

# Sing & Shine with Children's Choirs

*Sanna Valvanne, Conductor, Finland*

## Introduction



Sanna with children from Mexican choirs during her seminar with Baja California, in Tijuana, Mexico, in 2015 © Centro de Artes Musica

Dear you,

who work or would like to work with children's choirs, want ideas, are excited about starting a children's choir, and love children. Or you, who are tired, need motivation, and don't know what to do with children's choirs. This is to all of you. This is also to me, who never thought I'd be a choir conductor, yet have worked with choirs around the world since a teenager for 34 years already!

Originally, I worked mainly with children's and youth choirs. Eventually, I noticed that I love working with all ages because everyone actually is the same, like a child, on the

inside. In 2016, I returned to Finland to finally start my own choir organization, the Sing & Shine Choirs (Sing & Shine Kuorot) for everyone who wanted to sing, express themselves and be empowered. I have around one hundred singers from ages five up to senior citizens rehearsing in six different age groups and also performing as one cross-generational choir family. I love them all, yet the sound of the children singing moves me the most. It's just so special, pure, touching, beautiful and powerful.

I am writing this, being too caught up with all the organizational work, to remind myself why I love children's choirs and started this work in the first place. May this inspire all of us in our work with children, and most of all, benefit children everywhere and bring them more opportunities to sing and shine.

## **The Magic of Children**

The children we get to work with are like a magical canvas full of unlimited potential, beauty, energy and joy. We, as their teachers and conductors, have the awesome opportunity to shape the painting into anything we can imagine. It is up to us what we make of it. So, let's be courageous and creative, have fun, give ourselves fully and with love, explore and experiment, trust, listen to the children and to our hearts!



## Love & passion

How? There is no one right way. We must find what works for each one of us, again and again. For me, the love and passion for children and music, a clear vision, and the willingness to work hard regardless of salary and circumstances, are keys. It is important to keep re-evaluating why we work with children's choirs and to have clear goals and motives.

## Mission & method

My main goal has been to enable everyone, regardless of age, experience and background, to sing and express themselves freely, confidently and joyfully with the voice and the whole being. And to awaken the love for singing in everyone. My method of working with choirs is called Sing & Shine with Body & Soul. It is based on my own experiences and the understanding I reached through experiments, studies, practice, and the journey with my own voice. And the years of

singing and working with choirs.



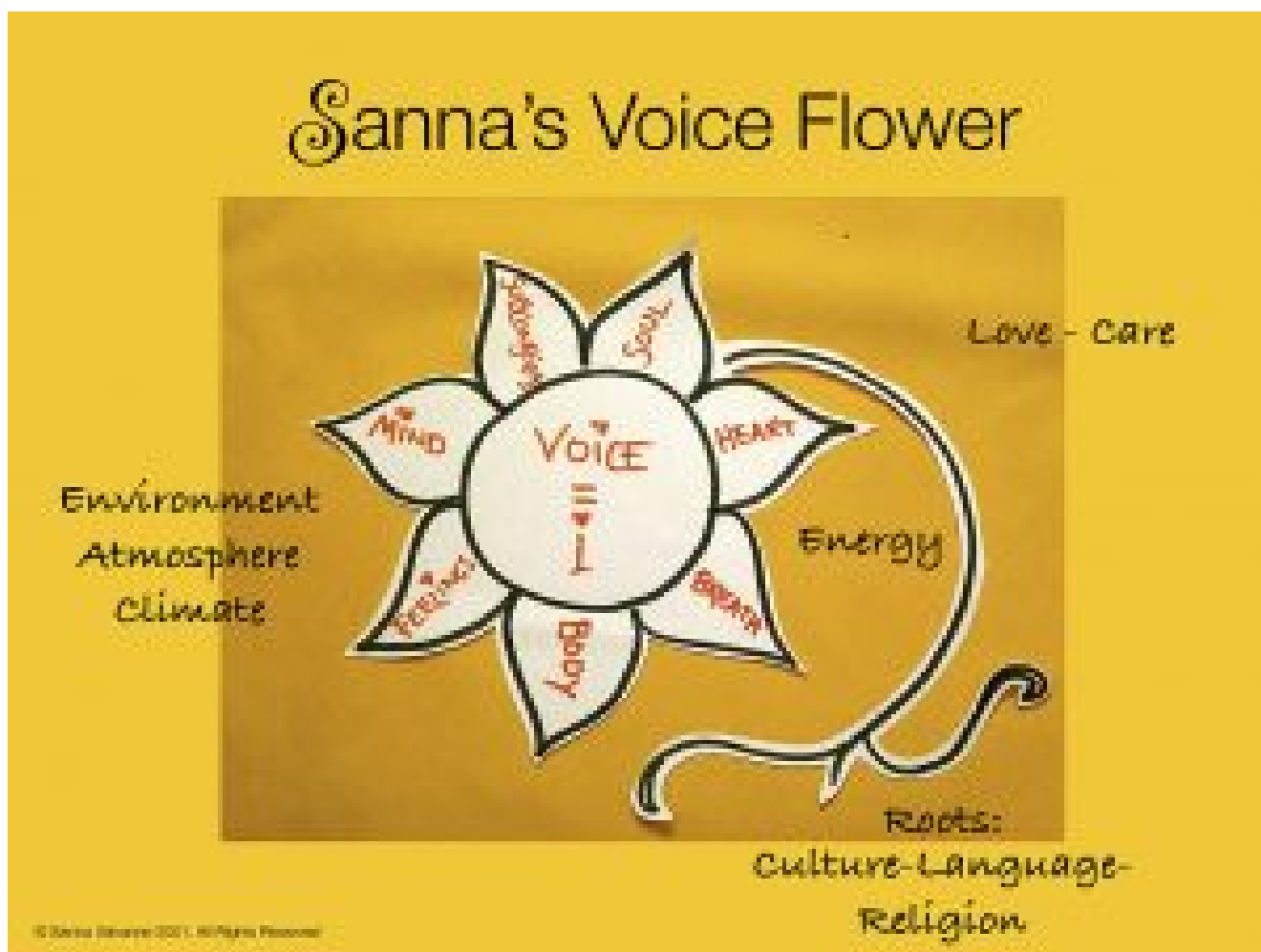
## In search of my voice

I have always loved to sing, but it has not always been easy for me. Even though I loved singing in the Tapiola Choir as a teenager, I also lost my voice there many times. At age sixteen I was even told by a doctor not to think of a career with the voice: singer, teacher or actress. However, because of my love for singing and the need to express myself, I decided to find my voice and prove the doctor wrong. This started the process of searching for my healthy and free voice again. It also led to the exercises and understanding that make up my method. Without accepting and overcoming the challenges I probably would not have had such a great desire to help others to find their voices too.

## The Voice Flower

Through the process, I understood that my voice is not

separate from me. It is very intimate and reflects everything I am. Therefore, everyone's voice is unique and must be treated with the utmost love, care and respect. We can really hurt a person and their ability to express themselves if we judge their voice negatively. So let's remember to be kind with children's voices too. Here is a picture of my voice flower, which shows what is reflected in our voice and needs to be considered when working with the voice:



### Children can learn anything – Can we teach them?

For children to experience the magic and power of singing together, we conductors and teachers need to give them the necessary tools. Isn't it our duty to teach them how to breathe and sing well, listen, participate in a group, be responsible and caring community members and global citizens? Being part of a choir is a great means for this. And children can learn anything. It is up to us not to stand in the way of

their learning with our own limitations, but to believe in them, show them the way, and let them soar.

## Everyone deserves to know how to sing

Everyone deserves to know how to sing and use their voice. Children may have challenges with the voice and singing, but most of those can be overcome. Many are caused by emotional troubles and stress, which we cannot always know or solve. But to be aware of this and to approach the child gently with empathy is at once helpful.



## Who decides what is beautiful?

It was very helpful for me to realize that there is no one right way of singing or one beautiful sound or style. Every culture, person and musical genre has its own concept of beauty, singing, and what sounds good. But we can really help each child to become aware of what they sound like, and show

them how to move and shape the voice and match the pitch. Usually a chance to hear and instruct each child individually without the choir, even just for a short moment, is very helpful for this.

## **A safe environment**

One of the most important aspects of my method and for allowing children to open up, breathe freely, and sing from the heart, is creating a safe environment, where the children feel respected, loved, and accepted, and can be confident that no one is going to hurt or make fun of them. Of course the atmosphere also needs to be fun, exciting, encouraging, and yet focused.



## **Sing & Shine Exercises**

For this purpose, I have created warm-up exercises and circle-

games that combine movement, drama, yoga, breathing, and improvisation with singing, in a natural and playful way. I use them at the beginning of each rehearsal to warm and free the singers – their voices, bodies, minds and feelings, as well as the atmosphere and the group dynamics. They are also great for getting everyone connected. Gradually the fears, insecurities, and tensions are released, and a natural and healthy breathing and singing technique is created.

The exercises also help to get in touch with the hidden inner child, creative artist, and performing star inside all of us. As a result, everyone starts to shine. Even though the exercises were first designed for children, they work for all ages. Children just learn much faster.



### **Conducting techniques vs. connection**

What about conducting techniques for children's choirs? I think it is important to know conducting techniques, so that we conductors feel confident and can use our hands as needed.



But much more than any hand gestures, how we are, how we communicate and connect with the children, and how well we know the music and are enthusiastic about it, will decide how we get the children singing. So, practice and know your material and yourself, because the more comfortable you are with yourself, the better everything works. The choir is always a reflection of the conductor, so better we be honest and accept ourselves. And of course, work on ourselves.

## **Repertoire that rocks**

My conductor, Erkki Pohjola, the founder of Tapiola Choir, shared with me a secret when I was his assistant: he didn't like most of the repertoire children's choirs were performing at the time. I didn't either. He taught me to choose carefully. Why should children sing anything other than great music? We should only teach songs that are powerful, have meaning, and move us inside out! Music that we love. Children love to sing good music also written for adults, not only children's songs. It is a matter of taste of course, but we should trust our intuition. And when we are into the music, the children can connect with it much better.

The repertoire does not necessarily have to be complicated. Very simple traditional songs can be most powerful and offer a chance for exploring different ways of expression and arranging. Or like Erkki, we can ask composers to write music for our choirs. Collaboration with other artists is enriching for both singers and conductors.



All pictures above: Let Children's Voices be heard concert on March 7, 2020, Tapiola Hall, Espoo Culture Center, Finland © Tero Pajukallio

## Creating with children

We can also create performances, texts, choreographies and songs ourselves and with the children. I love including the singers in the creative work. It makes the children feel important, more committed, and so they take ownership of the choir. The choir becomes their thing and much more interesting for everyone. And that's when the choir really starts rocking and singing on another level!

## Listen!

Children are so wise, talented, funny, beautiful, caring, and have so much to say, yet often adults don't listen. Let's make sure the children's beautiful voices are heard and that their souls shine in our choirs. It matters!



Rehearsals, March 2019, Westendinpuijon school, Espoo, Finland  
© Anneli Tuominen-Halomo



**Sanna Valvanne** is one of the most international and innovative Finnish choir conductors, the founding director of the Sing & Shine Choirs, and the Artistic Director of the 2017 Tampere Vocal Festival. She is recognized for her creative choral method “Sing and Shine with Body and Soul”, and has been a popular guest conductor with hundreds of choirs and festivals around the world since 1994. A former singer, conductor’s assistant, and vocal trainer of the world famous Tapiola Choir, Sanna has a Master’s Degree in Music from the Sibelius Academy. Sanna spent eleven years in the USA focusing her work in New York City with El Sistema-inspired music programs for children in underserved communities. She then returned to Finland in 2016 to launch her own choir organization, the Sing and Shine Choirs, to provide creative, community-oriented and empowering choral training for all ages in the Helsinki

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*Edited by Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, Italy/UK*