

SWAN CONFERENCE REPORT



PARMA
University Conference Hall
4-5 October 2025





The conference dedicated to the European project **SWAN – Singing With Additional Needs** took place on **4 and 5 October 2025 in Parma**, with presentations and testimonies focused on the inclusion of people with disabilities and special educational needs through choral practice.

Hosted by **Feniarco** (the National Federation of Regional Choral Associations in Italy) and supported by the European Union and the Italian Ministry of Culture, the event represented an important international opportunity for dialogue among choir directors, psychologists, educators, researchers, and representatives of the musical and academic world.

The lead partner of the project is **Norsk Sangerforum** (Norway), in partnership with the **European Choral Association**, **Sing Ireland** (Ireland), **Kanker in Beeld** (The Netherlands), and **Koro Kültürü Derneği** (Turkey).

The conference was realised in collaboration with AERCO – Associazione Emiliano Romagnola Cori and the Arturo Toscanini Foundation of Parma.

Italian and international speakers took part in the conference, sharing experiences, research, and best practices developed in different European countries. The event opened with an institutional greeting from Lorenzo Lavagetto, Deputy Mayor and Councillor for Culture of the City of Parma, who highlighted the role of culture as a tool for social cohesion and active participation.

The SWAN project stems from the awareness that choral singing is not only an artistic discipline but also a powerful vehicle for social inclusion, capable of enhancing quality of life, supporting mental well-being, and fostering participation. While the most visible part of the choral world is often represented by elite ensembles striving for the highest artistic quality, a vast network of experiences combines artistic excellence and social impact.

In recent years, increasing attention has been devoted to initiatives that highlight the beneficial power of music in people's lives. In these projects, artistic goals are not an end in themselves, but rather a means and driving force to achieve essential human outcomes: inclusion, well-being, and personal growth through the shared pursuit of beauty and collective singing.

The following proceedings bring together all the contributions presented during the conference, offering a comprehensive overview of how, across Europe, choral music continues to serve as a powerful instrument of education, participation, and resilience.

INTRODUCTION

● Introduction to the SWAN project

Objectives, tools and prospects of a European initiative promoting the use of singing as a means of social inclusion, highlighting experiences and best practices in different countries.

Kjetil Aamann *international contact person for the Swan project*

The SWAN - *Singing With Additional Needs* project was born from the awareness that music represents a fundamental part of everyone's life.

A group of European organisations decided to join forces and submit a proposal to the European Union under the Creative Europe programme. Thanks to the funding received, the project took shape with the aim of promoting access to choral singing for people with special needs – whether physical, cognitive, or psychological – and of making choirs more inclusive and welcoming, not only during rehearsals and performances but also through the creation of practical tools that enable such participation.

The general goal of SWAN is to collect, enhance, and disseminate good practices in musical inclusion, providing transnational opportunities for choral professionals and sharing knowledge and experience at an international level.

The project includes a range of networking, training, and dissemination activities, as well as the development of specific resources such as:

- software scripts and an e-book for singers with visual impairments;
- research reports and documentation of pilot experiences;
- a handbook for choir conductors working with people affected by cancer;
- audio and video recordings of project events;
- a European database of best practices.

The project is coordinated by *Norsk Sangerforum*, the national choral federation of Norway and sister organisation of *Feniarco*. Together with partners from several European countries, we work to make the musical life of our continent ever more vibrant, accessible, and inclusive.

SINGING AND SPECIAL NEEDS

● Singing and special needs: experiences and projects in Europe

The European Choral Association database collects and promotes choral experiences dedicated to people with additional needs, becoming a resource for knowledge and sharing at an international level.

Sonja Greiner *Secretary General of the European Choral Association (Germany)*

Sonja Greiner opened her contribution with a brief overview of the network, created through the merger of AGECE (the choral association of German-speaking countries) and *Europa Cantat*, the *European Federation of Youth Choirs*. The merger was completed in 2011. *Europa Cantat* began in the early 1960s, when choir conductors who had lived through the war felt that bringing young singers together could help prevent future conflicts. They created a festival where young people would sing together, share meals and accommodation, and spend free time side by side, building friendships across national borders. The first *Europa Cantat Festival* took place in 1961. The merger was guided by Jeroen Schrijner (President of *Europa Cantat* until 2009), Michael Scheck (final President of AGECE) and Sante Fornasier (first President of the European Choral Association). Among the historical “founding fathers” we remember Gottfried Wolters (Germany) and César Geoffroy (France).

Today the ECA is:

- a European cultural network;
- a member of several other music and cultural platforms (*International & European Music Council, IFCM, Culture Action Europe, Musica International, Choral Festival Network*);
- one of the bodies responsible for the *World Youth Choir* and a member of the *World Youth Choir Foundation*, together with *Jeunesses Musicales International* and *IFCM*.

The association also collaborates with numerous choral, musical and cultural organisations across Europe and beyond, and supports the twin festivals *America Cantat* and *Africa Cantat*.

Members, reach and numbers

Since 2022, only organisations can be members of the ECA (no longer individuals or families). Their own members are considered indirect members of the European network.

The association currently includes:

- around 60 national and regional choral organisations in 34 European countries and Israel;

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- over 2.5 million people directly represented;
- more than 37 million singers reached overall.

For individuals, choirs or groups that do not fall within the categories of associated members, the *Friends of the European Choral Association* network has been created, serving also as a fundraising instrument.

Events and programmes

Events are a central part of the ECA's identity: the first Europa Cantat festival predates the formal establishment of the organisation.

The ECA offers activities for:

- choirs and vocal ensembles;
- singers, conductors and vocal leaders;
- composers and creators;
- music educators and managers.

The association uses the term **collective singing** instead of choral music to adopt a more inclusive approach towards all vocal ensembles, including those without a choir conductor and led instead by a vocal leader. The *ECA Cooperation Events* are conceived by the association (sometimes with partners) and hosted in different countries on an annual or triennial basis. Among the most important:

- the *Europa Cantat Festival*, a triennial event which since 1961 has brought together thousands of singers, conductors and composers. The 2021 edition, scheduled in Ljubljana (Slovenia), took place partly online due to the pandemic, while the next edition will be held in Liepāja, Latvia, in 2027;
- *Europa Cantat Junior*, dedicated to children's and youth choirs, whose next edition is scheduled in Girona, Spain, in 2026;
- the *Leading Voices* forum, first organised in Utrecht in 2022 and subsequently in Tallinn in 2025;
- the *European Youth Choir* (formerly *EuroChoir*), held annually, with the next edition planned in Montpellier, France, in 2026;
- the *World Youth Choir*, whose next session will be announced shortly.

The association also organises conferences and workshops around the Annual General Assembly, endorses selected international events (such as the **World Symposium on Choral Music**) and publishes a yearly programme brochure, including a dedicated section for conductors and vocal leaders. Several events in the annual programme are hosted by Feniarco.

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Vision, mission and inclusion

In the ECA's updated strategy, inclusion stands among the organisation's core values. Its vision and mission emphasise the power of collective singing to foster wellbeing, social cohesion, cultural participation and educational growth.

This commitment underlies the ECA's involvement in the SWAN, within which the association has taken responsibility for mapping and highlighting European projects involving singers with special needs.

Purpose of the SWAN database

The European Choral Association bases its strategy on key values, among which inclusiveness plays a central role — fully aligned with the philosophy of the SWAN project. Within SWAN, the ECA aims to:

- collect examples of choirs and projects involving people with additional needs;
- make them visible through an online database.

The idea stems from the awareness that:

- many projects exist, often small and with little visibility;
- project leaders struggle to find similar initiatives elsewhere in Europe;
- a structured collection can inspire new activities, encourage exchange, and support informed project development.

The database complements the work done in the *#BenefitsOfSinging* campaign, which gathered studies and research on the impact of collective singing.

#BenefitsOfSinging: a shared framework

During the *#BenefitsOfSinging* campaign, the association had already gathered and disseminated international research on the benefits of collective singing, creating an archive of scientific studies, data and outreach material. With SWAN, a similar effort is being undertaken, focusing specifically on inclusion: documenting initiatives aimed at people with additional needs, with the aim of inspiring and encouraging the creation of new projects. The *#BenefitsOfSinging* campaign has been translated into more than twenty languages, including Italian, and provides numerous resources on the association's website: a complete toolkit, a curated research archive and a set of multilingual infographics freely available for use. These materials aim to raise awareness of the significant benefits of singing—not only for physical and mental health, but also for education and social well-being.

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Types of projects collected in the database

Sonja Greiner presented several categories already included in the ongoing mapping.

1. *Culture and health*: through the network *Culture Action Europe*, the ECA highlights the EU-funded project *Culture for Health*, which mapped arts-based initiatives linked to health and wellbeing. Several involve collective singing, including:
 - singing with new mothers after childbirth to address postnatal depression;
 - projects using singing as medicine or therapeutic support.
2. *Singing and visual impairment*. One of the first historical contacts from the *Hearts-in-Harmony* series is the *Coral Allegro ONCE Valencia*, a choir involving blind and visually impaired singers, demonstrating the role of singing in overcoming sensory barriers. A video produced for the choir's 40th anniversary is available at: www.once.es/servicios-sociales/cultura-y-ocio/para-quienes-for-man-parteeo-quieran-pertenecer-a-un-grupo-de-musica-o-teatro/grupos-de-musicapatrocinados-por-la-once/paginas-grupos-de-musica/coral-allegro
3. *Signing choirs*. Another category includes choirs involving deaf or hard-of-hearing people, using sign language as a musical language:
 - the ECA is a partner of *BEAT*, a project initiated by the *Coro Inclusivo Cantatutti* (Zaragoza, Spain), fully integrating sign language into choral performance;
 - the group produced a sign-language version of the *Choirs For Ecocide Law* project, www.youtube.com/watch?v=RL3KGVhnb7s and www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPVbA_a8d0s;
 - in 2024, at the *Beethovenfest Bonn*, the *German National Youth Orchestra* and the *World Youth Choir* performed the *Ode to Joy* with a sign language choir and Erika Colon (*White Hands Chorus Japan*). WYC singers learned the text in sign language for this occasion.
4. *Singing and physical or multiple disabilities*. Many projects involve choirs including singers with physical or multiple disabilities alongside singers without disabilities. During the *Choral TIES Study Tour* in Armenia (2024), the ECA visited the award-winning *Paros Choir*, bringing together singers with diverse disabilities and non-disabled participants. Other examples found online show family-based or mixed-ability ensembles where each participant contributes through singing or through instruments and movement.
5. *Singing and cancer*. The SWAN partners from the Netherlands, Kanker in Beeld, coordinate the well-known “cancer choirs”, offering:
 - practical guidelines for founding similar choirs;
 - training for conductors;
 - international networking opportunities.

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Informal searches reveal additional examples, including choirs for people treated for laryngeal cancer, exploring new forms of vocal expression after surgery.

6. *Singing and mental health.* Research highlights the role of collective singing in supporting mental health. The ECA database includes, among others, a Polish pilot project “*Singing Against Depression*” and initiatives aimed at people living with anxiety or mood disorders.
7. *Singing and dementia.* Collective singing is also effective for people with dementia. Flemish and German members of the network have developed specific programmes enabling people with dementia to sing in choirs or orchestras, fostering memory, ritual and social connection.
8. *Singing and aphasia.* A particularly meaningful area concerns choirs for people with aphasia, who may not be able to speak but can still sing. Greiner recalls the experience of a conductor who worked with such a group and emphasises how singing can reconnect families where verbal communication is compromised. The database includes, among others, a choir for people with aphasia in Vienna, showing that musical excellence is not the goal: the focus is on experience, wellbeing and shared participation. One such choir operates in Vienna, Austria. Two examples are available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCbzsi3ynNA and www.youtube.com/watch?v=agj_yHr_Y1U
9. *Autism and hospital-based singing.* Within the IGNITE project, ECA hosted a webinar dedicated to singing with autistic participants, available on the association’s YouTube channel. In Germany, the organisation “*Singing Hospitals*” brings collective singing directly into healthcare environments as a form of support and wellbeing.

Further examples include choirs working with traumatised individuals—an area explored by Pelin Küçükerdoğan, the Turkish partner in the project—and with migrants and refugees with specific needs, as highlighted in a video by *Sing Ireland*

A call for collaboration

The ECA has so far collected around 20 projects for the SWAN database, including many examples presented during the session. Yet it is clear that many more exist across Europe. Greiner therefore invites all participants to contribute:

- if you run a project involving singers with additional needs;
- or if you know of such an initiative.

You are encouraged to fill in the online questionnaire, or forward the link to the project coordinators. The aim is to build an increasingly complete European map of choirs that include, support and empower, connecting experiences, sharing methods, and offering a concrete tool for those wishing to start new inclusive musical journeys.

INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY

● Music: inclusion and accessibility

Presentation of the results of the questionnaire promoted by Feniarco APS to collect data on the inclusion and accessibility of people with special needs in musical contexts (particularly choirs) in Italy.

Vladimiro Vagnetti *Feniarco Music Commission (Italy)*

The presentation outlines the results of a survey (around 200 responses) on inclusion in collective singing in Italy, reflecting on the gap between public schools and associative settings and on the prospects for the choral movement to grow towards full inclusivity. The topic is framed within the national historical and regulatory context: the fiftieth anniversary of the *Falcucci Report*, which marked the closure of segregated “*special classes*” and the beginning of a process that placed Italy at the forefront of school inclusion; Law 517/1977 introduced integration into ordinary classes; this was followed by Law 104 (rights of persons with disabilities), Law 170 (recognition of specific learning disorders – DSA) and the ministerial note of February 2013 which, with the expression “*a school for everyone and for each individual*”, required schools to undertake a structural rethinking in an inclusive perspective. The survey thus becomes a comparative analysis of what happens in schools and in associative contexts, from which operational ideas can be drawn for the entire choral world.

In the background lies a reflection on the right to art: in the 1970s José Antonio Abreu defined art as *the most sacred of human rights*, orienting his work towards bringing it to people on the margins (favelas and socially disadvantaged groups). In 2011, an additional conceptual framework emerged: the arts should be fostered as tools for education and for raising awareness of human rights. It follows that music is not only entertainment, but also civic education, social cohesion and a lever for overcoming difficulties and building active inclusion.

Objectives and sample of the survey

The survey pursued three main objectives:

1. To assess the state of the art of inclusivity in Italy, comparing public schools and associative contexts.
2. To analyse barriers and resources, highlighting the rich heritage of good practices which have often developed in an uncoordinated way, yet with significant results.
3. To identify common challenges and priorities for improvement.

In terms of responses: about one quarter comes from schools (a smaller propor-

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tion, but from respondents with significant experience in ensemble music); 148 responses come from the associative choral world (numerically few compared to the Feniarco universe and the national landscape). This does not indicate resistance to inclusion, but rather a lack of opportunities and channels to communicate that choirs can also be open spaces for people with disabilities.

Factors of inclusivity that emerged

The percentages collected highlight the following as key elements:

- physical accessibility of spaces;
- adapted teaching materials;
- staff training;
- flexible planning of activities for different levels of ability;
- and, above all, the relational dimension: a welcoming, non-judgemental atmosphere.

The factor mentioned most often is the active involvement of everyone. Real inclusion is achieved when each person is not only present but plays an active role (*“a choir for everyone and for each individual”*).

Comparative analysis of critical issues and levers

- *Accessibility of spaces.* Schools prove to be almost fully accessible; in the associative world there is a growing degree of non-accessibility, linked to the lack of premises owned by the organisations themselves (choirs *on the move* between different venues, with little scope for structural adaptations). Closely related to the issue of space is the need for accessible signage: simple visual mediators help everyone find their way at minimal cost, with universal benefit.
- *Assistive technologies.* Associative realities find it harder than schools to equip themselves with hearing/visual aids and software (for enlarging scores, etc.): without technology, adapted materials are often missing too. One key to closing the gap is building networks.
- *Welcoming.* A positive finding: schools and many associations do welcome people with disabilities (cognitive, motor, psychiatric, sensory; the latter to a lesser extent, as they require more demanding tools). The *“I don’t know”* response is a concern: not knowing whether there are people with disabilities in one’s choir indicates fragility in internal awareness and in communication with participants and the local community.

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- *Adaptations.* In schools, adaptations are more structured; in the associative world they tend to be more informal and individualised, without this limiting the creativity of conductors (as the good practices show).
- *Governance of inclusion.* It would be desirable for every association to appoint an Inclusion Officer, similar to the person responsible for safety: one does not “wait for a fire”, one prepares for potential scenarios and needs. The answers regarding staff training show an alarming level of “no” in the associative sector: investment is needed.
- *External collaborations.* Here the trend is reversed: associative realities report many collaborations, because this is how they access tools, expertise and resources. Types of partner include third sector organisations (organisations of people with disabilities, 47 out of 190, social cooperatives, federations), services, schools and, in some cases, prisons or residential care homes: signs of solidarity and openness to the local area.

Benefits identified

The feedback on psycho-physical benefits is almost unanimous: improved mood and quality of life, increased self-esteem and confidence, reduced stress and anxiety. The choir also responds to the sense of loneliness and abandonment experienced by many vulnerable people (not only those with disabilities, but also older adults and people in socio-economically fragile situations).

Among the social benefits are: the creation of bonds, a sense of belonging and identity, pride and joy in the activities carried out, and, in a time that urgently needs it, the practice of mutual respect, cooperation and active citizenship.

Challenges and priorities

The main challenges are: limited financial resources; lack of training; architectural barriers. Priority actions (as indicated by respondents) are:

- designing and delivering inclusive activities;
- training;
- collaborations and networking.

For schools, training is a higher priority than collaborations; for associations, networking with the local community comes first. Interestingly, neither schools nor associations identify accessibility as an immediate priority, it is considered important, but the most pressing needs are perceived to be planning, training and building networks.

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Good practices (categories and examples)

Qualitative analysis shows that success does not stop at welcoming participants, but depends on targeted interventions, constant tutoring (especially in schools), peer support and a tangible psycho-social impact.

Emerging categories

1. *Active participation and inclusion*: people with motor, cognitive, sensory disabilities or on the autism spectrum fully integrated in choirs/orchestras from a young age and over many years (e.g. Giacomo, below).
2. *Psycho-social benefits and competences*: emotional, relational, social and cognitive growth; increased self-esteem; autonomy; a contagious impact on the group (for example, a girl with selective mutism who, after 18 months in a choir, begins to speak).
3. *Methodological and instrumental adaptations*.
4. *Institutional projects and structured models*: Manos Blancas, Parallele Orchestras, workshops in collaboration with local health services, etc.
5. *Awareness-raising and charity*: concerts for Autism Awareness Day, in oncology wards, fundraising for specific conditions.
6. *Concrete measures for physical access*: attention to the accessibility of concert venues.

Some exemplary stories

- *Building expressive bridges*. Many organisations draw inspiration from the Abreu system (*Manos Blancas*) and from Merovici's workshops; examples include the *ManincanTo choir* (Turin) and the *Scuola Popolare di Musica Donna Olimpia* (Rome). In addition to the integration of sign language (LIS) into singing, several projects combine different approaches (LIS + Dalcroze, etc.), generating new inclusive methods.
- *Music as group therapy*. Experiences in which music has a rehabilitative purpose: the *Marietta Alboni choral association* (Città di Castello) runs workshops with the local health service for psychiatric rehabilitation; the choir *Agli Ali* welcomes people with Parkinson's disease and stroke survivors together with their caregivers; the *Teatro San Carlo* in Foligno staged a musical involving members of the choir, young people from a disability organisation and their support workers, who moved from being *accompanying staff* to dancing and performing on stage alongside the young participants. Here the focus is

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not so much *musical quality* in itself as quality of life through music.

- *Singing on an equal footing* (Giacomo's story). In the *Gruppo Costumi Tradizionali Bisiachi*, Giacomo, who has Down's syndrome, has been taking part in all activities for 18 years, including performances in care homes. The perspective has been reversed: from being someone *in need of care*, he has become someone who cares for others, and his role is becoming a job (with a view to being hired as an entertainer). His story is documented in the volume *Musicalmente Superabile*.
- *For everyone and for each individual*. The project *La musica è gioia* by *Accademia Popolare di Musica Mugellini* integrates people with different disabilities into orchestra and choir, preparing specific instruments and exercises for each person, differentiated according to type of vulnerability. Over the years, tangible results in terms of inclusion have been observed.
- Overcoming barriers and preconceptions. In the choir *T'Incanto*, a girl who did not meet the vocal performance requirements was included in a duet in which her poetry (spoken voice) became music and an integral part of the choral piece. An apparent *exclusion* is transformed into real inclusion, with a major impact in terms of personal pride.
- A personal experience (*Festival di Primavera*). With a lower secondary school choir, Alessio, who had limited vocal ability and clumsy motor skills, struggled with the choreography. The introduction of a rain stick (suggested by Ilaria Cavalca) gave him a musical role: he no longer danced, but led the sound effect on stage, becoming one of the most aware and joyful members of the group. This overcomes the preconception that *"to be in a choir you must necessarily sing"*.

Conclusions

The data and stories convey clear messages:

- *Inclusion is multifactorial*: lifts and one-off training courses are not enough; an integrated approach is needed, one that takes into account spaces, people, methods and relationships.
- *There are virtuous and replicable models*: sharing good practices reduces the isolation of those who welcome singers with additional needs.
- *Networking is crucial*: it makes it possible to find resources, equipment and collective strength (*"alone you go faster, together you go further"*).
- *Training and self-training*: moving from good will to stable competence.

EVERY VOICE COUNTS

● Every voice counts: inclusive singing in Ireland

Examples of programmes and activities developed by Sing Ireland to build inclusive projects aimed at both migrant communities and young adults with cognitive disabilities.

Jenny O'Connor-Madsen *General manager of Sing Ireland (Ireland)*

Sing Ireland is the national organisation supporting all forms of group singing in Ireland (formerly known as the Association of Irish Choirs). It represents over 229,000 people who sing regularly in groups and choirs across the country: from amateur and community choirs to professional ensembles. In addition to supporting affiliated choirs, it delivers programmes in a variety of settings: early years, primary schools (5–12 years), secondary schools (14–18 years), local communities and residential care homes. It also oversees the *Irish Youth Choirs* (two ensembles: ages 14–17 and 18–28) and organises the *International Conducting Summer School*, which will celebrate its 45th anniversary in 2026.

Within its programming, *Sing Ireland* currently runs two inclusive initiatives, both part of the SWAN project:

1. *Song-Seeking* – aimed at migrant communities living in reception centres and temporary accommodation across Ireland.
2. *Sing for Life* – aimed at young adults with intellectual and physical disabilities.

Alongside these two strands, the organisation is working to develop additional inclusive singing programmes that offer opportunities for communities, facilitators and participants in various parts of the country.

Sing for Life

The programme is delivered in collaboration with four organisations that support young adults with intellectual and physical disabilities. The willingness of these partners to collaborate enables the pathway to grow and develop together with their staff and participants. The initiative involves young adults aged between 19 and 30, a group identified as being at a stage of life where creative opportunities and non-essential skills are not always accessible to those supported by partner organisations.

At the heart of *Sing for Life* lies a person-centred methodology: each session lasts 90 minutes, includes a social break and is structured in a familiar and reassuring way. Sessions begin with physical and vocal warm-ups to support coherence and comfort; different group members lead these exercises each week, setting the tone and approach at the start of the meeting. Breathing, body movement and rhythm are central exercises that foster ease and confidence before the singing work begins.

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Activities are led by two musicians, one of whom always comes from the *Sing Ireland Youth Choir*: this allows young singers to develop skills in diverse contexts and to interact with programmes beyond the youth choir. The approach is based on respect, trust and collaboration. Meetings take place in a community centre where participants, outside their daily services, set up the space and decide together how the week will unfold. Facilitators work responsively, listening to participants, observing energy levels and adapting content to the needs of the group on that day. While planning is in place, they do not “*simply teach music*”: they co-create a space for sharing and creativity.

Song choice is crucial and is made by the participants themselves. This autonomy allows exploration of what it means for each individual to be part of a singing group and draws on familiar songs that are part of everyday life. A powerful feature of the programme is precisely this autonomy: choosing songs, leading the warm-up, shaping performances and contributing to directing sections gives decision-making power back to people who often lack it in other areas of life. If they do not wish to do something, they are not required to.

Many participants have been involved for years, and initially one of the main concerns was the lack of opportunities to take centre stage (literally or figuratively). In the programme they are not an audience: they are performers, decision-makers and leaders. The performative element is an integral part of the programme: in 2024 and 2025 the group performed twice (winter 2024 and summer 2025), and this will continue throughout the year. These events bring families and communities together, allowing participants to share the songs they are learning and experience being the focus of attention.

Song-Seeking

The programme works with migrant communities living in Direct Provision Centres and International Protection Centres throughout Ireland. In 2025 it is active in nine temporary accommodation centres and involves participants aged between 5 and 60. *Song-Seeking* highlights the power of music to bridge cultural and linguistic boundaries, creating meaningful experiences, fostering empathy and reducing social isolation. The initiative aims to contribute to the Irish national strategy for integration and well-being. As the contexts are not homogeneous, the programme takes on different forms: sometimes within the centres, sometimes in community or cultural spaces; this approach allows participants to be part of the wider community and to feel comfortable in performance spaces.

The approach, centred on the people in each setting, has meant that the programme has been intergenerational since the pilot phase: in some locations the work focuses mainly on children (with families in the background), while in others singing groups include parents/grandparents and children together.

In every context, the long-term aim is to develop connections with the community through *Sing Ireland*'s network of choirs and groups. Work through *Song-Seeking* seeks to deepen the understanding of the wider Irish choral community and sup-

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port it in developing ways to work with migrant communities, with greater attention to their needs and the requirements for participating in a singing group or choir.

As in *Sing for Life*, performance is also very important in Song-Seeking: it is encouraged at regular intervals throughout the year, providing opportunities for community engagement and for different singing groups to meet.

Tools and framework

For both programmes, a key element that has enabled *Sing Ireland* to build inclusive programming capable of involving the broader choral community is the development of operational tools. Thanks to the work undertaken within SWAN, a toolkit for facilitators has been launched to clarify what they need and how best to support them as an organisation; this also makes it possible to expand the workforce for the programmes in other parts of the country. A framework has also been defined for community groups and choirs interested in replicating the work: guidelines on how to approach groups with additional needs within their own communities, whatever their background may be.

ACCESSIBLE SHEET MUSIC

● Accessible sheet music for visually impaired singers

The use of digital tools and open-source software to make sheet music more easily readable and accessible, offering new opportunities for visually impaired singers to participate.

Kjetil Aamann Head of Organisation of Norsk Sangerforum (Norway)

The *Norsk Sangerforum* is the national federation of choirs and vocal groups in Norway. Among its members are also singers who are visually impaired or blind, for whom access to musical scores has long represented a significant barrier.

In the past, blind and visually impaired singers and musicians faced major difficulties in obtaining Braille scores: the available archives were very limited, and producing new transcriptions was complex and extremely expensive. Today, in 2025, the situation has changed radically thanks to digital tools, which make it possible to produce accessible transcriptions more easily, quickly and at far lower cost.

Modern technologies allow users to modify the visual layout of the score, enlarge notation, adjust colours or generate alternative versions in different formats. All these tools have been developed as open-source software, freely available to anyone wishing to reproduce, adapt or share the project. The choice of open source follows a principle of universal accessibility: in many countries, particularly those with limited resources, it is difficult to secure funding for commercial software.

To illustrate the possibilities offered by these technologies, Aamann presents an example from the traditional choral repertoire: *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound*. In its conventional form the score is dense and complex, and even for experienced musicians it can be challenging to follow the vocal lines and distinguish between parts. By transcribing the piece with digital notation software, the same music can be made far more readable: larger characters, clearer fonts, separate vocal lines for each section and a visually cleaner layout. Aamann emphasises that even for those without visual impairments, this version is easier to read and more practical in rehearsals.

The principle underlying this initiative is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which recognises the right of all persons to participate, on an equal basis, in cultural, recreational and social life and requires States to ensure access to cultural materials in accessible formats. Making musical scores accessible therefore means putting this right into practice, removing a barrier that has long limited the participation of many singers.

Based on this principle, the *Norsk Sangerforum* has initiated the development of Easy-to-read sheet music, a digital tool that makes it easy to convert scores into accessible versions. The project is supported by the *Musikkens Studieforbund*, the national Norwegian organisation for music studies, which has contributed funding together with the Norwegian Ministry of Culture.

Within SWAN, this work has been further expanded through collaboration with

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numerous partner organisations. A German-language e-book has been produced, easily translatable into other languages using digital tools such as *DeepL* or *Chat-GPT*, containing practical instructions and resources on how to create Braille scores or customised arrangements tailored to users' specific needs. The e-book also includes simple computer scripts designed to enable anyone to produce accessible materials independently.

The entire project is open source: all materials can be downloaded, shared, modified and used freely. The main software employed is *MuseScore*, a free notation programme that can automatically generate Braille scores and allows users to customise visual layout according to individual requirements. All procedures and operational instructions are described in detail within the e-book.

The *Norsk Sangerforum* has also made thousands of standard choral works available in digital format, downloadable online and ready to be adapted or reworked.

For further information and materials, the official SWAN project website is available. For clarification or technical support, Kjetil Aamann can be contacted directly through the *Norsk Sangerforum* or via his personal contact details included in the presentation.

BUILDING RESILIENCE

● Building resilience through singing together

A series of psychosocial support workshops for music teachers in regions affected by earthquakes, where singing becomes a tool for sharing and community care.

Pelin Küçükeroğlan Project manager for Koro Kültürü Derneği (Turkey)

The presentation outlines the activities carried out by the Turkish partner *Koro Kültürü Derneği* (Turkish Choir and Culture Association) within the SWAN project, with particular reference to psychological support initiatives and the rebuilding of well-being through choral singing in the areas affected by the February 2023 earthquake. Pelin Küçükeroğlan, SWAN project manager for Türkiye and a trained psychologist, emphasises how her involvement in the project represents a meeting point between her profession and her long-standing passion for choral singing, which she has practised for over ten years.

Context and objectives

The devastating 2023 earthquake, which struck the southern regions of Turkey, had a profound impact on local communities and on the school system. In response to this emergency, *Koro Kültürü Derneği* decided to contribute to SWAN by developing specific materials and pathways for music teachers working in the most affected areas, with the aim of supporting them in managing the psychological consequences of trauma and providing useful tools to foster resilience through music.

The project pursued three main objectives:

1. To organise mental health workshops and support groups for music teachers, with the aim of strengthening their resilience and, indirectly, enhancing students' emotional well-being.
2. To analyse the psychological needs of teachers and develop effective intervention strategies based on the experiences collected during the ateliers.
3. To share the results with the choral community and project partners.

Activities carried out

The SWAN ateliers were integrated into two national events:

- March 2024, during the association's *General Assembly*.
- January 2025, during the *Walter Strauss Masterclass*.

During the first event, the project was introduced to music teachers. A brainstorming workshop was organised to gather information about their needs, followed

BUILDING RESILIENCE

by a psychodrama session to explore the teachers' psychological experiences, and subsequently those of children, in greater depth.

During the masterclass, two additional ateliers were delivered:

- a Choir Music Atelier, focused on using music, games and choral repertoire as tools to support students' psychological well-being;
- a psychological support workshop, centred on trauma and post-traumatic stress disorders.

In this second strand, teachers were helped to recognise trauma symptoms and to understand how to communicate with parents should a student display behaviours linked to traumatic experiences.

Results and reflections

The activities made it possible to identify significant differences among the groups of teachers: some had directly experienced the earthquake, while others had been assigned to the affected areas afterwards, working with students who had been through very different experiences. This highlighted the importance of providing practical psychological information that teachers could apply immediately in the classroom.

Since teachers are not professional psychologists, it was stressed that their role is not therapeutic but educational: music becomes a tool for emotional support and shared expression, helping restore balance and trust.

A key insight that emerged was the need to listen to teachers' needs from the outset: the first sessions revealed reflections and requests that had not been considered during the planning phase, showing how essential a participatory and dialogic approach is.

The ateliers also addressed the ethical responsibilities involved in working with vulnerable groups, highlighting the differences compared to teaching children without difficulties.

The experience confirmed that, through the power of collective singing, it is possible to provide a form of emotional support, and even care, by creating spaces for dialogue and sharing in which participants can speak openly about trauma, emotions and rebuilding.

The success of these initiatives has led the association to plan the permanent inclusion of workshops and sessions on psychological well-being in future training events and in choral programmes aimed at schools and local communities, reinforcing the role of singing as a tool for resilience and social healing.

PEOPLE FACING CANCER

● Conducting choirs with people facing cancer

Resources and opportunities to discover how choral practice for people facing cancer can become a tool for strength, connection, emotional expression and growth in self-esteem.

Cora Honing *President of Kanker in Beeld (The Netherlands)*

Cora Honing presents the activities developed within the project SWAN, with particular reference to the experience of the *Singing for your life* choirs, made up of people affected by cancer and their families.

Kanker in Beeld is a non-profit organisation based in the Netherlands and has been active for over twenty-five years. It operates as an umbrella organisation for four artistic disciplines — singing, dance, theatre and visual arts — and promotes initiatives that help people living with cancer and their families face illness through expression, visualisation and imagination.

At the heart of the association are the 27 *Singing for your life* choirs across the Netherlands, which offer participants a welcoming environment where singing becomes a tool for well-being, support and community.

By sharing its experience and expertise, the association aims to encourage and inspire European professionals — conductors, singing teachers, vocal therapists and musicians — to establish similar choirs in their own countries, fostering the spread of inclusive musical practices for people living with cancer.

Kanker in Beeld's participation in SWAN is articulated in three main initiatives:

1. a practical guide on how to start a *Singing for your life* choir;
2. a European exchange programme for choir conductors;
3. a regional choral gathering in the Netherlands, also open to international guests.

1. The guide to founding a *Singing for your life* choir

Published in summer 2024 and available online on the SWAN website, the guide is a practical tool based on research conducted among the organisation's professionals. It explores several key aspects:

- professional profile: essential skills for conducting a choir of people affected by cancer;
- rehearsal structure: integration of vocal expression, vocal release techniques and repertoire work;
- relational dynamics: managing the pressure placed on the conductor by choir members and among the singers themselves;
- well-being and social care, themes that are also central in the cultural sector.

PEOPLE FACING CANCER

A detailed webinar, available online, presents the working method through the direct experience of one of the conductors involved. The guide concludes with five key recommendations which invite readers to consult the full document to discover the practical and human-centred approach developed by the association.

2. The European exchange programme for conductors

The second initiative is an exchange programme offering Dutch and European choir conductors the opportunity to observe rehearsals of a *Singing for your life* choir and subsequently take part in one-to-one conversations with the conductors to discuss methodologies, repertoire and approaches.

Preliminary results from the programme in the Netherlands include:

- new repertoire ideas, such as combining singing and movement;
- the use of musical instruments by choir members, introduced in some ensembles;
- body percussion, an innovative proposal for many conductors;
- recording rehearsals to maintain a connection with those unable to attend, as “*connection*” is one of the key concepts in the association’s choirs;
- solo or duo performances within the choir, an experience some conductors plan to replicate in their own groups.

The exchange programme will remain active until the end of the year, and the organisation invites interested conductors to take part by contacting *Kanker in Beeld* via www.kankerinbeeld.nl

3. The regional choral gathering

The final initiative is the regional gathering of the *Singing for your life* choirs, which will take place on 22 November in Heida, a centrally located town easily accessible by train. Fourteen choirs are already registered, but participation is expected to exceed 100 choirs. It will be a creative and communal moment during which all groups will perform in singing and dance, sharing experiences and the results of their artistic and human journey.

Conclusions

Kanker in Beeld views music as a means of expression and healing. Through its guide, professional exchange activities and collective gatherings, the association promotes the creation of new inclusive choral initiatives and contributes to spreading across Europe a vision of singing as a form of care, resilience and shared experience. Those wishing to explore further can join the dedicated webinar, take part in the exchange programme or attend the regional choral gathering. All information is available on the *Kanker in Beeld* website and on the SWAN project platform.

ALTERNATIVE NOTATION SYSTEMS

● Alternative musical notation systems

An overview of approaches to music writing as tools to facilitate learning, promote innovative teaching strategies and encourage more inclusive pathways to traditional notation.

Emilio Piffaretti *choir conductor and lecturer at the G. Verdi Conservatory in Milan*

Emilio Piffaretti presents a contribution dedicated to alternative methods of musical reading and writing for students with specific learning disorders (SLD), autism or visual impairments, based on direct experience developed within Higher Artistic and Musical Education (AFAM).

Inclusion in higher music education

The Milan Conservatoire, like other AFAM institutions, welcomes students who already possess solid musical foundations. However, even in this environment, significant learning difficulties emerge. Piffaretti's work consists in providing students with tools and skills that enable them to continue their studies with confidence, adapting teaching methods and individualised approaches. The first step is to recognise the difficulty: it is impossible to support a student without fully understanding their condition and their way of learning. Each student is a person with unique characteristics, strengths and weaknesses that must be identified in order to build an effective learning pathway.

Difficulties in reading musical notation

One of the main barriers encountered concerns traditional musical notation, which contains a vast amount of simultaneous information (pitch, rhythm, dynamics, articulations). For students with SLD, such complexity becomes a source of cognitive overload. Piffaretti cites the example of the note C, which can appear in seven different positions within the ten-line system: this variability creates confusion and makes decoding the musical language difficult.

The most problematic aspect is the positional principle of traditional notation, which distributes information across two dimensions — horizontal (time) and vertical (pitch) — generating a dual level of cognitive interpretation. For a student with learning disorders, this system often appears opaque and disorientating, making sight-reading particularly challenging.

Teaching strategies and support techniques

To overcome these difficulties, Piffaretti proposes an approach based on simplification and gradual progression:

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- rhythmic orientation exercises with elementary sequences to strengthen perception of structure;
- reducing visual load in scores, starting from essential versions and gradually increasing complexity;
- use of numerical or symbolic systems to associate pitches and rhythmic values with more easily memorised codes.

The goal is not to abandon traditional notation, but to facilitate access to it through compensatory tools that reduce perceptual complexity.

Piffaretti stresses that no universally inclusive writing system exists; inclusion is built by layering multiple strategies. In this regard, he recalls historical models such as:

- the *Chevé* numerical system, based on associating pitches with numbers;
- the *Kodály* method, which simplifies learning through gesture and rhythmic syllabication.

Both methods remove part of the difficulties linked to positional representation and offer more direct access to the sonic meaning of the sign.

Exercises and applications in the classroom

In his daily work with students, Piffaretti uses exercises designed to develop orientation and harmonic perception.

One example involves starting from a score devoid of performance indications (only the notes in G major) and gradually adding elements of complexity (accidentals, modulations, tonal variations). This method helps students move consciously within harmonic space, transforming reading into a process of exploration.

Another recurring exercise concerns musical spelling: as in language learning, “unpacking” syllables or letters helps strengthen phonetic memory. In music, spelling becomes a means to reinforce articulation and automate the cognitive processes involved in rhythmic and melodic reading.

From graphic sign to *grafelemma*

One of Piffaretti's most original reflections concerns the relationship between graphic form and sound perception.

He proposes associating recurring visual shapes (such as five ascending or descending notes) with identifiable sonic elements, even for those unfamiliar with musical notation. This gives rise to the concept of the *grafelemma*, a link between a graphic sign and a sonic or linguistic content.

This approach allows even non-readers of music to recognise visual patterns

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and connect them to sound images, facilitating more intuitive and perceptual sight-reading.

Experiences with neurodivergent students

Among the examples presented, one stands out: the experience of an autistic student who, after two years of study, was able to interpret complex scores thanks to the use of a numerical system. Transitioning from traditional notation to numerical code enabled him to reduce decoding anxiety and focus on musical meaning.

The number, transformed into a grafolemma, thus becomes a bridge between symbol and sound, a tool that attributes meaning and makes the complexity of musical language more accessible.

Conclusions

Piffaretti concludes by highlighting several fundamental principles for musical inclusion:

- define clear and realistic objectives for each student;
- explore different strategies and notation systems, avoiding single and rigid approaches;
- address a limited number of difficulties at a time, with gradual progression;
- consider diversity as a resource, not an obstacle.

The challenge, he explains, is not to invent a perfect new system, but to build bridges between different musical languages, enabling each student to find their own path in reading, writing and experiencing sound.

CHOIRS BEYOND THE WALLS

● The choir beyond the walls: singing in prison

The experience of the choir founded in Parma's high-security prison as part of Verdi Off, where collective singing becomes an instrument of beauty, socialisation and trust, capable of opening up spaces of humanity and new perspectives within the prison system. The project was awarded the 2024 Abbiati Prize.

Gabriella Corsaro *choir conductor and teacher from Parma (Italy)*

Gabriella Corsaro, musical director of the *Opera in Prison* project at the Parma Correctional Facility, shares her experience of choral conducting in a detention context, illustrating how music and collective singing can become tools for rehabilitation, human connection and the rebuilding of personal dignity.

The Opera in Prison experience

The *Opera in Prison* project, launched in 2018 as part of the *Verdi Off Festival* in collaboration with the *Teatro Regio di Parma* and artistic director Barbara Minghetti, aims to bring opera into the prison, involving inmates in the creation of full-scale operatic productions.

Recognised as part of the prison's rehabilitative programme, the initiative offers participants the opportunity to become active protagonists in music-making, improving relationships and reducing behavioural issues through a shared experience of responsibility, listening and creativity.

Context and rules of engagement

Entering a prison means stepping into a world where the first question one encounters is: "Why have you come here?" Building trust becomes the first essential goal: inmates need to understand whether those who enter are bringing mere entertainment or a genuine interest in their humanity.

Corsaro explains that, as in any choir, there are rules of engagement, beginning with a simple yet symbolic act: learning to sit. Three fundamental positions are established:

1. Listening – relaxed but attentive;
2. Singing – back away from the chair, stable pelvis, body engaged;
3. Performing – standing, as in a concert.

These gestures, seemingly minimal, become tools for bodily and collective awareness: the first shared rules of discipline and mutual recognition.

CHOIRS BEYOND THE WALLS

Empathy, not emotivity

In prison choral work, Corsaro explains, one must choose between empathy and emotivity. Empathy — not emotivity — is the key to establishing an authentic and respectful relationship.

The prison choir must be treated with seriousness and dignity, without infantilisation: it cannot be a “*charity choir*” but a real choir, working on real repertoire and with concrete artistic goals.

One of the most delicate elements is protecting singers from ridicule. Rehearsals and performances aim to ease embarrassment and fear of judgement — factors amplified in a detention context. For this reason, during some productions, such as the recent *La Bohème*, audiences (including authorities, judges, officers and inmates from other wings) were also involved in short collective choreographies, creating a gesture of shared experience and equality.

Building normality and trust

Normality, Corsaro states, is a central concept: it means feeling no embarrassment, recognising one’s body as a musical instrument and understanding that breathing, posture, articulation and gesture are part of singing just as much as the voice.

The first “*rule of engagement*” also concerns physical contact, which is subject to strict limitations in prison. To teach breathing and technique, the director established a formal agreement with the prison administration and officers, asking each choir member explicitly for consent to physical contact, in the presence of staff, to ensure safety and mutual respect.

The guiding principle is simple: “*I will treat you like any other chorister, inside or outside the prison. The choir belongs to you, and what you learn here is exactly what you would do in a theatre*”.

Inmates who receive exit permits and attend productions at the Teatro Regio recognise this continuity: “*We did exactly the same thing, with the same music*.”

Choral teaching in prison

The Parma prison choir is all-male, and the sections do not correspond to musical parts but to the prison’s corridors. Seating singers from different wings together is itself an act of mutual trust.

Corsaro structures rehearsals as she would in any opera choir, but with specific adaptations:

- personalised librettos with large fonts and drawings to support reading, useful where illiteracy or learning difficulties are present;

CHOIRS BEYOND THE WALLS

- imitative learning based on listening, repetition and gesture;
- rhythmic syllabication (“Ro-ma, Na-po-li”) to associate consonants with rhythm and vowels with sound;
- simplified visual symbols: “dots” for notes, “corners” for rests.

These strategies make it possible to bypass linguistic and cognitive barriers, enhancing the oral, gestural and communal dimension of music.

The social and human value of singing

Corsaro emphasises that the prison choir is not an escape but an act of trust. Choral music becomes a way to restore dignity, belonging and self-esteem to people deprived of freedom, without dramatising their condition.

The choir is a space where no one needs to recount their past or “*confess dreams*”: what matters is the shared present of singing, breath and voice experienced collectively. Even competitiveness is reimagined as positive motivation: during rehearsals, playful “volume contests” between chorister and conductor create moments of irony and release, helping ease tensions and build camaraderie.

Conclusions

The *Opera in Prison* project has gained wide resonance and has led the director to reflect on the deeper meaning of choral singing: “*The choir is a democratic place. As Darwin said, music is good even for earthworms, so it is good for every place and every human condition.*”

Singing in prison is not escape, but mutual trust: “*It is an act of trust towards our fellow human beings. And trust is the greatest gift one can receive, especially under conditions of restricted freedom.*”

Thanks to music and to those who bring it *beyond the walls*, shared spaces of freedom open up — spaces in which no one feels alone anymore.

THE THREAD OF THE HEART

● The thread of the heart

A collective workshop to explore the relational potential of choral singing as a tool for inclusion. Through voice, movement and mutual trust, participants will experience a journey of listening and empathy in pairs, guiding and being guided by a thread of the heart that unites beyond sight

Vladimiro Vagnetti *musician, choir conductor and teacher from Perugia (Italy)*

Il filo del cuore (*"The Thread of the Heart"*) is an experimental inclusion-education project implemented in a peripheral lower-secondary school, where 28 support teachers work across four sections. The school has a longstanding tradition of attention to inclusive practices, and this project represents its flagship initiative, designed to promote awareness and empathy among students towards disability.

Structure and aims of the project

Each year, teachers provide a selection of films, books and scientific or educational materials that form the basis of a multi-phase learning pathway.

The aim is to build genuinely inclusive classes by encouraging understanding and active participation. The pathway always begins with a theoretical phase introducing the topic through films, readings and scientific insights:

- screening of films dealing with stories of inclusion or disability;
- reading of extracts and testimonies;
- science lessons on chromosomal alterations or the genetic basis of certain disabilities.

The next step is direct experimentation, in which students *"experience first-hand"* the difficulties faced daily by people with disabilities. Every year new immersive activities are designed, such as:

- going up and down school stairs with their legs tied together, to understand motor disability;
- moving blindfolded, guided only by classmates;
- simulating dyslexia and other specific learning disorders through targeted reading exercises.

THE THREAD OF THE HEART

The experiential activity presented

During the conference, Vladimiro Vagnetti demonstrated one of the project's activities, designed to explore sensory perception and non-verbal communication.

The experiment begins with a question: *"What happens if we lose our sight?"*

Sight, Vagnetti explains, is the sense we rely on constantly; losing it, even temporarily, evokes one of our deepest fears. However, by transforming this limitation into an opportunity, new perceptual channels can be opened.

The activity is carried out in pairs:

- one participant is blindfolded;
- the other guides them without speaking.

Vagnetti teaches a simple song in Latvian and a short choreography devised by a colleague, but he does not explain the movements verbally. Participants must therefore learn through touch, listening and shared movement, without sight and without spoken communication.

Recreating the experience of an inclusive choir composed partly of singers with visual impairments, the activity allows participants to understand the importance of trust, bodily awareness and mutual listening when making music together.

Educational value

The session ends, when possible, with a circle time where participants share the emotions and sensations they experienced.

The project as a whole offers students the opportunity to develop empathy and respect by directly experiencing what it means to depend on others and to communicate without words.

Through *Il filo del cuore*, the school succeeds in turning inclusion into a daily practice, helping each student become more aware of the value of collaboration and of diversity as a resource.

SINGING TO LISTEN TO YOURSELF

● Singing to listen to yourself again and feel moved

The experience of the Friuli Venezia Giulia choir for people with aphasia offers the opportunity to rediscover relationships and expression through music. The songs chosen by the choir become sound identities, intertwining emotions and life stories that transform the concert into a message of hope and resilience.

Loredana Boito (Italy) musician and music therapist

Loredana Boito, music therapist and conductor of the regional choir for people with aphasia in Friuli Venezia Giulia, presents the experience of a choral project launched twenty years ago in Trieste. The initiative is dedicated to people who, after a stroke, developed aphasia and suddenly found themselves excluded from everyday communication. The core of her lecture is condensed in the sentence: *“I sing to hear myself again, and I am moved as I hear myself”*.

Origins of the choir for people with aphasia

The choir was created in response to a specific request: to design a project capable of *reawakening* the person with aphasia, allowing them to say once again: *“I am here, I feel emotions, I am among you, even if I communicate differently”*. Aphasia, which often appears within hours of the acute event, deprives individuals of the ability to say who they are. The choir becomes a space where this identity can be expressed once more.

The choice of the choral medium is rooted in the conductor's personal history, shaped by the simple community singing of a church choir: music without the expectations of technical perfection, but grounded in shared enjoyment and togetherness. Unsurprisingly, many early participants reacted with perplexity: “How can I sing if I can no longer speak?” The proposal was sometimes perceived almost as an offence, making it essential to accompany each person with care and gentleness.

The chorality of emotions

Boito's music therapy training (at the Assisi school under Bernardino Streito) shaped the project around what her teacher called the *chorality of emotions*, considered more important than intonation or flawless execution. This approach translates into welcome, empathy and resilience in the face of an unexpected trauma: people who have survived a stroke but lost speech, work roles, and often their place in the family and social network. Even the outside world struggles: friends no longer know how to communicate; conversations falter; embarrassment grows. The choir offers a space where every presence is valued precisely for its unique-

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ness. The vocal technique used at the beginning is humming, reminiscent of the *coro muto* in *Madama Butterfly*: a collective sound with strong emotional impact. In the choir for aphasia, humming becomes the first step in feeling alive again, in going beyond the illness and affirming: “*You hit me, but I am moving forward*”. Choral music is seen as mutual support, energy in motion, and continuous personal engagement.

Sound identity and repertoire choices

At the centre of the work is the concept of sound identity (ISO): each person brings a part of themselves through a song connected to emotionally meaningful memories. The mind activates, the body feels, and affective memory awakens.

A first participant proposes *Mi sono innamorato di Marina*, a song linked to the moment he declared his love to the woman who would become his wife. Another, Mauri, brings the piece *Io vagabondo*, a personal anthem of resistance after a life cut short at 48: each performance is a reaffirmation, often with tears in his eyes.

Boito notes that, after a stroke, some automatic expressions often remain intact — including swear words — which become channels of emotional discharge. This is why it is essential to find in singing a constructive way to channel the same energy.

Levels of participation are adapted to each person’s abilities:

- those who cannot sing produce humming;
- those who can vocalise only a single phoneme choose a vowel (often A or O) and sustain it throughout the piece.

The case of Francesco is emblematic: unable to pronounce the entire phrase *Mi sono innamorato di Marina*, he sings only the A of *Marina*. That single vowel becomes his way of saying “*I am alive, I am here*”. The symbolic power of even one sound underpins the meaning of this choir.

Choral music as a network of mutual support

Boito emphasises that the choir for aphasia does not pursue technical perfection: its value lies in the energy it generates and in the affirmation of life. The group includes around thirty people who have experienced profound suffering; chorality becomes a network. A member who can drive picks up another who cannot walk; roles of care naturally redistribute themselves. Suffering can raise the question: “*How can I live my suffering through singing?*” The answer lies in activating one’s ISO-song: a song that speaks to the deepest part of oneself and that, through listening and singing, can make one cry, give strength or both, eventually leading to

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a renewed sense of wellbeing. The process reconnects psyche, emotion, and body.

Another key reference in Boito's work is vocal coach Christine Lieglier's famous statement: *"Freeing the voice means freeing the person"*. A principle familiar to many amateur singers after a difficult day, but which acquires an even deeper meaning for people with aphasia: meeting once or twice a week creates a space where one can *speak* without verbal language, and consistently leave the session feeling better.

A "tailor-made society" and the involvement of families

Over time, the choir has become what Boito calls a *"tailor-made society"*: a micro-community in which members meet not only during rehearsals but also in speech therapy, at the café, or in informal moments. Families often ask to remain during rehearsals and sometimes to sing in concerts, to share the emotional experience of collective singing.

During performances, audiences are naturally drawn in: emotions *travel* and spread. A particularly meaningful moment was the concert at the Politeama Rossetti, during the *Associations Evening*, where 1,300 people in the hall sang *Io vagabondo* together with the choir, an experience described as a true *recharge* of energy and positivity.

Beyond illness: singing, memory and dignity

Since the first experience in Trieste, many other choirs for people with aphasia or neurological conditions have emerged across Italy. The hope is that common singing, even after illness, can become a way to *go beyond*, using emotion as a lever to restart one's journey. Life is described as a path that begins with the newborn's cry, the primordial sound of entering the world, and sometimes ends with a gradual loss of the self. Songs and refrains, however, reconnect people with their emotional roots.

Boito closes with a quotation from Claudio Abbado, used to define the meaning of the choir for people with aphasia: *"Singing is the most spontaneous and natural musical expression, and the choir is the most immediate form of making music together: the voice is our first instrument. In a choir, every person is always focused on the relationship between their voice and the others. Listening to each other is therefore at the heart of choral singing and of making music together. Learning to sing means learning to listen to one another. The choir, like the orchestra, is the most powerful expression of what lies at the foundation of society: knowledge and respect for others through mutual listening, and generosity in placing one's best resources at the service of the community"*.

In this spirit, the choir for people with aphasia becomes a place where voice, listening and relationship restore dignity, belonging and the possibility of being moved by hearing oneself again.

NEURODEVELOPMENTAL RISK

● Enriching the environment: music as a challenge to current neurodevelopmental risks

A music therapy project that supports neuroplasticity and development in premature babies or those at neurological risk. Experience has shown benefits not only for the young patients, but also for parents and carers, reducing stress and promoting early attachment.

Eleonora Briatore (Italy) *child neuropsychiatrist at Cuneo Hospital*

Eleonora Briatore presents an experience of integrating music and music therapy into the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), with particular attention to newborns at neurological risk. Her talk offers the perspective of a health professional who, working alongside musicians and music therapists, chose to enrich the care environment in order to influence neurodevelopment from the very first days of life.

Prevention in the first 1,000 days of life

Neuroscience identifies the first 1,000 days – from conception to two years of age – as a crucial and at the same time highly vulnerable period for neurodevelopment. In this timeframe, what happens can have a long-lasting impact on future quality of life, either positively or negatively. For infants at neurological risk, often preterm or with early brain damage (loss of neurons, circuits not properly formed, smaller brain volume), this translates into difficulties in the regulation of sleep, feeding, breathing and growth. For this reason, primary prevention becomes a central task for hospital child neuropsychiatry, to be shared closely with neonatologists.

From a hyper-technological NICU to newborn “care”

Briatore describes what the neonatal intensive care unit was like twenty years ago: a highly tense atmosphere, a constant sense of emergency, open and brightly lit incubators, continuous noise (wheels, hatches, monitor alarms), and very little attention to the newborn’s sensory experience.

Training on newborn “care”, carried out with American paediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, who taught clinicians to read states of wellbeing and distress in newborns, and with professor Prechtl, who introduced early diagnosis of central motor disorders – radically changed this approach.

A gradual transformation followed:

- incubators were covered with cloths to modulate light and support sleep-wake rhythms;

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- babies were wrapped to restore bodily boundaries similar to those experienced in utero;
- more physiological positions (semi-prone, contained) were adopted, and small soft objects (such as a cuddly octopus-shaped doudou) were introduced to recall tactile experiences from pregnancy.

These measures improved oxygen saturation, breathing, sucking and growth compared with the previous model of the *naked and exposed* baby.

The enriched environment: beyond harm reduction

Alongside the reduction of harmful stimuli (noise, light, excessive handling), the team introduced the concept of environmental enrichment, drawing on the work of Rosenzweig and Cummings in the 1970s: animals raised in stimulating environments (toys, running wheels, varied sensory input) show fewer aberrant behaviours and better adaptive capacities than those reared in sensory deprivation.

In the NICU, environmental enrichment means:

- allowing parents to enter at any time, fostering early attachment;
- supporting breastfeeding;
- promoting skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby, even in the presence of monitoring devices and respiratory support;
- introducing music as an additional relational and sensory care tool.

Why Music?

The choice to use music is based on three main reasons:

1. *A universal, non-verbal language.* Music is accessible both to the newborn (who is non-verbal) and to parents from diverse cultural backgrounds. The music therapists chose lullabies such as Frère Jacques and Bella Stella, which are recognisable and adaptable in many cultures. There are no societies without music: it is a primary, cross-cultural channel of communication.
2. *Development of hearing and sensory integration.* Hearing is the first sense to develop: by 23 weeks of gestation the foetus can already perceive the mother's voice, her heartbeat and internal bodily sounds. It is a crucial survival system and needs to be "educated" not only to alarm sounds but also to sounds of calm and comfort.

If the auditory system is exposed only to loud, sudden noises, neural connections will mainly strengthen circuits linked to alarm (amygdala, fight-flight

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responses). Music, and lullabies in particular, make it possible to associate sound experience with circuits connected to pleasure, rest and wellbeing.

3. *Complex system integration.* Music is a complex praxis: it integrates vision, hearing, gross and fine motor skills, emotional regulation, attention and executive control. For the central nervous system, exposure to music means practising the ability to link different systems in a modular and flexible way, a key competence for adapting to life.

On top of this, there is solid scientific evidence showing positive effects of music on the wellbeing of the child, the parents and healthcare staff.

Clinical evidence and observed changes

In Cuneo, the structured introduction of music therapy in the NICU (supported by the hospital's foundation) involved two music therapists – a musician and a singer – who offer twice-weekly sessions. Parents are always included: they are trained to use positive sound stimuli while respecting their baby's signals.

Among infants exposed to an enriched environment with music, staff observed:

- greater calm and reduced reactivity during invasive procedures;
- improved oxygen saturation and breathing;
- better feeding and growth;
- at 12–24 months, better behavioural regulation in developmental assessments.

More objective experiments also showed that newborns recognise, in the first three months of life, the lullaby sung repeatedly by the mother during pregnancy, making it a powerful tool for reassurance and anxiety containment.

Beyond the NICU: Music as a “Prescription”

The journey does not end in intensive care. These children are followed up to the age of eight, and the teams frequently observe anxiety linked to early traumatic experiences. For this reason, music has also been incorporated into later cultural and educational opportunities.

In collaboration with an association that organises the baroque music festival *Modulazioni* in Cuneo (with a *Modulazioni Kids* section for 0–3-year-olds), tickets were purchased so that children and their families could attend musical performances designed specifically for very young audiences.

Access to these events is formalised as a genuine medical prescription: on a

NEURODEVELOPMENTAL RISK

prescription form, the child's name is written along with the indication that they are to attend a musical performance because *“music brings wellbeing and relief to the child and their family”*.

Conclusions

Eleonora Briatore's experience shows how music and music therapy can transform the neonatal intensive care unit into a more humane and neuroprotective environment, one that not only saves lives but also supports more harmonious development from the very first days.

Her lecture closes with a quotation from Ezio Bosso, chosen as a symbolic summary of this *magic* in the NICU: *“Music is real magic, and it is no coincidence that conductors have a baton, just like magicians”*.

● Free sounds: a polyphonic choir open to all

An inclusive project that brings together people with and without disabilities, promoting the educational and social aspects of singing. The choir offers a varied repertoire, original arrangements and collaborations with the Libera band, combining music, theatre and poetry in projects that unite inclusion and creativity.

Donatella Moioli (Italy) *choir conductor and teacher*

Donatella Moioli presents the experience of *Liberi Suoni*, a polyphonic choir born not as a traditional artistic project but as a genuine social experiment in inclusion, where the primary objective is to be *inside* the music and the relationship, before any pursuit of technical perfection.

Origins and development of the choir

The choir was founded in 2011 on the initiative of CIS – *Comitato Iniziative Sociali* – and the cooperative *La Fenice* of Albino and Nembro (Val Seriana, Bergamo, Italy). The initial mandate was clear: to create a choir made up of *users and volunteers*, with two neatly separated lists of names. From the outset, however, this distinction proved artificial. Some people with disabilities displayed remarkable energy and ability to engage, while some so-called *able-bodied* participants were more rigid or embarrassed. After only a few months, the conductor decided to remove the two columns: the choir would no longer have categories, only people.

The group began with six members (including the conductor), two of whom had disabilities, and with a very simple repertoire – *Frère Jacques* in multiple voices, patiently constructed over months of work. The first concert immediately doubled the number of participants. Over time, the choir grew to more than seventy members, supported by word of mouth from those who attended rehearsals and concerts and sensed the group's contagious energy.

A choir where mistakes are allowed

Liberi Suoni is not the choir of *perfect intonation*: its name itself is a statement of intention. It is a space where mistakes are legitimate, sometimes almost welcomed, and where playfulness is an integral part of musical work. Many people approach the choir with a familiar hesitation: “*I would like to join, but I'm out of tune*”. In this context, that *but* becomes an entry point. Uncertain intonation is supported by the group, by the instruments, and by tailored arrangements. Those who have always been silenced (*pretend to sing, just hold the folder*) discover not only that they can belong to a choir, but that they can truly sing and derive satisfaction from it.

FREE SOUNDS

The coexistence of people with and without disabilities also has a liberating effect on the so-called able-bodied, often burdened by performance anxiety, fear of judgement and the need to *appear* perfect. Those who live their body and presence on stage with spontaneity give everyone permission to have fun, dance, smile, *make a mess* without shame.

Today, the choir includes people aged 18 to over 80. Some disabilities are visible, others not, but what emerges is each person's uniqueness and the possibility of belonging to a community where vulnerability becomes a shared resource.

Visual and symbolic identity

The choir's logo, designed by a choir member, expresses the philosophy of *Liberi Suoni*. The messy rainbows evoke ideas of peace, joy, vitality, inclusion, unity and the beauty of being together without prejudice. The black-and-white keyboard, symbol of classical music sometimes perceived as rigid and inaccessible, becomes a colourful keyboard opening in multiple directions, crossed by lines that form a rainbow-bridge. That bridge connects different worlds – people with and without disabilities, those who feel *out of place* and those familiar with musical environments – harmonising differences and fragilities. The choir becomes a space where the music *changes*: from a specialised, sometimes elitist object to a language that everyone can share.

Vocal practices, body work and learning

From a pedagogical point of view, *Liberi Suoni* is a polyphonic choir (sopranos, altos and male voices) with repertoire specially arranged for the group. Vocal ranges are adapted, lines are made more accessible and respectful of the singers' real abilities; the goal is not virtuosity but quality of experience. Scores are distributed even though not everyone can read music: over time some singers begin to recognise visually the *little balls going up*, while others learn by imitation and listening. New members face the challenge of reaching a repertoire of more than fifty pieces, supported by recorded backing tracks and gradual work.

Specific attention is given to the body: vocal and physical warm-ups, exercises inspired by yoga, and posture awareness (*top model position* for better singing) support both those with motor disabilities and those who struggle with body image. Vocal technique is always guided by the principle of avoiding harm and respecting individual limits.

Alongside the choir, there is also a *Libera Band* that accompanies performances, with winds (clarinet, flute, bassoon) and a multi-percussionist with disabilities, fully integrated into the musical ensemble.

Repertoire and narratives of freedom

The repertoire ranges from medieval and Renaissance music to traditional songs from various countries, as well as singer-songwriters (including De André, Branduardi and local authors such as Davide Van De Sfroos). Many arrangements are created by the conductor, who tailors the music to the abilities and stories of the singers. A significant part of the work involves songs developed through music therapy and collective writing: for instance, a song about freedom composed with people with disabilities and interpreted by two choir members, Lara and Monica. Lara is an instinctive *primadonna*, always ready to take the solo part. Monica, by contrast, initially cried every time she sang in public – and the audience cried with her. Over time, emotion turned into expressive strength: today she also sings at karaoke, but the intensity of her communication remains unchanged.

During the pandemic, the choir worked on interdisciplinary artistic projects:

- a performance reinterpreting the lockdown experience starting from a fable by Filelfo, particularly meaningful for a community deeply affected by covid;
- a performance dedicated to human rights.

Music becomes a tool to process traumatic events and give collective shape to fears, grief and desires for freedom (*Anima liberi*).

The enchanting art: a festival of wonder

In 2024, the first edition of the festival *L'arte che incanta* was launched, made possible by a grant awarded to the choir. The festival is dedicated to individual artists or groups with disabilities: theatre, dance, orchestras and choirs, with around two hundred participants. The aim is to spark wonder and change the audience's perspective. Many people arrive with a paternalistic attitude ("let's go do something nice for the poor things") and leave amazed: "I didn't expect... you can actually sing". Behind this comment – halfway between compliment and prejudice – lies a shift in awareness: art created in contexts of fragility is still art, capable of moving people, telling stories, building networks and fostering mutual support.

Conclusions

Liberi Suoni is an extraordinary choir in the literal sense: it steps outside the ordinary to show that music can be a space of freedom, playfulness and care for everyone, without the filters of perfectionism. Over time, the choir has become a true community: singers form friendships, organise holidays together and share pieces of life. For the conductor, the privilege lies in leading a group where artistic and human qualities nourish one another.

HEALING CHOIRS

● Healing choirs: experiences for aphasia and Parkinson's disease

The choir as a tool for continuity, participation and new social interaction: 'La Voce dell'Afasia' (The Voice of Aphasia) offers those who have lost their speech after a stroke the chance to rediscover it through singing, while 'Parkinsonsong' offers a choral music therapy programme for people with Parkinson's disease.

Maurizio Scarpa (Italy) musician, music therapist and sound therapist

Costanza Di Leo (Italy) music therapist, singer and singing teacher

Maurizio Scarpa, president of the Turin-based association *Musica e Cura*, and choir conductor Costanza Di Leo present two pathways in which music, music therapy and choral singing become tools for rehabilitation, self-perception and social reintegration for people living with aphasia and Parkinson's disease.

From clinical expertise to the choir

Musica e Cura has been active for many years in the field of music therapy across different settings. In 2019, the choir for people with aphasia was created, inspired by the pioneering work of Loredana Boito in Fossano, from which a genuine national network of choirs for aphasia has since developed. In cooperation with the association *Alice*, a major national gathering of these choirs is currently being prepared. Scarpa draws on more than twenty years of clinical work with aphasia and has developed specific music-therapeutic techniques to support language recovery. Recent research shows that three months of intensive music therapy (three sessions per week) can produce clinical outcomes comparable to one year of other forms of treatment, confirming the value of music in the rehabilitation process. Alongside the choir for people with aphasia, a second strand has been initiated for Parkinson's disease: Parkinsonsong, combining music therapy and choral practice.

The elements of music and the elements of the person

At the heart of the approach lies a parallel between musical structure and human identity. Music is built upon four essential elements – rhythm, melody, timbre, dynamics – whose absence makes musical sound impossible. In a similar way, a person is made of time (rhythm), unique identity (timbre), expressive modes (dynamics), and an individual *line* (melody). Losing one of these aspects deeply affects overall functioning.

The guiding idea is therefore to use the inherent qualities of music to reinforce

what tends to weaken in conditions such as aphasia or Parkinson's: coordination, inner rhythm, breathing, voice, relational abilities.

Parkinson's disease and rhythm: from the body to walking

In simple terms, Parkinson's disease involves a reduced ability to modulate movement:

- the rhythm of walking becomes disrupted;
- breathing and voice weaken;
- the body struggles with "dual-task" motor activities.

In the past, *Rhythmic Auditory Stimulation* (walking to music through headphones) showed improvements in gait. *Musica e Cura* reinterprets this principle within group-based work using music therapy tools, aimed at developing bodily self-perception and grounding. During the sessions, it becomes evident how, starting from confused or fragmented movement, shared rhythm helps to:

- coordinate the right/left alternation of arms and legs;
- broaden shoulder and trunk movement;
- increase the precision of gestures;
- internalise a rhythm which gradually transfers into daily walking.

A specific phase focuses on grounding: perceiving the contact of the feet with the floor, weight distribution, slow and conscious body movement, following diaphragmatic breathing exercises. From here, participants move to walking in time with music, with particular attention to equal weight on right and left feet and to managing *freezing* episodes: the awareness of having both feet firmly on the ground becomes a *safe thought* for starting again without losing balance. Comparison videos of walking *before* and *after* show increasing regularity in step patterns and direction changes, with fewer hesitations.

La Voce dell'Afasia and Parkinsong: two choirs, one shared vision

Costanza Di Leo conducts both of the association's choral pathways:

- *La Voce dell'Afasia*, active for several years and dedicated to people living with aphasia;
- *Parkinsong*, more recently founded and aimed at people with Parkinson's disease.

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The groups differ in clinical conditions, needs and resources, but share a core principle: turning a condition of fragility into an opportunity for giving back. Those living with chronic illness often find themselves continuously receiving – care, attention, support – with fewer opportunities to give something. The choirs are conceived as places where participants can:

- offer energy, commitment and beauty to audiences;
- avoid any form of pity or condescension;
- present concerts that are authentic artistic experiences, not mere *patient performances*.

In this perspective, music is both a starting point and a means of improving quality of life: what begins as a musical intervention becomes emotional, relational and social growth.

Parkinson: voice, breath and social connection

For people with Parkinson's disease, the programme includes two parallel weekly sessions: a music therapy session with a rehabilitative focus; a choral singing rehearsal.

Clinical objectives include balance, coordination and gait, but also the voice, which is often weakened and difficult to hear due to compromised breathing. Singing addresses:

- breath quality and support;
- vocal volume and projection;
- articulation;
- confidence in using one's voice in social contexts.

Equally central is the group dimension: many people, after diagnosis, experience a significant reduction in social life and perceive themselves primarily as *objects of care*. The choir becomes a place where:

- experiences, challenges and achievements are shared;
- new relationships are formed;
- an active, contributing role within the community is regained.

La Voce dell'Afasia: Reclaiming speech through song

Active for six years, the group aims to support the recovery of language and speech through singing.

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Aphasia affects the ability to speak, but not necessarily the ability to sing: music thus becomes a bridge between what seems lost and what remains accessible. Through songs of different genres, varied formations (solos, small groups, full ensemble) and performances in prestigious venues – such as the Egyptian Museum in Turin, collaborations with gospel choirs and rock bands – participants experience:

- a renewed ability to express themselves;
- the pleasure of being protagonists on stage;
- the sense of *giving back* something powerful and meaningful to the audience.

The vocal teaching approach, in both choirs, does not aim at technical perfection but builds a space halfway between vocal instruction and music therapy, adapting to each person's respiratory, vocal and emotional needs. The goal is not to *produce soloists*, but to enable each person to rediscover their own voice – in the broadest sense of the term.

Conclusions

The projects of Musica e Cura demonstrate how, in the context of aphasia and Parkinson's disease, music and choral singing can:

- accelerate and support rehabilitation pathways;
- strengthen bodily awareness, inner rhythm and breath;
- counter social isolation and loss of personal role;
- transform the non-musical – the fragment, the weak voice, the interrupted word – into a shared experience of beauty, exchange and dignity.

Each concert thus becomes an act of reciprocal care: for those who sing and for those who listen.

RESPIRATORY TRAINING

● Cantando: singing as respiratory training for children with congenital heart disease

An experimental project that uses singing as a therapeutic tool to improve the respiratory capacity, quality of life and self-esteem of children with complex congenital heart disease. The initiative involves doctors, researchers, musicians and conductors in a programme that combines music, health and social inclusion.

Pierluigi Festa (Italy) paediatric cardiologist at the Gabriele Monasterio Foundation, Tuscany Region, National Research Council (CNR)

Clinical background: complex congenital heart disease and the Fontan circulation

Cantando is a project designed to use singing as a form of respiratory training for children and young people with complex congenital heart disease, particularly those living with the Fontan circulation.

Complex congenital heart defects are developmental malformations that prevent the normal separation between systemic and pulmonary circulation. Under physiological conditions, the two circuits function in series and never mix; in the most severe cases, without surgical correction, survival and growth would not be possible.

In the 1970s–1980s, Dr Fontan in Bordeaux devised a surgical strategy that directs venous (deoxygenated) blood straight into the pulmonary arteries, leaving the malformed heart responsible only for systemic circulation. The lungs, described as a low-resistance “sponge”, make this adaptation possible, but the resulting circulation is entirely non-physiological.

The cost is a significant haemodynamic alteration:

- central venous pressure, normally around 2–8 mmHg,
- stabilises at much higher values in patients with Fontan circulation (14–18 mmHg).

Thus, the original heart defect is corrected, but a new condition is created – the *Fontan disease* – which gradually affects all organs chronically exposed to this venous hypertension (intestine, lungs, and especially the liver).

The objective becomes twofold: ensuring survival and, at the same time, promoting the best possible physical well-being, alongside healthy relational and emotional development, for children and adolescents living with a condition of permanent fragility.

Physical exercise and breathing: a cultural challenge

To support this non-physiological circulation, it is essential to strengthen the ener-

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gy sources that push venous blood forward:

- the muscular pump of the lower limbs, through physical activity;
- negative intrathoracic pressure during inhalation, through deep and effective breathing.

Paradoxically, children with Fontan circulation need more physical exercise than their healthy peers. However, in Italy, strict regulations regarding sports eligibility make access to sport particularly difficult precisely for those who would benefit from it the most. This led to the idea of focusing on the second element: breathing. The theoretical reference is pranayama, the conscious control of breath in the Eastern tradition, understood as vital energy. A first programme engaged ten young patients in specific diaphragmatic breathing training aimed at:

- increasing breath awareness;
- strengthening the diaphragm;
- improving the effectiveness of the respiratory pump.

Initial results were very encouraging, with an increase in endurance (the ability to sustain physical effort for longer). However, benefits tended to diminish once the training ended, highlighting the need for an activity that was more natural, motivating and continuous.

From respiratory training to singing: the birth of Cantando

The turning point came with the idea of integrating respiratory work with choral singing, transforming exercises into an artistic and relational experience. Thus the *Cantando* project was born, developed through the collaboration between:

- the Tuscany Choral Association;
- the National Research Council (CNR);
- the Tuscany Hospital Foundation;
- the Paediatric Cardiac Surgery Centre of Massa;
- the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino Foundation.

Its aim is to develop and test an integrated method combining:

- specific respiratory training techniques;
- vocal and choral exercises;
- a motivating framework of rehearsals and performance.

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The project is aimed at children aged 7 to 14 with complex congenital heart disease (particularly those with Fontan circulation), with the intention of expanding the model in the future to other forms of physical or neurological disability.

Structure of the programme: between hospital, theatre and final concert

The programme includes:

- weekly singing and respiratory training sessions in the hospital, delivered collaboratively by the medical team and vocal teachers;
- special sessions at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, where theatre professionals provide technical and artistic expertise;
- a final concert in Montecastelli, at the Science & Music Foundation established by Philip Bonhoeffer, who supports the project.

During the sessions, vocal exercises and breathing techniques overlap significantly with those used in respiratory rehabilitation protocols:

- diaphragmatic control;
- management of inhalation/exhalation phases;
- breath support for sustained sound;
- modulation of airflow through musical phrasing.

Singing therefore becomes the *natural* and motivating form of respiratory training which might otherwise be perceived as purely clinical.

Observed outcomes: breath, body and social connection

Although the sample size is too small for robust statistical evidence, the collected data indicate:

- improved diaphragmatic mobility, measured through specific instrumental tests;
- increased capacity to sustain physical effort;
- excellent subjective and emotional responses.

Pre- and post-programme questionnaires show:

- a perceived improvement in physical well-being;
- increased relational and social well-being, particularly important for children who often experience limitations and differences from their peers;

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- enhanced emotional well-being, also reflected in letters and messages of gratitude from families.

In this context, singing is not only respiratory exercise: it becomes an opportunity for group belonging, normality and pride for young people whose clinical history has often been dominated by hospitals and therapies.

When medicine meets the choir

In closing, Rossana Paliaga situates the project within a broader perspective: medicine is moving increasingly close to the choral world. More and more often, doctors participate in musical initiatives and use – often in pioneering ways, despite resistance and prejudice – music and choral singing as therapeutic support.

This is not only about emotional well-being: scientific evidence increasingly demonstrates that choral singing – the very practice promoted and experienced within Feniarco – can have concrete effects on clinical parameters, functional abilities and quality of life. Cantando fits perfectly within this perspective, placing singing at the crossroads between care, prevention and human growth.

CIRCLE IN MUSIC

● Circle in music - interactive concert

Produced in collaboration with the Arturo Toscanini Foundation in Parma

Camilla Mazzanti and **Anna Follia Jordan** (Italy) *violinists*

Martina Spagnuolo (Italy) *musician and music therapist*

Giuliano Scalisi, from the Production Office of *Fondazione Toscanini*, brings the institutional greetings of the Foundation and of Superintendent Ruben Jais, standing in for his colleague Marilena Lafornera, the main coordinator of the projects dedicated to music and inclusion. Scalisi briefly retraces the origins of the *Music Circles*, created within the project *Music Elisir*, supported by Chiesi Farmaceutici. The project included both one-to-one sessions between children with disabilities and the Foundation's music therapists, and short interactive concerts involving children and families as active participants in the musical experience.

Over time, the *Music Circles* have proved to be extremely versatile tools, adaptable to different audiences and settings, becoming an integral part of further initiatives aimed at promoting a truly inclusive musical experience. The goal is to overcome the traditional separation between audience and performance, turning the musical moment into a shared, accessible and participatory space. Scalisi then gives the floor to music therapist Martina Spagnuolo, who leads the activity.

The structure of the circle

Martina Spagnuolo introduces the meaning of the music circle: the circle as a symbolic form of containment, equality and reciprocal participation, in which musicians and participants share the same space. Depending on the circumstances, the activity can take place seated, standing or on the floor; for the conference session, the chairs already available are used.

The involvement of about fifteen volunteers is requested, to ensure the activity remains manageable and inclusive, while still allowing everyone else to participate indirectly. The activity includes:

- a welcome song to set the atmosphere of the circle;
- an initial phase of simple and accessible body percussion;
- paired exercises, designed to support participants with specific needs, also through the spontaneous assistance of a caregiver or companion;
- the use of small percussion instruments – jaw harps, egg shakers, bells – chosen to facilitate movement and enable participation even for those with motor limitations.

A key element of the method is welcoming the proposals that spontaneously emerge from within the circle: participants' suggestions, when compatible with the flow of the activity, are integrated to foster authentic and non-directive involvement.

This is followed by a moment of musical listening: violinists Camilla Mazzanti and Anna Follia Jordan perform the first movement of a sonata by Leclair, offering a contemplative pause within the circle.

Musicians in dialogue with the circle

The violinists of Fondazione Toscanini briefly describe their role within the Music Circles, which they see as contexts that allow them to *break the mould* of the traditional concert.

In these activities, introducing the instrument and engaging in dialogue with the participants becomes an integral part of the experience. Depending on the group involved, they present the violin, demonstrate how sound is produced, and explore the relationship between gesture, listening and movement, adapting their language to the needs of the people present.

Dance, movement and a shared closing

In the final part of the activity, Spagnuolo invites participants to stand up again and form a true circle to experience a brief collective dance based on simple and accessible steps. The objective is to encourage freedom of movement, bodily expression and the playful dimension of musical experience.

The session concludes with thanks to all participants for their spontaneity and willingness to take part, recognising the importance of such moments in reconnecting with one's expressive and relational freedom.+

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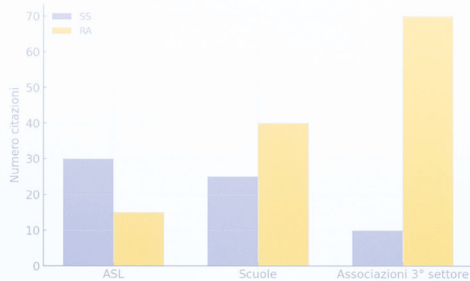
Camilla Mazzanti, Anna Follia Jordan and Martina Spagnuolo

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