

What is Circlesinging, really?

Description

(Here's hoping I don't get myself into too much trouble with this one, because it isn't really my term to own or define. I'm going to attribute and refer heavily, but first, to business:)

Here are two definitions of Circlesinging which amount to the same thing: it is a community-singing practice that emphasizes the music-of-the-moment; and, it is a music-invention method that makes use of a chorus for help. Whether you experience it as more the former or the latter may depend on your vantage point.

From the perspective of a choral singer, it compares to other community-singing practices you may be familiar with. Maybe you've gathered with friends and a copy of the Rise Up Singing songbook; maybe you know some chants that you sing with your circle of friends; maybe you sing in your church choir or a community chorus; maybe you've been to a singalong where a leader taught old songs from one tradition or another. It's like that, with one difference: the leader(s) creates the parts on-the-spot, giving you parts to sing that are unique to the time, place, and people-in-attendance.

Put yourself in the shoes of the circlesong leader and you may see that on some level it's about the act of creating music. Music, some would say, is always here, and always now. When a circlesong leader is making up stuff to sing, s/he is finding the right music to make for that moment: for what has happened to him/her that day, week, or year, and how s/he feels about all that; for who is in the room at the moment, and his/her knowledge of what each participant can contribute; even for the incidental sounds and random accidents that occur during the in-the-moment composing. The leader's job is to turn all of that into song, and to sing that song with you, his/her friends.

The positive effects of the music-of-the-moment

The next time you gather with friends to sing, why might you want to spend some-or-all of that time circlesinging?

I don't want to make a case against singing from sheet music or a songbook, or passing ancient chants or songs along by an oral tradition. These practices also have great value, and when we discuss those topics I'll happily rave about their benefits. Here, I'm focusing on circlesinging.

First, an interesting thing tends to happen when you sing a part from memory that you've just heard for the first time. Singers report that it is easier to pay attention to the sounds they are making in the space they're in, and how those sounds interact with the sounds that others are making.

Perhaps it's that when your attention isn't drawn to a piece of paper full of words and musical symbols, and when it isn't drawn inwards to your memories of (and associations with) a song you know, there's less to compete for your attention. You might more easily be able to put that attention on the part you are playing in making music, and on the other people with whom you're singing. And that's a pretty cool thing to experience, and a valuable experience to bring to your other music-making activities.

And we've noticed another effect that's perhaps a corollary to this: people report a greater sense of connection with one another after a session of circlesinging. I believe it has something to do with this tendency it has to help us pay attention to one another.

Next, there's something special about taking part in a piece of music that never existed before, and was created for just this moment. In fact, that's even one definition of the word 'special': "designed for a particular purpose or occasion." When you're a one of a group of people circlesinging, you're taking part in a unique performance of a unique piece of music that can only happen in precisely the way it does because you're there—and it will never happen again.

If you've done circlesinging before, and you've experienced benefits other than these, tell me about them in the comments.

Origins of this practice

Some would say (and they can't really be called wrong) that the practice of circlesinging is as old as humanity. What is it about gathering in a circle and following along with what a leader makes up that could truly be called "new"?! But many attribute the renaissance of this practice to [Bobby McFerrin](#). There may have been other leaders who were experimenting with this form at about the same time, but Bobby helped raise it as an art and increase its visibility. (I think he'd prefer "Bobby" to "Robert McFerrin, Jr" or just "McFerrin".)

Early in his career, Bobby developed his vocal technique to the point where he could perform unaccompanied, using only his own vocal arpeggios and large-interval leaps to flesh out his musical ideas. But at some point he decided recruit singers for a group he dubbed "[Voicestra](#)." They appear on two tracks of his 1990 album "[Medicine Music](#)," are recorded in the act on the 19th of July, 1997 episode of "[Sessions at West 54th](#)," and are featured on the 1997 album "[Circle Songs](#)."

Several members of that ensemble, perhaps most notably Rhiannon ([her website](#), and also [WeBe3](#)), Joey Blake ([his website](#)), and Dave Worm ([Sovoso](#), [Glass House](#)), kept the tradition going and developed other techniques for improvised choral singing. Together with Bobby, Voicestra alumnus Judi Donaghy Vinar ([her page](#)), and Christiane Karam ([her website](#)), they make up the faculty of a week-long workshop called [Circlesongs](#), held every year or so.

Today, if you live near a major metropolitan area, you can probably find a group that regularly meets to do some community-singing inspired in part by Circlesinging. I'm not yet aware of a centralized list of such groups, so you may have to do some digging. As people respond to this post, I'll be happy to list them here!

Category

1. Uncategorized

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