with dementia for many people, and those looking after them withdraw from their social circle when actually you need support, to be out with dementia and proud instead of banished to a dark room."

"Our sessions are so happy and as we keep going, we sing better and better," says Marrietta Alcuran, 80, a former police caterer. "It shows me that when you have dementia you don't need to be put to one side. Sometimes you can become even better than who you used to be."

Why Music? The Key to Memory is at the Wellcome Centre from tomorrow until Sun. All events are free: book at wellcomecollection.org/why-music. It will be broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and available on iPlayer for 30 days