

# ‘The show must go on’: older entertainers making music in the community in Melbourne, Australia

Dawn Joseph

*Deakin University*

Jane Southcott

*Monash University*

## Abstract

Globally countries are faced with an aging population and Australia is no different. This creates challenges for the maintenance of well-being which can be enhanced by active engagement in society. There is extensive research that confirms that engagement in music by older people is positively related to individual and community well-being. Music engagement encompasses a range of social participation and has the potential to recognise the contribution of older people to their local communities. Music participation can contribute to a better quality of life, particularly in relation to health and happiness. There are many possible forms of music engagement. This study is part of an on-going Deakin University and Monash University research project, *Well-being and ageing: community, diversity and the arts in Victoria*. This article focuses on three members of a mixed voluntary singing group formed by older residents of an outer suburban community in Melbourne, Australia. This group, The Skylarkers, were established in 1999 as a four-part choir. Over the years the nature of the choir has changed under subsequent music directors. Since 2009 the group has focused on music theatre repertoire and performance style. Membership of the group is fluid reflecting changing life circumstances of the members but the ensemble is resilient. This small amateur music theatre group is based in suburban Melbourne, rehearses weekly and performs regularly at retirement villages, nursing homes and facilities for senior citizens. This article presents a phenomenological qualitative single case study of members of the Skylarkers. In this study, interview data were gathered in 2011-2012 and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Two significant themes emerged that concern musical self-identity and gaining a sense of purpose and fulfilment. The Skylarkers are more than a choir; they are an amateur entertainment troupe that engages with each other and the wider community. This resilient group holds true to the motto ‘the show must go on’.

**Key words:** well-being; community music; musical self-identity; active engagement; positive ageing

*Australian Journal of Music Education* 2014:1, 66-76

## Introduction

Globally the proportion of people aged 60+ years is “growing faster than any other age group, as a result of both longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates” (World Health Organization (WHO), 2013). This inevitable and predictable rapidly changing population

demographic challenges societies to adapt and maximize health, functionality, and social engagement amongst older people. Ultimately there must be increased attention to the concept of active ageing and the enhancement of quality of life. The World Health Organization asserts that, active ageing should allow people “to realize

their potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout the life course and to participate in society according to their needs, desires and capacities, while providing them with adequate protection, security and care" (2002, p. 12). WHO (2002) defines 'active' as ongoing participation in social, economic, and cultural aspects of life. In Australia as elsewhere across the globe the ageing population creates challenges and opportunities for maintaining well-being and combating social isolation. Australia's population, as in most developed countries, is ageing. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011), in the two past decades the proportion of the population aged 65 years and over has increased "from 11.1% to 13.6%. During the same period, the proportion of population aged 85 years and over has more than doubled". In the next two decades the number of people aged 80+ years in Australia will almost double again. By mid 2012 there were 3.2million Australians aged 65+ (14% of the population). The Australian federal government recognises that "Participation in social and other community activities has many benefits that promote individual and community wellbeing, and ... benefits include the building of social networks that provide formal and informal support for members of the community" (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2013, p. 251). Many community activities involve voluntary engagement by older people in arts programmes such as music and theatre performing groups. It is through such engagement that older people find a place for personal growth, such as in this study of a small music theatre performance troupe in Melbourne, Australia called The Skylarkers.

Music engagement by older people takes place in a range of community contexts that may be organised informally by interested participants or formally auspiced by a governmental authority. Community groups arise from shared interests that are shaped by their personal background, age, gender, and personal circumstances (Borland, 2005). Membership of community music

ensembles can enhance individual well-being through the development and maintenance of close relationships in both the music group and the social networks that surrounds it. This is confirmed by Duay and Bryan (2006) who identified how important it is for older people to maintain close relationships, socialize, help others to sustain well-being and their sense of self. In studies of Australian older people's community music groups it has been identified that the choirs provide older people with opportunities to maintain a sense of purpose, forge relationships, and engage in activities. Further, these groups offer effective social meeting environments where members often find a sense of family, belonging, validation and empowerment (Southcott & Joseph, 2010; 2013).

### **Belonging to a community singing group**

Engagement with music by older people active in community has many potential benefits and can improve their quality of life through forming and sustaining of relationships within community (Anetzberger, 2002). This is particularly so when older people join together to make and share music. For most people, music is "one of the few activities that offers lifelong enjoyment and that the continuation of this pleasurable activity throughout life may add to general wellbeing" (Cohen, Bailey & Nilsson, 2002, p. 99). The benefits associated with older people singing include well-being, and positive social, psychological and physical outcomes (Clift & Hancox, 2001; Skingley & Bungay, 2010; Skingley, Clift, Coulton & Rodriguez, 2011). These benefits occur regardless of musical background or cognitive ability (Creech et al., 2013a). In addition music participation can be a source of enhanced social cohesion, enjoyment, personal development, and empowerment (Coffman, 2002b; Sixsmith & Gibson, 2007). Music is a culturally meaningful and creative leisure activity (Sandgren, 2009; Iwasaki, Coyle & Shank, 2010) that promotes

self-expression, positive health and well-being (Creech et al., 2013b). Music engagement such as singing with a group can offer social affirmation through collaboration by which participants gain a sense of fulfilment, community and being valued which made it possible for the older participants to access their inner resources (Chené & Sigouin, 1995). This contributes to an overall sense of resilience that relates to independence, autonomy, and well-being (Creech et al., 2013b). As part of successful aging, singing in a group can contribute to the maintenance of active and independent lives in the community, have “positive effects on medication usages and number of doctor visits” (Sandgren, 2009, p. 475) and delays the need for residential care (Skingley et al., 2011).

Singing together can provide opportunities for people to combat negative feelings and social isolation (Skingley & Bungay, 2010). Social networks such as community music making may contribute to recovery from depression (Creech et al., 2013a) and offer a lifeline to those who feel marginalised by society. Creech et al. found that participants reported that membership of a music group provided “routine and structure to their daily lives, providing motivation for leaving the house and for engaging in daily individual practice” (p. 10). Humans are social beings and “as such they need to share activities with the other people around them. At any age, isolation can cause undesirable negative impact” (Escuder-Mollon, 2012, p. 2344). Participation in group singing provides a meeting place that can assist social relationships (Skingley & Bungay, 2010), networking, a sense of personal well-being “and reduce anxiety and depression” (Creech et al., 2013a, p. 5). Commitment to attending regular rehearsals and events over a period of time can improve mental health and wellbeing and serve “as a counter to social exclusion, which often correlates with depression and poor health” (Skingley & Bungay, 2010, p. 139). Taking part in meaningful social engagement, there are observable positive health outcomes for older people (Lally, 2009). In their study Jacob, Guptill and Sumsion (2009) found that the “majority of the participants ... look[ed]

forward to seeing their friends at choir practice each week and that they enjoy the social aspect of the choir” (p. 189). Coffman (2002a) confirms the importance of music making for creative expression and for building relationships with others. The social benefits of belonging to a community singing group are numerous and include a shared sense of belonging, enjoyment and “a sense of playing a valued and vital role within a community” (Creech et al., 2013a, p. 10). Shared music making can provide older singers with opportunities to remember and reconnect with their youth (Southcott & Joseph, 2013; Li & Southcott, 2012). This can enhance vitality in people and assist in gaining a sense of empowerment (Creech et al., 2013b). By singing well-known songs that evoke past pleasant experiences memory can be stimulated in both performers and their audiences. This can contribute to “improved wellbeing, in view of its ability [to] provide some ‘anchorage to life’” (Borglin et al., 2005, p. 205). Performing to others can offer participants a sense of fulfilment, pride and accomplishment (Jacob, Guptill & Sumsion, 2009).

## Methodology

This article discusses one case study from the larger ongoing joint research project, *Well-being and ageing: community, diversity and the arts in Victoria*. This project began in 2008 and has been undertaken by academic researchers from two metropolitan Australian universities in Melbourne, Victoria (Deakin University and Monash University). This research has entailed a number of case studies of individual visual and performing arts community organizations that cater for older people active in community. Ethical approval having been gained, individual groups located via the networks of Community Arts Victoria and Multicultural Arts Victoria were contacted by our Research Assistant (RA) and invited to take part in the study. This study used data gathered in 2012 from three volunteer participants (from the group of ten) in semi-

structured interviews of approximately one-hour duration per interview. The participants were a married couple identified by the pseudonyms 'George' and 'Val' and the ensemble director 'Ethel'. Introductory material sourced from the group's website provided basic information about the group and its evolution. As a phenomenological qualitative case study this research sought in-depth understandings of the participants. Phenomenological research entails an exploration of participants' lifeworlds, experiences, understandings, and perceptions (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005) and recognizes that this involves a process of interpretation by the researcher (Smith, 2005; Clarke, 2009). It is important to "remain as faithful as possible to the phenomenon and to the context in which it appears in the world" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 28). Given this approach, open-ended questions were posed that sought reflective responses and allowed additional questions for clarification. The interview was conversational in manner and asked such questions as: Tell me about The Skylarkers and what they do? How long have you been a member? Has the group changed over time? Why do you stay a member? What is your music background? What does membership of The Skylarkers mean to you? A research assistant (RA) undertook the interviews that were audio-recorded and transcribed. All participants were invited to confirm the accuracy of the interview transcript. The questions initially sought details about the individual participants, their involvement with the ensemble, and their understandings of group membership.

Data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is a "qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). IPA is phenomenological as it "seeks an insider perspective on the lived experiences of individuals" (Fadé, 2004, p. 648). This analytic approach also acknowledges "the inevitable

interpretative role of researchers" (Tzanidaki & Reynolds, 2011, p. 377). As in this study, IPA is generally conducted on "relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 3). In IPA in-depth, conversational semi-structured interviews are the most common and effective data collection strategy (Smith, 2005; Eatough & Smith, 2006). To reduce the possibility of researcher bias, initially the interview transcripts were analysed and coded independently by both authors as a form of member checking. From this coding of the emerging categories a table of common themes was developed by the authors that was then reported thematically and illustrated by verbatim quotations from the transcripts (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). Quotations can amplify themes and reveal differing perspectives of interviewees (Tzanidaki & Reynolds, 2011). Ultimately the data were reported under two main themes, Musical self-identity and Gaining a sense of purpose and fulfilment.

## Participants: The Skylarkers

The Skylarkers were established in a suburb of Melbourne, Victoria, in 1999. The group has changed. Initially it was founded as a four-part choir who focused on excellent performance. Over the years the nature of the choir has changed under subsequent music directors. Since 2009 the music director has focused on music theatre repertoire and performance style. The singing group membership has remained between 10 and 20 but the balance of voices has changed from equal representation of men and women to a pre-dominance of the latter. The members of the group refer to themselves as singers and performers. There is no audition, or expectation of music literacy, and there is a small membership fee per annum. The group rehearse weekly on Thursday afternoons (except in January and July) and the ensemble performs about twenty shows per year at which all members are expected to attend. The venues

for the performances include Senior Citizens' Clubs, Hospitals, Hostels, Nursing homes, and Retirement Villages. The singing group is organised by an elected committee and the music director takes most of the responsibility for the program that consists of group numbers and solo items. The latter are volunteered by members and, if accepted, included. On stage the ensemble has a dress code. The men wear dinner suits (usually acquired from a charity shop) and the women black slacks and tops that are enlivened by various matching scarves and jackets. In addition a range of accessories are added to highlight the spirit of particular songs. The solo items are often costumed, again from personal collections and charity outlets. Membership of the group is fluid reflecting changing life circumstances of the members but the group is resilient and has continued. Members generally find the group by word of mouth, often after retirement or life change. There is a mix of ages reaching until the early 90s. Amongst the members are amateur, semi-professional and professional performers.

## Discussion and findings

This discussion will focus on the joint interview of a married couple, George and Valerie (Val), and the conductor of the ensemble Ethel. Different elements of membership of the ensemble such as group singing, creative expression, costuming and performing proved to be motivating factors for individual participation but remained unique to each individual (Jacob, Guptill & Sumsion, 2009). In passing, the interviewees mentioned both physical and cognitive benefits from singing in this group. George mentioned that at his annual medical check-up his lung capacity had improved and he ascribed that to learning to "breathe from the diaphragm when singing". Valerie thought that learning new things sharpened her memory. George cited his guitar teacher's explanation that as you learn new things, new connections are made in your brain and that, although "it

might take a day or two for that connection to be made... a couple of days later you'll go through it again and you'll find you can do it better! This is because 'things' are connecting! So, maybe that's what happens when we learn the words of new songs". These examples were the only ones offered and thus are not the focus of this article which echoes the findings of Skingley and Bungay (2010) who found that physical health was not central to their participants' discussion. Despite this other researchers have identified that participation in music activities can offer a "balance between abilities and challenges (cognitive, physical and memory stimulation) and external resources (friendships, transport etc.)" (Skingley & Bungay, 2010, p. 140).

For George and Val belonging to this musical group has been journey in which they have developed very different notions of themselves as musicians and performers. For Ethel conducting the singing group has provided an opportunity for her showmanship to come to the fore. Membership of the ensemble has supported the ongoing development of the musical identities of the participants.

## Theme 1: Musical self-identity

George learnt the piano for two years as a child but did not get very far because he had no instrument on which to practise other than an old pedal organ. He did learn to read music from this early engagement. His mother also played the violin, until her fingers were burnt, then she learnt to play the concertina so music was always present in his home. George described music at his school:

*I was rather fortunate in that I went to a little country school in northern New South Wales. It was a one-teacher school and we had a musical instrument – a tuning fork! That was it! But we were very lucky. In my first three years we had a teacher who was very musical and we would sing a huge range of songs. And, out of that school, a lot of kids – cousins of mine and others – went on*

*to be country and western singers and in a sense I thought, "Doesn't everybody do this?"*

For George, singing was just part of life. When he moved to Sydney to take up an apprenticeship he joined a church choir and this practice has continued throughout his life. Despite this ongoing music making, George described himself as an introvert when young. On reflection he ascribed this to being an only child with older parents brought up on a farm in a small community where most people were related. Although he never thought of himself as an entertainer he has reached a stage in his life where his self-confidence has increased so that when asked to perform he thinks, "Yes, I can do that" and believes that he is prepared "to have a go". Where once he would have hesitated to volunteer now he considers himself to be "a bit like that girl in *Oklahoma*. I can't say 'No!'" George now sees himself as a performer who sings, wears costumes and dances to suit the repertoire. He now contributes both on stage and back stage in different ways to the Skylarkers and other local amateur music theatre groups. His immediate goal at the time of interview was to finish the sets for a production of *The Pyjama Game* with Babirra Music Theatre, a local non-professional music theatre company. About three years ago George did the sets for *Me and My Girl* and also performed on stage. He found that this was "pretty demanding – you rehearse three times per week for five months". George has grown as a performer from a school-boy who sang to become in his later life a confident all-round music theatre performer prepared to take musical risks and take on the artistic design of a production. George is married to Valerie. Her musical trajectory is different.

Valerie has been involved with music for most of her life. As a girl the radio was always playing music and she learnt the piano, reaching Grade 2 but did not continue. She continued to listen to music on the radio during her mothercraft training. Valerie stated that she had been in different choirs and has always loved music, although she never

thought of herself as "much of a singer". Valerie took the opportunity to join the Skylarkers but always describes herself in comparison to her husband who she considers far more musically able. Valerie stated that, "I do feel a bit inferior. But that's part of my inferiority complex; I'm not very confident". She feels that:

*George's talent is just everywhere; he's so talented in everything he does; everything he touches just turns to gold and I guess because of my inferiority complex, which has been there right from the start I guess I feel I'm not as good as he is.*

Despite this underlying sense of inferiority, Valerie does enjoy the group music making. She explained that, "I don't put myself forward because I don't feel I'm good enough...I'd rather sing in the group than by myself". Valerie does recognise her own ability to learn lyrics easily, stating that "I find that I can pick-up words easily; I know George's words as well as my own". Valerie is testing her boundaries by agreeing to perform a duet with George. They are rehearsing the song 'We're a Couple of Swells' from the musical film *Easter Parade* (1948). The original starred Judy Garland and Fred Astaire. Valerie is "only just beginning to get used to it". She is dressing up as a male tramp like Garland and is still feeling a "bit threatened by it sometimes". George is singing strongly and projecting over Valerie, which she feels is encouraging her to get louder. Valerie does not aspire to be as good as George and does not see herself as being as determined as he is.

Ethel began learning ballet as a little girl. She first performed on stage at the age of three and this continued until her marriage. After having children, Ethel returned to musical theatre joining amateur light opera companies and gaining lead roles. She has done some professional work for television, film and commercials. From an early age Ethel has thought of herself as a performer. She always knew she could sing, but did not realise that she had a voice until she auditioned for the musical *Calendar Girls* in her mid-fifties. Ethel recalled the conversation where she said, "I can't sing" and the director said, "yeah you can". She took

the lead in a community theatre production of *Hey Dolly* which was a defining role. She stated that, "once I found a voice there was no stopping me – I could bring all my dramatic skills to my singing which all really helped". Ethel defines her voice as a "middle range belter up to C if pushed". She has never had lessons which she now considers a strength. She recounted that when she was singing in *Dolly* a well-known singing teacher told her never to have lessons, "just do some scales of a morning and every night to keep the voice open as it is natural". For her, projection just "comes with the territory". Ethel continues to audition for stage and theatre work, finding that this fills a gap in her life. She explained that, "when the family left I couldn't go back into that empty nest". This was the point at which she joined the Skylarkers.

At the time of interview, Ethel has been the fourth music director of the Skylarkers for a year. She saw herself as different to the previous directors when the group was a traditionally run choir. Ethel argued that if she was to become director, the group had to let her bring her skills to enliven their performances. She could not tolerate a static performance and explained, "I've got to move, honey". Ethel found that the group members responded well to this new approach. She recounted that "I just said to them 'music is to move to' even if you are singing in grand opera you'll be tapping your feet, silently clapping your hands together, your body wants to move". Ethel described that the "guys were pretty good" and "for the women it's like something's been unleashed". They have added gesture and animation to their performances. Ethel understands this as a palpable energy that she has brought to the group from her theatrical experiences. She believes that she has "given them permission" and describes one of the women who has transformed from a static performer to someone who is now "hopping all over the place". Ethel has brought her acting skills to the singing. She taught the group that, "all songs are stories" and she expects them to "show it to me, tell them the stories". This resonates with her own understanding of herself as a performer. She states that in musical theatre, "I get to sing

and show off. I get to dress up. It's a tremendous satisfaction for me – I get to put my makeup on, get my pretty cossies on, I get to sing, I get to show off – that's what actors do". Ethel believes that she has "released these people" and that they have transformed from "just a singing group" to being performers.

Integral to their performances are their costumes. The group co-ordinates and uses matching jackets and ties to give a sense of unity and spectacle. Ethel enthusiastically described that "we open in a beautiful hot pink top the girls with a black see through over-jacket with pink and white roses beading very classy and the guys where all black with pink bow ties". For different numbers, the group changes costume. Variety is added to the program by alternating ensemble, solo and small group performances. For example, two of the women sing *Bosom Buddies* they wear "beautiful outfits that we found in an op shop with jackets smothered in spangles". For her solo number, Ethel sings *The Rose* wearing a "beautiful shot silk jacket and I've put a rose on it".

Ethel's encouragement is infectious. She described Yvonne one of the women who was very quiet and not ready to take a solo. Ethel convinced her to put on a costume and be the unmoving centre of a performance of the song *Mame* by three of the men. After this experience Ethel described that something in Yvonne changed. Ethel explained that Yvonne had "never sung solo before in that group but yesterday she and another member brought a little number to us that they would like to sing in the show next year and do a little dance in the middle of it". As a choir director, Ethel has encouraged growth and confidence in the group. Both together and as individuals, members are prepared to take musical and theatrical risks. Ethel recognised that the group has changed and understands that she has given them permission to change. She stated that, "suddenly these people are like 'yes!' Eunice, one of the older members of the group, is on a stick, she's stooped over with arthritis, but by the end of the rehearsal she's practically standing up with the adrenalin – it's wonderful".

## Theme 2: Gaining a sense of purpose and fulfilment

The Skylarkers began as a formal choir but now see themselves as entertainers. George explained that, “we don’t class ourselves as a choir because we don’t aim to be perfect or anything like that”. The group mainly performs in nursing homes, at senior citizens functions and sometimes in retirement villages. Although the Skylarkers’ programs contain both solo and group items depending on the occasion, George asserted that, “we present as a group”. Underpinning all their engagement with the ensemble is a desire to contribute to the community. Val explained that “we are entertaining other people, it is good to think that we are doing something to help somebody else”. Ethel too found that she “just wanted to be a member of the group as their mission statement appealed to me, and I just wanted to bring joy into the lives of others”. The participants all stressed that by singing in the music theatre group they gained a sense of purpose as they could bring music and pleasure to their audiences.

The performance style of the ensemble is intentionally informal and engaging. Val relishes the performances in which they are “face to face with the audience” and demonstrably having fun. If they make mistakes, they laugh and move on. Val stated that, “when things go wrong we get a bit giggly and poke fun at each other and that goes across to the audience and they can see that we enjoy it! And we can see their enjoyment”. Ethel described changes she had observed in the audience. Even before the group begins to sing, they “suddenly sit up and you can see that they think that this is going to be good”. She noted that audience members may enter hunched over their Zimmer frames but by the end of the show “some of them will be straight”. Ethel has the group capitalise on this enthusiasm and, after the last song, the Skylarkers go down into the audience to meet people, when they “talk to them, and touch them and they just respond. Little couples will get up and dance”. This practice provides a sense of fulfilment to the members of the ensemble. Ethel provided a further example:

*Last week we did a concert and there was a woman in a long bed who was very old – she was in her 90s. Our last number is always chosen to relate to the age group of the audience. For this concert we chose ‘You are my sunshine’ and as soon as we started to sing she started to clap. She was obviously very unwell and two nurses ran right round the back [astounded] as she was clapping.*

At the same concert Ethel talked about another “little tiny bent up old guy and the nurse danced with him. We’re all standing there with tears rolling down our faces”. The performances of the Skylarkers provoke nostalgic reactions in their audiences. Further, the nurses attending the concert share the moment with their charges. Ethel firmly believes in the power of music to make connections between the group and their audiences. Langston and Barrett (2008) similarly found that a performing ensemble valued giving back to the community as a form of civic involvement and fellowship.

The Skylarkers find personal, musical and social fulfilment in their membership of the ensemble.

Ethel stated that, “I walked in and it was like I’d known them all my life. They are great people, lovely positive people ... I loved being part of it all”. A large part of this enjoyment is the social interaction between the members of the Skylarkers whom Ethel describes as “the most wonderful group of people. We all just really get on together and like each other’s company”. She chronicled that two members play golf together, another two are married, other members prepare duets in their own time and so forth. They stay in touch by email and telephone. Ethel added that, “we all get so much joy out of each other’s company, we’re always laughing together, no domestics, no one gets up anyone’s nose. The chemistry is terrific”. She is of the strong belief that everyone should do musical theatre with “a group of chums” who have developed a sense of community. This is despite their diverse backgrounds as “some of us are well-educated, some of us aren’t and yet we all hang out and have a good time. We’ve got two died in the



wool atheists, two died in the wool Christians – it doesn't make any difference".

The group is resilient. Over the past years the membership has changed but the group persists, albeit in an altered form. The numbers fluctuate from twenty to ten. There is no resentment when members announce their retirement. George recalled that, "one chap retired last year at age ninety saying, 'I think I'd better get on with my life". Other members have joined on the advice of their doctor. A past member came because she was suffering from depression and Ethel thought that singing with the group "really helped her". The resilience of the group is typified by their response to death. Val mused:

*When I think about it, over the years we've had a number of people die from the group – not on stage during a show – but we've sort of had to move along with it ... we've had to collect ourselves again and continue on ... and sometimes major people have moved out but we've managed to regroup and keep it going.*

There actually was a death during one of the performances. One of the members of the group collapsed on stage during a show. The interviewees recalled that the other performers carried the collapsed performer off-stage quipping that, "He's always doing things like this". They took him to the theatre foyer that was the only area where they could lay him on the floor to conduct CPR and, although he died at the theatre, they were able to keep him alive until his wife arrived to say, goodbye. George recalled his CPR training as he was "on the spot, and nobody was taking over and it was just a case of 'getting on with it". Val added that the show continued, uninterrupted, "not only because of the performers' determination that, 'The show must go on', but because the only exit for the audience was through the foyer which had been taken over by the team working on the collapsed performer". This dramatic incident has become part of the history of the group. They are proud of their resilience and ability to cope with change and

trauma. Creech, et al. (2013a) found that music engagement could give participants "a sense of purpose in life, enhanced confidence, positive feelings about life in general, and support following bereavement" (pp. 10-11).

## Conclusions

The Skylarkers are more than a choir. They are a performance troupe who relish their shared music making and enjoy each other's company. Skingley and Bungay (2010) confirm that singing with others is more beneficial than singing alone. Each member has undertaken a journey to their present understanding of themselves as musician and performer. In this study George and Val both had early music experiences but only in later life have they joined a performance group where they have found a place for self-expression. George has flourished in this new environment and Val is comfortable being part of it and supporting George. Val recognised that she is a more hesitant individual but she is now preparing a duet. Ethel has always seen herself as a performer and director, and her confidence and enthusiasm that are infectious. Under her aegis the group has changed; where it was once a choir that sought musical accuracy, now the ensemble focuses on engaging music theatre performances with choreography, costume and audience interaction. The group maintain a high standard in their performances but are more relaxed about the occasional slip up. The participants enjoy being in the Skylarkers and describe their involvement as fun. Creech et al. (2013a) confirm that an important social benefit of community music making is having fun.

Membership of the Skylarkers provides a sense of validation, purpose, belonging, fulfilment and personal growth. Although the membership changes due to aging, life choices, and occasionally death on stage (literally), the group is resilient. The participants are proud of their ability to cope, to learn, to collaborate, and to maintain a positive and enthusiastic attitude. Creech et al. (2013a) also identified that music engagement

enabled older participants to rise to new challenges and acquire new skills that provided a sense of achievement and pride. The members of the Skylarkers interviewed proudly described the musical and personal journeys of other members, some who have sought the ensemble as a way to distract from illness. There is a palpable sense of connectedness and caring within the group. Socialising and social networking are very significant aspects in the wellbeing of older people (Skingley & Bungay, 2010; Creech et al., 2013a). All of this contributes to their ongoing sense of wellbeing, demonstrating the positive affects of shared music making amongst older people. As Bryant et al. (2001) asserted, healthy aging relies on going into community and doing something that is meaningful for both performer and audience. The Skylarkers see themselves as entertainers who bring music and pleasure to their audiences.

In the latter part of our lives participation in music can offer a source of social belonging, enjoyment, personal development, and empowerment (Coffman, 2002b; Sixsmith & Gibson, 2007). It behoves all those with an interest in working with older people "to advocate for high-quality, accessibly musical opportunities throughout the life-course" to engender successful ageing (Creech et al., 2013a, p. 12). Fisher and Specht (1999) point out that ageing well "is about being happy and being hopeful and making the most of what our lives have to offer" (p. 470). Being a Skylarker offers both the members and their audiences a sense of rejuvenation, pleasure, and musical enrichment. For the performers the Skylarkers provides a place and space for members to continue their active engagement with music performance and music learning. As presented, significant themes emerged that concern musical self-identity and the journeys of individuals, and gaining a sense of purpose and fulfilment from membership of the ensemble. The Skylarkers are more than a choir; they are an amateur music theatre entertainment troupe that engages with each other and the wider community. This resilient group hold true to the motto 'The show must go on'.

## References

- Anetzberger, G. J. (2002). Community resources to promote successful aging. *Clinics in Geriatric Medicine*, 18, 611-625.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011). *Population by Age and Sex, Australian States and Territories, Jun [sic] 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3201.0>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013). *Australia's Welfare 2013*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
- Borland, H. (2005). *Heritage languages and community identity building: the case of a language of a lesser status*. *International journal of bilingual education and bilingualism*, 8(2/3), 109-123.
- Borglin, G., Edberg, A-K., & Hallberg, I. R. (2005). The experience of quality of life among older people. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 19, 201-220.
- Brocki, J. M. & Wearden, A. J. (2006). A critical evaluation of the use on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) in health psychology. *Psychology and Health*, 21(1), 87-108.
- Bryant, L. L., Corbett, K. K. & Kutner, J. S. (2001). In their own words: a model of healthy ageing. *Social Science and Medicine*, 53, 927-941.
- Chéné, A. & Sigouin, R. (1995). Never old older learners. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 14(6), 434-443.
- Clarke, C. (2009). An Introduction to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: a Useful Approach for Occupational Therapy Research. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 72(1), 37-39.
- Clift, S. M. & Hancox, G. (2001). The perceived benefits of singing: findings from preliminary surveys of a university college choral society. *The Journal of the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 121(4), 248-256.
- Coffman, D. D. (2002a). Banding Together: New Horizons in Lifelong Music Making. *Journal of Aging and Identity*, 7(2), 133-143.
- Coffman, D. D. (2002b). Music and quality of life in older adults. *Psychomusicology*, 12, pp. 76-88.
- Cohen, A., Bailey, B. & Nilsson, T. (2002). The importance of music to seniors. *Psychomusicology*, 18, 89-102.
- Creech, A., Hallam, S., McQueen, H. & Vargarigou, M. (2013a). The power of music in the lives of older adults. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 35(1), 87-102.
- Creech, A., Hallam, S., Vargarigou, M., McQueen, H. & Gaunt, H. (2013b). Active music making: a route to enhanced subjective well-being among older people. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 133(1), 36-43.
- Duay, D. L. & Bryan, V. C. (2006). Senior Adults' Perceptions of Successful Ageing. *Educational Gerontology*, 32(3), 423-445.
- Eatough, V. & Smith, J. (2006). 'I was like a wild wild person': Understanding feelings of anger using interpretative phenomenological analysis. *British Journal of Psychology*, 97, 483-498.

- Escuder-Mollon, P. (2012). Modelling the impact of lifelong learning on senior citizens' quality of life. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 46, 2339-2346.
- Fade, S. (2004). Using interpretative phenomenological analysis for public health nutrition and dietetic research: a practical guide. *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, 63(4), 647-653.
- Fisher, B. J. & Specht, D. K. (1999). Successful Aging and Creativity in Later Life. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 13(4), 457-472.
- Giorgi, A. & Giorgi, B. (2003). Phenomenology. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative Psychology: A practical guide to research method* (pp. 25-50). London: SAGE.
- Iwasaki, Y., & Bartlett, J. (2006). Culturally meaningful leisure as a way of coping with stress among aboriginal individuals with diabetes. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 38, 321-338.
- Jacob, C., Guptaill, C. & Sumsion, T. (2009). Motivation for continuing involvement in a leisure-based choir: The lived experiences of university choir members. *Journal of Occupational Science*. 16(3), 187-193.
- Lally, E. (2009). 'The power to heal us with a smile and a song': Senior Well-being, Music-based Participatory Arts and the Value of Qualitative Evidence. *Journal of Arts and Communities*, 1(1), 25-44.
- Langston, T. W., & Barrett, M. S. (2008). Capitalizing on community music: a case study of the manifestation of social capital in a community choir. *Research Studies in Music Education*, 30, 118-138.
- Larkin, M., Watts, S. & Clifton, E. (2006). Giving voice and making sense in interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 102-120.
- Li, S. & Southcott, J. (2012). A Place for Singing: Active Music Engagement by Older Chinese Australians. *International Journal of Community Music*, 5(2), 59-78.
- Reid, K., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2005). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: An overview and methodological review. *The Psychologist*, 18, 20-23.
- Sandgren, M. (2009). Evidence for Strong Immediate Well-being Effects of Choral Singing – With More Enjoyment for Women than for Men. In Jukka Louhivuori, Tuomas Eerola, Suvi Saarikallio, Tommi Himberg, Päivi-Sisko Eerola (Eds.) *Proceedings of the 7th Triennial Conference of European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music (ESCOM 2009)* (pp. 475-479). Jyväskylä, Finland: ESCOM.
- Sixsmith, A. & Gibson, G. (2007). Music and the wellbeing of people with dementia. *Ageing and Society*, 27(1), 127-145.
- Skingley, A. & Bungay, H. (2010). The Silver Song Club Project: singing to promote the health of older people. *British Journal of Community Nursing*, 15(3), 135-140.
- Skingley, A., Clift, S. M., Coulton, S. P. & Rodriguez, J. (2011). The effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of a participative community singing programme as a health promotion initiative for older people: protocol for a randomised controlled trial. *BMC Public Health*, 11(142), Retrieved from <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/11/142>.
- Smith, J. A. (2005). *Jonathon A. Smith [Online]*. Retrieved from [http://www.psyc.bbk.ac.uk/people/academic/smith/smith\\_j/js.html](http://www.psyc.bbk.ac.uk/people/academic/smith/smith_j/js.html)
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Theory, Method and Research*. London: SAGE.
- Southcott, J. & Joseph, D. (2010). Sharing community through singing: The Bosnian Behar Choir in Victoria, Australia. *e-journal of Studies in Music Education*, 8(2), 17-27.
- Southcott, J. & Joseph, D. (2013). Community, commitment, and the Ten Commandments: Singing in the Coro Furlan. *International Journal of Community Music*, 6(1), 79-92.
- Tzanidaki, D. & Reynolds, F. (2011). Exploring the meanings of making traditional arts and crafts among older women in Crete, using interpretative phenomenological analysis. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 74(8), 375-382.
- World Health Organisation (2002). *Active ageing: A policy framework*. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/hpr/ageing/ActiveAgeing-PolicyFrame.pdf>
- World Health Organization (2013). *Ageing*. Retrieved from <http://www.who.int/topics/ageing/en/>

**Dr Dawn Joseph** is a Senior Lecturer in music and education studies in the Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. She teaches in undergraduate and postgraduate courses and is Course Coordinator for the Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts. She researches, publishes and reviews in national and international journals in music education, teacher education, African music, cultural diversity and multiculturalism. She was Chair of the Australian Society for Music Education (Victorian Chapter) and a member of the National Council.

**Dr Jane Southcott** is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education, Monash University. Her phenomenological research explores music education, cultural identity and community music. She teaches in postgraduate and pre-service programs and supervises many postgraduate research students. Jane is National President of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Research in Music Education and a member of the editorial boards of international and national refereed journals.