

# FOR THE LOVE OF MUSIC

BY MONA LEE

At a weeknight choral practice, Ieva Wool is the embodiment of fun and enthusiasm. Her energy is contagious. Her Simple Gifts Choir singers are tired after a long day at work, yet they show up for practice, smiling and ready to sing. "One of the things I really love about my work is that I can be silly and zany and nobody ever tries to tame or tone me down," says the choir conductor and voice instructor. "The more fun I have, the more fun the singers have. The joy of singing is one of the best things there is."

With pianist Elaine Joe at her side, Ieva leads her singers in a vocal and physical warm-up to prepare their voices and relax their bodies for the two-hour practice ahead of them. The singers, ranging from age 20-something onwards, are there for Ieva's tutelage, the mutual love of singing, and camaraderie.

"I think we singers have long known that singing is good for us," Ieva says. "We can set aside our cares and become completely engrossed in the music. Singing generates endorphins, puts a big smile on our faces, and helps to keep us young and healthy. Scientists have been catching on in the last few years, and there are many studies published about the benefits of music."

Ieva (pronounced ee-eh-va) was born in a German refugee camp just after the Second World War. Her father immigrated alone to Canada and worked hard for an Ontario mining company to buy passage for his family. Six months later, one year-old Ieva, her older sister and mother reunited with him.

"Those six months apart were very difficult on us – all of Germany was hungry and the refugees even more so," she says. "When we finally got on the ship, I almost died from dysentery. We

lived in northern Ontario for a couple of years and there were a couple of other Latvian families that my parents befriended. My mom had studied English at school, so she was able to make her way around the community a bit more easily than my dad, who had to learn the language from scratch."



Choir Conductor and Voice Instructor Ieva Wool.

Her mother, a singer, wanted Ieva to take voice lessons, but Ieva followed in her older sister's footsteps and played piano. From a young age, she loved classical music. Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and Debussy were her favourites until her sister introduced her to the Beatles, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and other 1960s pop singers. "I discovered jazz and musical theatre when I was a teenager," she says. "I didn't start liking opera and classical voice until I was well into my 30s."

Ieva taught piano in her 20s, but discovered she wasn't very good at it. She explored careers as a Gestalt therapist and bookstore owner. She worked in computer inventory and production

control, and group process facilitation for an international development organization. Through her travels, Ieva lived in the United States, Italy and Vancouver. Nearly 20 years passed before she returned to music. She began singing with a trio for fun, which she describes as one the best experiences of her life.

"When I realized that I wanted to conduct and do music as my work, it was an amazing revelation to me," says Ieva. "People who knew me at the time thought, 'well of course,' but I hadn't realized I could do this."

In 1993, she started volunteer-conducting Vancouver's High Spirits Choir. "It took everything I had and then some," she says. "I fell in love with conducting, went to workshops and training sessions for conductors whenever I could, and started my own vocal training."

Ieva liked it so much she decided to start her business, Gotta Sing, in 1998. She had help from a government-sponsored self-employment program and

received the "Be Your Own Boss" Entrepreneur of the Year award in 1999. She is grateful for the assistance in finding her true calling in the music business.

Ieva believes all of her careers contributed to her current role as a choir conductor and voice instructor. She gained communication and organizational skills and experience in bookkeeping and financial planning. "I was a single mom when I started my music business, so it was very important to be grounded with money, and to provide for myself and my daughter. Working with groups, organizing activities and events, helping people work hard, and keeping them happily engaged – all of this is very useful as a conductor."

Most of Ieva's singers come from referrals, her website, [www.gottasing.ca](http://www.gottasing.ca), and Craigslist postings. To join the High Spirits Choir, singers need choral experience and must be interviewed before they try out for choir. When Ieva grew more skilled as a conductor, she started the Simple Gifts Choir and Afternoon Delight Choir. As long as they can sing, anyone is welcome to join either choir. No audition or experience is required. People sometimes see Ieva for a private assessment, if they are not sure they can sing in tune.

Louise Walsh discovered Simple Gifts Choir online and has been a member since February 2011. She enjoys the choral experience, the great group of people, and mixture of songs; some are demanding, others are fairly easy to learn.

"I really love Ieva," she says. "I think she is the perfect mix of professionalism and fun! The Simple Gifts Choir fit my criteria of being in my neighbourhood and not requiring auditions (way too daunting for me)."

Chris Oikawa attended one of Ieva's Christmas Sing-along concerts to see a friend perform. He points out that singing was out of his comfort zone, but he was so impressed by Ieva's skills in leading the choir and teaching the audience, that he registered for her "Find Your Voice" class in 2009. Chris joined the Simple Gifts Choir in 2010 and has enjoyed the variety of songs he has learned so far. The repertoire includes folk, swing, gospel, classical, love songs, and Broadway show tunes.

"I'd highly recommend the choir to anyone who enjoys singing or is thinking about trying to sing but never had the venue or comfort to do it," says Chris. "Ieva gives lots of great pointers on singing and music in general. It's quite an experience hearing the different voice sections singing their parts and blending together into a great single song."

The Christmas Sing-along concerts take place on December 13 and 14 this year and the Winter Concerts are sched-

uled for January 2012. Net proceeds from tickets go to the She-way Drop-in Centre (a pregnancy outreach program for women and children) and the Lookout Homeless Shelter. Ieva explains the significance of the two charities that her choirs support.

"One of our singers was a public health nurse in [Vancouver's] Downtown East Side," she says. "I asked her which were the most effective organizations helping people there. She highly recommended both She-Way and the Lookout Shelter, and we've had singers who volunteer or work at both organizations. It feels good to be able to give back to the community, to help the poorest of the poor in Vancouver, and to help babies get a better start in life."

Her choirs also sing at several hospitals and nursing homes.



If a choir member has a loved one in a retirement home, Ieva arranges to perform there. "It's fun to sing for someone you know, and makes it more personal for the singers and the audience," she says.

How does Ieva manage three choirs and private singing lessons? "I'm freakishly organized with all of my choir materials, and I have good helpers," says Ieva. "My private teaching schedule is pretty much full, and I keep a limit on the number of students I have."

In her free time, Ieva enjoys dancing and good food with friends, reading mysteries and going to the Saturday morning Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. She counts the blessings in her professional and personal lives.

"I'm one of the lucky ones," she says. "I get to work with people who are all doing something they really want, and enjoying themselves. I have two great kids that I get along with and my three grandkids are a lovely bonus!"

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To learn more about the concerts or Ieva's choirs, visit [www.gottasing.ca](http://www.gottasing.ca)