

Unlocking the music within

Ever wanted to sing or play? Meet someone who can help free your spirit, **Sally Pryor** writes

Have you ever been told that you have no ear for music? That you're tone-deaf and simply shouldn't sing out loud, ever?

American pianist and educator Jessica Roemischer, for one, thinks you should give it another go. In fact, she's adamant that music is the key to liberating the human spirit.

If that sounds a bit new-agey, consider the sheer joy many people feel at singing in the shower, especially when they know they're alone and nobody's listening.

Roemischer will be putting her theory to the test in Canberra this week, at an event at Manning Clark House tomorrow.

She recounts how she arrived in Australia in 1983, shortly after graduating from Princeton University. She ended up staying for six years, lecturing at schools and colleges across Melbourne, including as an artist-in-residence at Presbyterian Ladies College.

"I had studied piano since I was about six. Music has been such an intrinsic part of my life that it seemed like a natural thing to begin to teach when I was here and when I started to venture out on my own after college," she says.

It was during this time that she hit on the idea of getting her students to play improvised duets with her, to help them open up and become more confident.

"I would sit on the piano bench and have the person sit next to me, and I would begin to create a lovely kind of background, and at a certain point ask them to begin to improvise, usually just on the white keys. They didn't have to have any background at all, or any prior musical experience, nothing," she says.

"And what began to come out, I realised, in every single case, no matter the age of the person, male or female... was something of really quite unique beauty and freedom, and people began to experience their creativity in a way that was striking both to them and to me."

More than 20 years later, she is back in the country and in the process of reconnecting with some of these students. She says she is seeing for the first time how eclectic a group of students they were, right from the start.

But what about people who simply have no ear for music? Roemischer says many adults have grown up believing they can't sing or play a melody, and have never given themselves the chance to find out whether this is the case.

While some of her first students, and many of her current students, have strong musical backgrounds, many more have never played an instrument in their entire life.

"A lot of people, even when they've studied music, were told, 'you're not that talented', or 'you should try something else'. People are told all sorts of things that lead



Jessica Roemischer believes everyone has music inside them.



them to the conclusion that they may as well just go do something else, that music isn't necessarily for them."

But she says her method, which has been tried and tested on hundreds of people, including many with disabilities, proves music can be for anyone. Three years ago, she began working at Riverbrook Residence for Women in the United States, a small residence for 23 women with a range of disabilities, including Down's Syndrome, cerebral palsy and blindness.

It was the first time she had ever worked in this sector, and she found it a revelation.

"It actually is the reason that I can speak with you now with the kind of certainty that I have about music and about our human ability to express music, because whatever the challenge or issue was with my students there, whether physical or cognitive a disability, every single one of the women with whom I work is entirely able to express herself at the piano."

And it's not just physical disabilities that could benefit from

her technique. Although Roemischer maintains she has no particular background or expertise in music as therapy, others who do have already started to cotton on to the benefits of what she's doing.

She has already worked with at least one psychiatrist, albeit one with a musical bent, who has replaced the traditional couch in her office with a keyboard, and has started doing improvised duets with patients.

The technique is transferable, she says, between instruments and settings, and can be applied for different reasons.

But for the moment, she's all about simply unlocking the creativity of as many people as possible.

At Manning Clark House this week, she plans to ask volunteers to join her at the piano for one of her improvised duets, at least one of whom should have no musical background.

"What they'll see is that there's something deeper," she says.

There is something about being seated beside someone that seems to give many people a sense of confidence they don't get in other endeavours – a rare sensation of being completely supported. The improvisation aspect is also

important in this respect, because it means those with no musical knowledge feel less at sea. Roemischer maintains that the opposite is often the case for a person who is classically trained.

"It's amazing how few people who do have musical background and can read music ever feel that they could actually create the music," she says.

The thing is, it would be difficult to find someone, anyone, anywhere, who didn't like music. It's not the same as sport, or smoking; everyone likes music in some form or another. This, she says, is the key to her success as a teacher.

"I can always count on

someone having a connection to music no matter how different their background might be from mine, or where they've come from or who they are."

Jessica Roemischer will be at Manning Clark House on Thursday July 22, from 5.30pm, where she will play original interpretations of popular melodies, discuss the transformative power of music and invite audience members to "encounter" their own creative musical abilities – experience or not. Tickets \$10/\$15. Bookings: 6295 1808.

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CREATION (PG)
Wed 9:50, 2:30, 4:50, 7:10, 9:30PM

ANIMAL KINGDOM (MA15+)
Wed 12:05, 3:45, 9:20PM

THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO (MA15+) Wed 3:20PM

TOY STORY 3 (G)
Wed 9:40, 12:00, 2:20, 4:40, 7:00PM

KARATE KID (PG)
Wed 9:50, 12:50, 6:20, 9:10PM

SHREK FOREVER AFTER (PG) Wed 10:00AM

MOTHER AND CHILD (MA15+)
Wed 10:10, 12:45, 6:30PM

MILENGE MILENGE (PG) Wed 9:00PM

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