In the cafeteria of the Pius-Hospital Oldenburg, singers are sitting around the piano. The choir and chapel master Michael Wintering starts the warm-up exercises. Prolonged vowel holding and hissing sounds fill the room. The only unusual thing about this choir is that many of its members suffer from chronic or irreversible lung diseases.

Dr. Gunter Kreutz, a professor for Systematic Musicology at the University of Oldenburg, is sitting in on the choir practice. He started the choir together with Dr. Regina Prenzel, director of the Clinic for Internal Medicine, Pneumology and Gastroenterology. “Chorpidus – community singing for people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and other lung problems” is the title of this unusual project.

“In Germany alone, over five million people suffer from COPD,” Kreutz explains. “It is very widespread.” Singing helps preserve health, according to new research. “Singing activates patients’ breathing. The voice, breathing and relaxation exercises used in choir practice open the lungs and help maintain their capacity.” At the same time singers improve their posture and strengthen the musculoskeletal system. “We want to use Chorpidus to research these factors and observe how singing contributes to wellbeing.”

Kreutz is in his element. For more than fifteen years he has been researching the effects that listening to music, singing, dancing and playing music can have on body, mind and soul. A wide field of research which became the focus of his interest only as his scientific career progressed. Kreutz studied musicology first in Marburg and later in Berlin. He followed the classic approach of starting with historical musicology. “People always think of musicology in relation to the work of art. You have a composer who produces music – and musicology is dedicated to this art form and the artefacts it produces. And there’s nothing wrong with that,” Kreutz says.

“Singing makes us more resilient,” he says, smiling. “Are the notes arbitrar- ily long or short, is playing loudly or quietly a reflected decision?” Following on from research performance, for his postdoctoral qualification Kreutz examined emotions and their expression. “Particularly in the field of music, right into the 2000s emotions were not given the attention they deserve – or the research.”

He began asking choir members about their moods and analysing the different emotions that pieces of music trigger in the listener – also using magnetic resonance imaging and EEG. Eventually he discovered that what he really wanted to work on was wellbeing and health. “Society is gradually gearing up for serious changes in demographic structure. And cultural techniques like singing and dancing play an enormously important role here,” the researcher says.

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“Music and dance are a unique resource that can help people to better manage their everyday lives or particular life situations. But these things take time. There’s no such thing as a quick fix. Project cultures that do not provide long-term financing for interventions destroy potential instead of utilising it consistently. The cutbacks on music lessons in schools do nothing less than rob entire generations of potential quality of life,” Kreutz asserts.

Choir singing in particular has huge potential in the musicologist’s eyes – which is why he also published a book this year, “Why Singing Makes You Happy”, an overview of scientific research for singers and above all potential singers. “What is the best way to stay healthy? Social contacts, positive emotions and movements!” Singing in a choir is good for all three, he says. “It seems that singing makes us more resilient. It can replenish our reserves of positive energy. And to that end I will gladly use my research to lobby for singing.” (dk)