

# Off-Key but In Sync

*Annabelle Gurwitch* can't carry a tune. But that didn't stop her from joining a choral group—for the health perks.

**W**HEN MY son was a toddler, he got out of bed and wandered into a lamp. The cut he received on his foot was small but required stitches. As a pair of nurses worked on him, I began to murmur “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” in an effort to comfort him. That’s when he uttered his first full sentence: “No sing, Mama!”

I love singing! I am that person you’ll see at a red light in full-on “carpool karaoke” all by myself. Until that moment, I thought I had a passably mellifluous voice. My shower rendition of “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” always sounded good to me. Now that my son is

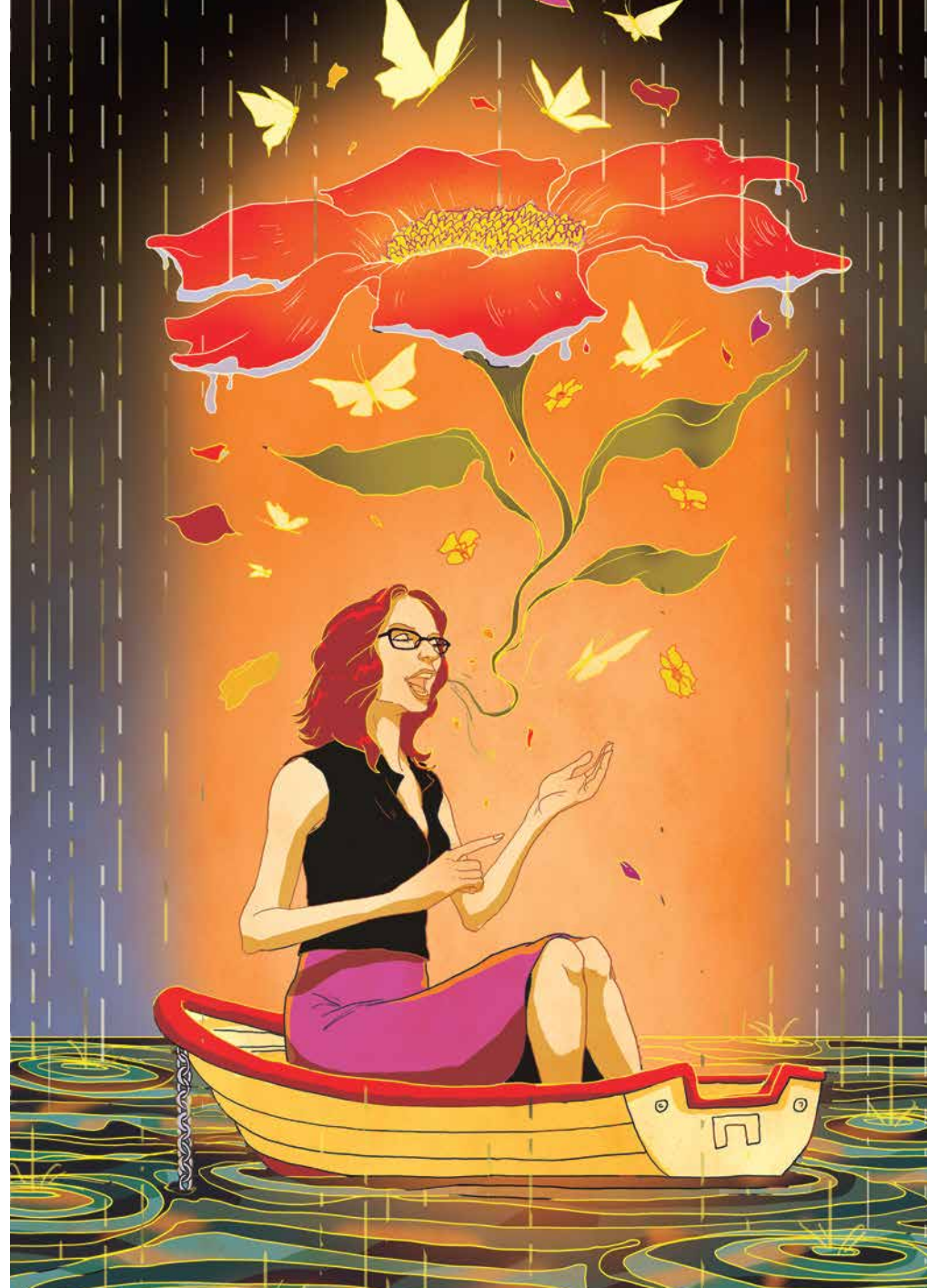
18, his critique has sharpened. Recently, for example, he noted, “If bleating goats and the changing voices of adolescent boys were combined, Mom, they’d sound just like you.”

So I was disappointed when I read a list of activities that may help prevent Alzheimer’s disease. There was Sudoku (numbers aren’t my strong suit) and square dancing (in my zip code, you can learn to make your own cashew nut milk, but square dancing classes are in scant supply). Also on the list? Choral singing. I’d heard that singing boosts cognitive function, but now I learned that choral singing is even better for you. Singing together increases social connectedness and slows and syncs the heart rates of the singers in what’s called synchronous movement, lowering blood pressure and calming the vagus nerve. This, in turn, boosts the immune system and the chance of a longer life.

Given my vocal limitations, I thought I’d be missing out on all that. Then I heard that amateur community choirs (no auditions required!) are springing up all over the country, and I set off to find my musical bliss.

I read about a group of singers on a local Meetup site and arrived on a Tuesday evening. The invitation said

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that the choir sang a wide variety of selections. But as we passed around the sheet music, I saw that the repertoire was more like a wide variety of show tunes—and there are no songs I like less than show tunes. There was also a larger problem: The choir consisted of eight people. My plan was to blend in, but that was impossible since I was the only alto, and none of us were on pitch. We were like eight separate shower singers, each enthusiastically belting out the song, oblivious to one another.

Not to be put off, I tried another group a few days later. When I arrived at the local yoga studio, a crowd of 80 singers had assembled—a promising sign, I thought. Straight out of the gate, the choir director informed us that she'd be teaching a Georgian folk song. *I've got this*, I thought. *I'm an ex-Southerner*. Then it became clear that she wasn't referring to Georgia of the chicken-fried steak but Georgia of the former Soviet Union. This choir, I learned, sings international folk songs—in their native languages. As someone who speaks just one language, I blanched. But then I recalled that learning languages is good for the brain and decided to stick with it.

Our director said that the song lyrics

we were going to learn translated to “I found a horseshoe; please melt it down and make me a spade, and with what's left over, make me a knife.” Not exactly “She walks in beauty, like the night.” But if you're on a farm deep in the Caucasus Mountains, a horseshoe, spade, and knife might indeed be beautiful.

We gamely gathered around our leader, who then sounded out the first line, beginning with the extraordinary combination of consonants “Okro mch'edelo mch'edelo.” When she asked us to repeat it back, several of us froze.



The director asked us to hum along and promised we'd catch on. That axiom “Fake it till you make it”? Unbelievably, it worked. As I learned later, the brain has an easier time learning new languages when you sing them. After an hour and a half, I experienced the heart-stopping pleasure of being surrounded by 79 ecstatic singers in a rousing appreciation of farm implements.

That was 3 years ago. I've

since learned songs in Zulu, Spanish, Portuguese, and Bantu. As our director says, “Reluctant singers can feel their courage rise when surrounded by a supportive group.”

It's true! I've gained confidence in my singing—which isn't always a good thing, as I learned when a young woman named Shelly joined our group. An alto with a sunny attitude, she stood next to me on her first day. As we began to sing, she sounded flat and off-key. I gently leaned into her, hoping to offer guidance, and made that face you make when you're trying to help someone you feel a tiny bit superior to. But Shelly just kept on singing. *Poor Shelly*, I thought. *She doesn't have a clue*. When we took a break, I did what any person who feels superior does: I asked for her help.

“Hey, Shelly,” I said, “I think I might be a bit off. What's that line you're singing?”

Shelly smiled and sang a few notes. Her voice was smooth and steady—pitch perfect, in fact. That's when the full extent of my limitations hit me.

I told Shelly what had happened, and we howled with laughter. And laughter? That just happens to be another wonderfully healthy synchronous behavior. **W**

**“Singing together slows heart rate, lowers blood pressure, and may boost the immune system. Given my vocal limitations, I thought I'd be missing out on all that.”**