

The 'Single Singers'

Nina Ruckhaber, event manager Humboldtsaal Freiburg/Germany (Reservix) and choir manager of the Jazz Choir Freiburg

The Single Singers are an international project choir, coming together at European a-cappella festivals.

'Whenever I was on my way, on my own, to a-cappella festivals, I had mixed feelings: of course I was greatly looking forward to the concerts and workshops. But what I really wanted was to stand on the stage myself. I wanted to sing – not just to listen!' In 2011 Emily May't Hoen from the Netherlands wasn't on her own with such thoughts and so, in January 2012, on the occasion of the London A Cappella Festival, together with her choir friend Annemarie Homan, she founded the Single Singers.

The idea was to offer festival visitors attending on their own the opportunity for a joint choral appearance within the framework of the festival. The name 'Single Singers' is, of course, first cousin to the legendary Swingle Singers, who actually put on the London A Cappella Festival.

In her day job Emily is the public relations officer of a charity, and Annemarie works as the online-editor of a choral organisation – so the two publicized their idea online, on Facebook and on Twitter. From this start, the concept developed an extraordinary dynamic all of its own. Annemarie Homan reports: '24 enthusiastic singers from all over the world, who wanted to be involved in London, came forward' – and thus the Single Singers were born.

But how does this simple idea work in practice? What is it like to be a Single Singer? How does this international group coordinate itself? At this year's Aarhus Vocal Festival in Denmark (AAVF) I enjoyed, for the second time, the opportunity

to be part of the Single Singers.

The first – albeit virtual – meeting of all Single Singers for Aarhus took place on Facebook, where 30 singers met as a group set up specifically for this purpose. This group offered us participants the opportunity to introduce ourselves and to come to know each other and – most importantly – to look forward together to the project at which we were aiming. Everything was governed by the slogan ‘three songs, two rehearsals, one concert!’ This time, however, Annemarie and Emily had actually selected four challenging choral arrangements.



With 'Ticket to Ride', a Beatles classic in the Swingle Singers' version was on the list. Clare Wheeler, an alto in this group, supported us *in situ* with the rehearsals. 'If you're out there' by R&B singer John Legend was also on the programme, arranged by Merel Martens, founder and director of the Den Haag group Pitch Control and vocal coach of The Junction, winner of this year's AAVF. We also sang 'Bottom' by the Belgian world music troupe Zap Mama – represented at AAVF 2015 with a concert – and 'No one' by the soul singer Alicia Keys, arranged by Morten Kjaer, the versatile vocal coach and long-standing member of Vocal Line.

We received the sheet music and files with which to rehearse, online, so that we could all prepare the pieces at home – something which in light of ‘two rehearsals’ is of course of crucial importance.

It’s a marvellous feeling to know that all over Europe there are the most different people, at this moment in time occupying themselves with the same sheet music, with the same musical material – each one on her/his own but nevertheless already linked to each other as part of a process that is beginning to take shape at many quite different places.

Time went on, the festival approached, and suddenly the moment had arrived: we came together for the first rehearsal of the Single Singers Aarhus 2015, to meet in the flesh and to make music together. The European a-cappella scene is not overwhelmingly large: many of the roughly 750 participants, workshop and concert attendees know each other. You meet again and again at the various festivals on the continent and enjoy being part of the a-cappella family.

The good thing, however, is that one does always also meet new faces – in Aarhus, too. Most of us have, over the last few years, already garnered Single Singers experience at this, that one the other festival, but – at least for me – there were some new encounters in this specific casting. During the first rehearsal it became apparent how well the concept of individual preparation works. All the Single Singers had already mastered the repertoire to such a degree that we could very soon start applying the fine musical polish. As a matter of principle, the Single Singers rehearse without a conductor – that’s part of the original concept. As, however, there are always a few choir directors among the participants, who take over the leadership for certain phases, rehearsing is an intriguing process, oscillating between directed and free work on the pieces.

The project Single Singers unites the singers for the entire

duration of the festival. As opposed to the participants of the many other workshops, we are a fixed group, meeting and working together every day. The joint preparation and the prospect of the final performance welds the 30 individuals together.

The concert itself then takes place within the framework of the final event of the festival, moderated by Jens Johansen, leader of the legendary Danish pop choir Vocal Line. As in all preceding festivals, the appearance of the Single Singers was given prominent positioning, for example as part of the build-up to the Swingle Singers, Vocal Line or Rajaton.

After four festival days spent together, of course it's really emotional to stand on stage as a member of the Single Singers. But even weeks after the festival I still have many positive memories of encounters with people whom otherwise I was unlikely to have met, of songs and arrangements which otherwise I would never have sung, and of many precious moments which would be unthinkable but for the adventure of 'Single Singers'.

Thanks to the internet, the enthusiasm of earlier participants spread fast: Florian Städtler, founder of the Vocal Blog on Acappellazone, described the idea of the Single Singers as '... a wonderful non-commercial "get-on-with-it-and-have-fun" work of art'. Some 480 people have expressed their interest in the Single Singers by joining their Facebook page. To date the project has already managed to establish itself at five European festivals (several times in London and Aarhus, once each in Stockholm, Hamburg and Fossano). The two founders' idea even managed to jump across the big pond to American a-cappella festivals. There, the Single Singers are managed by the American musician Judy Fontana, who this year herself was a guest at the Aarhus Vocal Festival.

Time and again you can spot individual stars of the scene mingle with the Single Singers, like Jens Sadler (ex-Swingle

Singer and member of The Magnets), Tor Martin Antonsen (from the Norwegian group Apes & Babes) or – as this year – Hans Cassa (head of the Dutch group Montezuma's Revenge) and Bill Hare (Grammy-decorated a-cappella producer from the USA). But the whole point of the Single Singers' joint music-making is not the opportunity for the jubilant audience to pay homage to stars, but being included in this very specific festival enthusiasm – whether as an amateur or as a pro.

Annemarie Homan and Emily May't Hoen are the driving forces behind this incredible international project: a collective of individual singers appears at a concert in carefully planned spontaneity – the audience conquers the stage! The firm inclusion of the Single Singers into the most varied festivals is a superb organisational feat. In the spring of 2016, at the London A Cappella Festival, the founders celebrated the Single Singers' fifth birthday.

Meanwhile the idea of the two ladies from the Netherlands has developed into a very special little a-cappella community. Around 40 enthusiastic singers come together for any one festival – some whom have met before several times, others who are new – forming a colourfully mixed international project choir which has already acquired cult status. However, we should not forget that the idea at the bottom of it all is as old as it is simple: making music together makes you happy!

www.thesinglesingers.com



Nina Ruckhaber works in Freiburg (Germany) managing of choirs

and events, and as a publicist. She has been singing in the renowned Jazzchor Freiburg, directed by Bertrand Gröger, since 2010. Nina Ruckhaber is Deputy Chair of the German Association of Young People in Choirs, and she runs the blog "Nina's VoxBox". Email: nina@ninasvoxbox.de