

Berliners find a voice in choir for homeless people

Six years on, choir set up by New York jazz singer brings stability and joy to lives of city's dispossessed

Kate Connolly in Berlin theguardian.com, Thursday 3 January 2013 11.48 GMT



Jocelyn Smith leads a choir group of mostly homeless Berliners at a social centre. Rolf Kellermann, 67, leaning on the piano, is among the choir members. Photograph: Timothy Fadek

Ecki Werner stood by the piano dressed in a lime green shirt, his grey-blue eyes surrounded by deep laughter lines, humming and swaying to the music.

He and 25 other homeless and socially deprived people were squeezed into a room on the first floor of a community centre as Jocelyn Smith led them through their warm-up exercises. "Don't forget to breathe, my darlings," the soul and jazz singer told them.

Six years ago, she set up Different Voices, Berlin's choir for the homeless and 72-year-old Werner, who has led an itinerant life for almost 20 years, is one of those who regularly drop in. He is not one for making dates or keeping appointments, but whenever Werner is in the German capital on a Wednesday morning, he makes a point of joining the choir to "recharge my batteries", as he puts it.

"Everyone has a voice in this choir," said Smith, originally from Queens, New York, who puts the stress not so much on the dynamics, or the accuracy of the notes, as on developing a sense of conviction in the singers in what they are intoning.

"If I can get them to sing from within, to put themselves into the notes, then I'm happy."

The choir's repertoire consists of life-affirming songs about whistling in the rain, being strong and staying true to oneself, several of which they have composed themselves, as well as gospel numbers about conjuring the spirit or searching for the truth.

The choir members are just a sprinkling of Berlin's estimated 10,000 homeless population. Different Voices consists of vagrants, such as Werner, and those who once lived on the streets

of Berlin and have since settled into sheltered accommodation. Some switch between half-way houses, church shelters and overnight stays with family and friends.

"What we all have in common is that we have very little money, no social status, no jobs, so the choir is literally the most stable thing in our lives," said Gabriele, who did not want to give her full name. She did not join in the singing this week as she had a sore throat but was determined not to miss out on the rehearsal, particularly as the choir was preparing for a December concert.

"They trickle in as and when, and all of them have their days," said Smith. "Some people come and don't sing a note, they stand and sway or tap out the rhythm on the piano. Some sleep. But you can tell they are mostly moved by the music although it can take the whole two hours of rehearsal to lift them to that level where they truly believe in themselves. I have had to learn to take them just the way they are."

Rolf Kellermann spent the entire rehearsal leaning on the baby grand piano and focusing his attention on Smith, whom he calls "our angel". The 67-year-old gardener from Hamburg sulked like a child when gently reprimanded for not paying more attention.

Tasked with performing a solo, his expression changed. His features softened and a smile spread across his face as he closed his eyes and sang the rousing song I've Decided to Make Jesus My Choice in a vibrato tenor voice.

Kellermann said the act of collective singing had helped him to manage his difficult life. He was separated at an early age by the Berlin Wall from his brother who was sent to live in East [Germany](#) while he remained in the west, told by his mother that his sibling had died. "I never believed it," he said.

The two were reunited only last year after more than six decades. "But that's something you never get over, the damage was done," he said. "The choir gives me the strength within so that I can survive the week. Even if I misbehave and have to be thrown out of the rehearsal, I know they'll always have me back."

Werner, a draughtsman by trade, recalled one of the impulses for his own itinerant lifestyle - his family's expulsion from Danzig (now Gdansk) along with other ethnic Germans after the war, when he and his sister were transported on a horse-drawn sledge through the snow to their new home in Bremerhaven.

"Though it must have been traumatic for my parents, I remember the peace of it and the expanse," he said. "I think I never lost that sense of excitement for travelling and freedom that I felt then as a four-and-a-half-year old." At the same time, he said, he often hankered after company "and I get that in just the right amount from the choir".

Geri, a 60-year-old former ski instructor from Darmstadt who scrapes an existence as a dealer in alpine landscape paintings, discovered the choir at a particularly low point in his life. "I cried at the first rehearsal," he said. "It felt so good. Such a release, and an anchoring I hadn't felt in a long time."