



Singing With Additional Needs



A guideline for
professionals who want to
start a choir specifically
intended for people
confronted with cancer



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1. Introduction

Kanker in Beeld/Singing for your Life has developed this guideline for professionals who want to start a choir for people who are confronted with cancer. This guideline is part of the Dutch contribution to the SWAN project, which is subsidised by the European Union. Norway, Ireland, Italy, Germany and Turkey participate in this project alongside the Netherlands. The project runs from the end of 2023 to the end of 2025.

The contribution by Kanker in Beeld consists of three elements:

- a guideline on starting a choir;
- a European exchange programme for conductors;
- a regional choir day that also includes dance and/or improvisation theatre (in addition to singing). European guests will also take part in this day.

The aim of our participation in the SWAN project is to share with the rest of Europe our knowledge, experience and passion regarding choirs for people who are dealing with cancer.

An impression of a rehearsal of the Singing for your Life choir Haarlemmermeer:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_yEGMv-uZw

Kanker in Beeld

The Kanker in Beeld foundation has existed for over 25 years. Our organisation brings together 28 choirs (Singing for your Life), 6 visual arts studios (Images for your Life), 5 dance groups (Dancing for your Life) and 2 theatre groups (Playing for your Life). The first choir started in 2002. The choirs were brought under the wing of Kanker in Beeld in 2006.

We encourage local and regional projects that introduce people who are confronted with cancer to ways of dealing with the disease through expression, visualisation and imagination. In addition, we function as an advocate of creative expression in case of cancer. As far as we're aware, there is no other organisation like Kanker in Beeld in Europe. Our sincere hope is to be a source of inspiration for initiatives in other EU countries.





2. Input for guideline

This guideline is a practical tool for professionals who want to start a choir for people who are confronted with cancer. These may be patients (or former patients) and their relatives. In developing this guideline, we sent out a questionnaire to all conductors, voice liberators and instrumental accompanists of the choirs.**

A number of them hold a double role and/or are accompanists for multiple choirs.

The questionnaire was drafted and analysed with the help of two conductors. The outcomes were then doublechecked with several conductors. This provided us with good insight into the profile and functioning of our professionals.

We received a response from 24 out of the 28 choirs. As a result, the outcomes of the questionnaire are an accurate reflection of practice.

*** In the rest of this text, we'll refer to 'professionals' for the sake of readability. This term includes conductors, voice liberators and musical accompanists.*



Summer workshop Singing for your Life, 2018



3. Characteristics of the Singing for your Life choirs

We would like to preface this section by saying our choirs are very diverse. This has to do with a number of factors, such as:

- the way the choir is organised, particularly whether it has an active local board;
- the available rehearsal space;
- the budget;
- the wishes of the members, for instance when it comes to repertoire.

The size of the choirs

Sizes vary from <20 to >40 members. Most of the choirs have 20-40 members. Although it is possible for a choir to start with a limited number of members, a choir consisting of at least 15 members is recommended for the sake of continuity. Due to the vulnerability of the members, it regularly happens several of them have to skip a rehearsal, but this size is also recommended for musical, organisational and financial reasons.

The choir members

Membership of a Singing for your Life choir is not subject to any musical conditions. After all, anyone can sing. The only difference with other choirs is that the members are either cancer patients (or former patients) themselves or have a close relationship with a patient (or former patient).

A choir member: "Here I can be vulnerable, here I don't have to pretend I'm bigger and stronger than I feel"

As a professional, it's helpful to know a bit more about the backgrounds of the choir members. Almost all of our professionals are aware of the musical qualities of the choir members. And they also give them the chance to use these musical qualities in the choir, for instance by assigning them a solo, using an arrangement created by them or allowing them to accompany the choir with a musical instrument.

In addition, all professionals are aware of the physical and/or vocal limitations of the choir members. They often have limited energy and/or heavy emotional baggage. But there may also be physical problems, for instance relating to breathing. In other words, choir members can be very vulnerable.

The repertoire

The repertoire is very diverse, ranging from pop, musicals and light, classical and world music to mantras. Practice shows that choir members like to sing a repertoire with a message that aligns with their emotions. In general, the *professionals* determine the repertoire. They are best placed to judge what suits the choir.

What makes a Singing for your Life choir so special?

A conductor: "Singing together and experiencing all of the emotions music evokes are the most important things. Laughing and crying, comforting and supporting each other through the songs we sing together."



A conductor: “Getting together in an informal setting, having room to breathe, enjoying vocal exercises, rhythm and movement, singing a nice repertoire from canons to mantras to other world music, preferably polyphonically.”

Performances

A large number of choirs give external performances on several occasions throughout the year. These may be for family and friends, but also for a wider audience, for example at a hospital. Sometimes, a performance is experienced as strenuous and stressful by choir members. Other choirs take pride in demonstrating how much enjoyment they get out of singing. A performance is also suitable as a PR instrument to recruit members, and as a means of generating extra income. It can also be that a public performance is an obligation imposed by a subsidising body.



Imagination toolkit, an edition of Jan Taal. Photo: Billy-jo Krul

Policy with regard to professionals

Kanker in Beeld attaches importance to good quality and continuity of the choirs. This is why the organisation sets the condition that conductors, voice liberators and instrumental accompanists have professional backgrounds and are adequately compensated for their work. This compensation may seem self-evident, but practice (in the Netherlands) shows that non-medical support of cancer is often financially underappreciated.



4. The profile of the professional

More than half the choirs work with a single professional. This means the latter has to combine several tasks: conducting, working on voice expression/liberation and instrumental accompaniment. This may be a personal choice of the professional, but can also be due to the limited size of the choir or to financial limitations.

A professional that has to carry out all of the work themselves has a hefty workload. This is why it is recommended dividing the artistic tasks amongst at least two professionals.

This makes it easier for them to shoulder the burden that comes with the organisational aspects and with the emotional impact of working with people who are dealing with cancer. Sometimes the conductor is supported by a focus group or an active board, so they can focus exclusively on the artistic side of the choir.

Policy with regard to the format of rehearsals

For Kanker in Beeld, a Singing for your Life choir isn't free of obligations or primarily geared towards having a good time. It requires serious effort. A standard rehearsal is a combination of voice expression/liberation and practising the repertoire. Voice expression/liberation is an essential element. This is about letting your voice be heard – both literally and metaphorically – to give room to your emotions. Singing from the inside out: singing to express what's going on inside of you. The singing aids the process of coming to terms with the disease.

Experience

A Singing for your Life professional generally has an extensive track record, either as a conductor/voice liberator or as an instrumental accompanist: More than half of them have between 20 and 40 years of experience. The rest have between 10 and 20 years.

When it comes to working specifically with a Singing for your Life choir, half of the professionals have less than 10 years of experience. The other half have between 10 and 20 years of specific experience in this area. This gives them the advantage of combining a longstanding artistic experience with general life experience. As a result, they are more aware of the possibilities and limitations the choir members have when it comes to singing. They are more mindful of their vulnerability and make sure every choir member protects their own boundaries.

Training

The musical background/training is very diverse. About half of the professionals trained at a conservatory. In addition, a number of them completed a voice expression or creative therapy training programme, with a specialisation in musical therapy. A significant portion of the professionals completed a different kind of training programme, for example in the field of amateur choir conducting or light music. Furthermore, almost a third of the professionals took a specific further training or retraining course relevant to a Singing for your Life choir, for example in the field of coping with death, meditation or speech level singing, or Pansori Living Sound or Estill Voice Training.



What's striking is that only a small portion of the professionals completed a specific training programme in the field of voice expression/voice liberation. Nonetheless, we believe this to be an essential part of the rehearsals. Converting emotions to sound frees up space. This is why voice expression/liberation is a valuable element for people who frequently struggle with their emotions when it comes to cancer. Voice expression can definitely be a healing force. Fear of the unknown may cause resistance amongst the choir members, so this can pose a challenge to professionals and members alike. It's often best not to talk about it too much, but to look for ways to integrate voice expression/liberation into the rehearsal.

Musical methodology

The majority of the professionals don't use a particular musical methodology. For those that do, it turns out this makes a positive contribution to the choir's development. This is why it's important for professionals to exchange their experiences, for example at an annual convention.

Preparation

It's remarkable how much time the professionals spend on preparing a rehearsal. This ranges from 30-60 minutes to over 2 hours. Half of the professionals are also involved in organisational matters. This is not preferred, as they are primarily there for the artistic process.



Performance of conductors at the regional choirs gathering in Hoogeveen, 2018. Photo: Martin van de Geest



5. Skills

The professionals affiliated to the Singing for your Life choirs were asked which skills they find important in their functioning. The following ones were indicated as being important (or even crucial) by all of them.

- ability to read music
- good singing skills
- ability to lead the singing
- improvising skills
- musical accompaniment skills
- flexibility in the way the rehearsal is carried out
- ability to connect people
- ability to introduce an element of fun/relaxation
- ability to deal with mourning and loss

To their minds, the most important ones are the ability to lead the singing (a functional aspect) and the ability to connect people and to introduce fun/relaxation.

A professional:

“The choir is a great place where you can sing to your heart’s content, knowing that the person next to you understands what you’ve experienced.”

Another professional:

“A choir where people can forget about their sorrows for a moment and take pleasure in singing together with their peers.”

Group dynamics

Almost all professionals have knowledge and/or experience in the area of group dynamics. In our view, this certainly comes in handy for anyone working with groups, let alone with our choirs. At a Singing for Life choir, you don’t have to talk about cancer but the disease is always there in the background. Sometimes people can’t come to rehearsal for a while because of their illness and/or medical treatment and side effects. Sometimes people are very emotional because they’ve received bad news, for example that the disease has returned. It also happens regularly that choir members pass away. In one way or another, all of those emotions come to the surface when singing. Professionals have to be mindful of this and sensitive in dealing with it at the individual and group levels.



6. Social safety

Social safety is a hot topic in all sectors of society. That's why the professionals were asked if they see it as their task to provide this safety to the **choir members**. They all agree this is an important (or even crucial) aspect of their work. The actions they take in this regard vary greatly.

KEY CONCEPTS

- ensuring an atmosphere of security and relaxation
- instilling trust
- being respectful
- projecting calmness and openness
- being clear and providing structure
- introducing an element of light-heartedness and fun
- refraining from psychologising
- connecting people

Some choirs have regulations detailing how to deal with each other's boundaries. What they do to feel safe **themselves**, is visualised below.

KEY CONCEPTS

- having confidence in what you're doing
- being open about your own wellbeing
- showing your own vulnerability
- indicating your own boundaries
- trusting your intuition
- not allowing someone else's pain to become your pain
- asking for feedback



7. Handling pressure from the choir

Dovetailing with the safety of the professionals, we asked them whether they feel pressure from the choir. Half of them don't experience any pressure, the other half do. This is mainly related to the repertoire, and sometimes to performances. Incidentally, this pressure doesn't have a lot of impact on their positions as professionals, but it does 'as humans'.

EXAMPLES OF HANDLING PRESSURE

- projecting calmness yourself
- introducing light-heartedness and fun
- providing structure
- emphasising that anything goes and nothing is obligatory
- protecting your own boundaries
- giving feedback about what pressure does to you

EXAMPLES OF SUPPORTIVE MEASURES IN HANDLING THAT PRESSURE

- one-to-one conversations with members
- setting clear boundaries when it comes to wishes and expectations for the conductor and indicating the repertoire



Regional choirs gathering in Tilburg, 2023. Photo: Josje Jonker



8. Professional development and exchange

Kanker in Beeld thinks it's important for professionals to exchange the experiences gained in working with their choirs. This can be done by visiting each other's choirs and organising video meetings (with a specific theme if desired). This way, they can learn from one another, inspire one another and safeguard quality together.

Kanker in Beeld supports this process in the following ways:

- Via the Kanker in Beeld intranet site, all professionals affiliated to the foundation can share their repertoires, methodologies and experiences.
- Each year, we organise a convention geared towards bringing together the different creative initiatives. All of the participants work on a joint theme and spend part of the day focusing on specific topics for professionals and boards.

An impression of a convention for professionals associated with Kanker in Beeld:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtrUjC2bOFU>

FIVE TOP TIPS

1. If you're a professional wanting to start a choir, work together with a number of people who take care of the organisational and financial matters. This allows you, as the professional, to focus on the artistic process. If possible, find a colleague so you can divide the artistic tasks amongst yourselves.
2. Use a clear format for the rehearsals. Find ways to incorporate voice expression/liberation into the rehearsals, as an essential element of the process of coming to terms with cancer.
3. Performances, even at a very small scale, contribute to the fun and pride of the choir.
4. Pick a repertoire that aligns with the wishes of the choir members. They tend to appreciate songs with a message that does justice to their emotions.
5. Exchange of experiences gained contributes to the further development of the specific singing genre and is a source of inspiration.



Two impressions of Singing for your Life choir Heerenveen. Photo's: Max van Gelder
Below: Singing for your Life choir Tilburg. Photo: Josje Jonker

This guideline was created in collaboration with the professionals of the Singing for your Life choirs in the Netherlands. The network of these choirs is part of Kanker in Beeld. Special thanks for their input to this guideline goes to conductors Don Henken and Annet Vervoort, and to Thomas Hessels, board member of the Dutch Choral Network. Final editor: Cora Honing, president of Kanker in Beeld Design: Inge Croes (Manifesta idee en ontwerp)