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Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival features pop-up concerts that welcome spring with singers of all stripes

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The city's seasonal pink canopy is the inspiration for a monthlong event with music at its heart.

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Like a lot of springtime arrivals to Vancouver, Kathryn Nicholson was not only impressed by our city’s vernal beauty, but somewhat overwhelmed.

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“I arrived ahead of my husband, looking for a place to live, and it was right in the spring when the azaleas, the rhodos, and the cherry trees were all in bloom,” she tells the *Georgia Straight* from wintry Burlington, Ontario, where she’s visiting her new grandson. “I remember walking down one of those streets in East Vancouver where they have that canopy of cherry trees. You just walk under this archway of pink, and the blossoms are all creating this fantastical pink world as you walk through it. It was just brilliant—and it was different, because we didn’t have those kinds of cherry trees where I grew up.”

Later on, she continues, “My uncle was driving me around, and an odd sort of comment came into my mind: it was ‘Vancouver! Cover yourself!’ The city was like a woman wearing too much jewellery, and I was just like, ‘Whoa! This is just too much!’ ”

These days, though, Nicholson has grown accustomed to the Lower Mainland’s seasonal shades, and rather than cover our spring blooms she’s about to celebrate them, as the point person for the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival’s Vancouver Sings One Song series of pop-up concerts. The director of the Sound Eclectic choir and her core group of singers will host an open rehearsal and vocal workshop at Christ Church Cathedral at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday (April 3); several hundred singers are expected to attend, with the first 400 receiving a free VSOS T-shirt. After that, they’ll disperse through the city, leading public sing-alongs at the Cherry Jam Downtown Concert (at Burrard Station next Thursday [April 5]) and Sakura Days Japan Fair (at the VanDusen Botanical Garden on April 14 and 15). Singers of any ability—or even none at all—are welcome to take part in all four events.

“Everybody can sing,” Nicholson stresses. “Not everybody can play a guitar or play the piano if they haven’t had the chance to learn that, but everybody can sing—even though, often, they’re told that they can’t keep a tune. So the invitation is ‘Wear your T-shirt and come on up to the front, or stand up where you are, and we’ll sing all these lovely songs together.’ ”



It’s fitting that Kathryn Nicholson is a choral director with the Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival, given how taken she was by the city’s springtime flowering during her first few days here.

The Vancouver Sings One Song repertoire, she adds, is a little larger than a single ditty. Participants will actually learn four: Japan’s traditional cherry-blossom-viewing anthem “Sakura, Sakura”; the Navajo chant “Now I Walk in Beauty”; Ludwig van Beethoven’s anthemic “Ode to Joy”; and a new number written for the occasion by local musicians Tom Landa and Robin Layne, “Cherry Blossoms for You and Me”. None will tax even amateur singers, and sheet music for all four can be downloaded from the VCBF website.

It's no coincidence that the chosen songs reflect Vancouver's cultural diversity, representing as they do Asian, European, First Nations, and Latin strains.

"I believe that singing is an extraordinary way for people to connect with one another," says Nicholson, who has firsthand experience with music's power to heal: she's trained as both a nurse and a music therapist, and currently works as a clinical counsellor with the Vancouver Hospice Society. "One's voice is a very intimate expression of who we are. So when one does have the opportunity to sing, and to sing in harmony and in the company of other people, it's not just beneficial to one's health, it *feels good*. You feel a sense of belonging and participation, and it's very joyful.

"If you read some of the studies on music therapy," she adds, "they'll say that when you sing with other people or make music with other people, sometimes your heartbeats begin to be in rhythm with one another." And at a time when so many forces are working to divide us into warring camps, even within our own blossom-bedecked city, who wouldn't want some of that?

The Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival takes place at various Vancouver locations from Tuesday (April 3) to April 29. For a full schedule, visit the festival's [website](#).

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