

If you can speak, you can sing

Susie Kelly

Simonds College is building a strong culture of music among its 435 students.

The school has found it was a challenging task convincing boys who have had little exposure to music to attend regular rehearsals and to move out of their comfort zone. However, great progress has been made.

Teenage boys often struggle with singing in their high school years. They tend to see it as something that's not cool or manly. To make matters worse, they are at the same time experiencing huge changes in their voices.

Last year, a small choir was established and began to meet weekly. Just months later, our students had the amazing opportunity to sing at the Hamer Hall as part of a massed choir



Stephen Taberner leads the young blokes at his 'Sing Like a Bloke' workshop. Photograph: Susie Kelly

from Melbourne boys schools in the Associated Catholic Colleges' ACCent on Music concert.

Even then, the school's music teachers were concerned that it was still only a small minority of students making music. As a result, they applied for a grant through our cleaning contractors, Danihers, who generously funded 'Sing Like A Bloke' workshops for every year 7 to 9 student.

In March this year, 40 boys were sitting in the newly renovated music room, looking very nervous. Then an energetic New Zealander in a peaked cap bounced into the room and immediately grabbed their

attention by starting a clapping game. Soon, they were all clapping along.

The Kiwi, Stephen Taberner is a vocal guru and leader of the Spooky Men's Chorale. He told the surprised boys, "If you can speak, you can sing." Rather than beginning with scales, a song or even vocal warm up, Stephen started with rhythm – the basis of all music.

He proved an instant hit. "We began by just playing games and copying silly accents, shouting responses at different pitches, and basically copying everything Mr Taberner did. Suddenly we were singing," says Matteo Encena,

junior music captain.

By the end of that first session, each group had experienced singing in several parts. They also sang a South African song, 'Shosholozá', which has become a big hit in Simonds' crowded corridors.

Nhial Michael, a drummer and year 8 student, recalls watching a Youtube video of Stephen's group, The Spooky Men's Chorale. "They were wearing funny Viking hats and singing 'Dancing Queen' by Abba as if it was a Swedish folk song. They had really good singing voices and it was pretty inspiring."

Stephen has passed on his

wisdom, wit and musicality to more than 200 students. They have learnt that whenever they speak, they are actually singing, as they have learnt to copy pitch since they were babies. They learnt how puberty changes the male voice, and a series of fun activities ensured their confidence soared.

Some boys have recently formed a group called 'Rebel Clefs' and it has sung various popular songs chosen by students. After all, a teenage boy who sings has to be a bit of a rebel!

Susie Kelly is music convenor at Simonds College.