

# Finding your voice on the Riviera

BY AUDREY STUART



*From classical music to jazz, barbershop, gospel and pop, any keen singers wanting to join a choir on the Riviera should find it easy to choose the right group for them and share their love of music.*

MOST French villages in our region have their own local choir and larger towns such as Grasse boast more than one to choose from.

But if you've just arrived or nervous your French isn't good enough to join a choir just yet, there is a great selection of English-speaking choirs who will make you feel welcome.

The Riviera International Singers (RIS; [riviera-international-singers.com](http://riviera-international-singers.com)) choir features first as they are the longest-running English choir in the region after being set-up 27 years ago by Beryl Arnould in the front room of her home.

Today, the thirty-so members are

still singing sweetly, though they now rehearse in more spacious surroundings in Mougins School on Thursday evenings in term-time from 20h-22h, followed by refreshments and chats!

The choir's repertoire covers a wide variety of music styles from classical to jazz and popular to gospel, and the singers give well-attended concerts twice a year at Christmas and in the summer, with part of the proceeds going to local charities.

With a Dutch President, Astrid Najar, a German choir director and six different nationalities singing in the choir from Sweden, UK, France, Holland and USA, the RIS embodies its international image.

Najar is keen to recruit new members who have team spirit and a musical ear: "Being able to read music is not an obligation though it is a big advantage as the choir's repertoire is mostly in English," she noted.

One French RIS member said her singing, as well as her English, improved hugely after joining the choir. And another explained: "I sing with the choir because I'm always discovering new songs from different eras, from classical to jazz that I couldn't have found by myself."

Like all the choirs featured here, the RIS sing in the four-voice harmony parts of soprano, alto, tenor and bass. So most choir directors provide MP3 tracks of the different voice parts of the songs their singers are working on to help them learn their music.

And all the choirs bar one – Big Blaze Chorus – ask new members to take a short voice test after they've sung with the choir for a few weeks though choir directors



The Riviera International Singers have been crooning the classics, as well as jazz and popular music, for 27 years.

stressed this is more to ensure they are singing with the voice group that's best for them.

Big Blaze Chorus ([bigblazechorus.com](http://bigblazechorus.com)) is also the newest amateur choir on the local scene.

Set-up by Lizzy Parks just over a year ago, it now has 25 international singers who rehearse during term-time on Tuesday evenings from 20h-21h30 at the bilingual Montessori School "Les Colibris" in Sophia Antipolis.

Lizzy, a recording artist in England before she moved to France said, "I saw there was a need for a really easy, non-professional, non-pressured environment where normal people who have busy weeks could enjoy making music and doing something creative."

"We perform mostly original tailor-made arrangements by myself of popular music from the 60s onwards from a diverse range of artists from the Beach Boys to Frank Sinatra and One Direction!" Lizzy pointed out, adding that the main emphasis is about being enthusiastic, social and having fun.

Putting the "F" into fun and the social side is important for Big Blaze members. One singer commented: "It's what I perceive a choir should be. It's got to be fun with a bit of seriousness and more than just learning songs," noting that many of members meet up in a nearby English-style pub after the choir.

Other well-established English-speaking choirs in the 06 include Harmonie Toot Sweet ([facebook.com/harmonietootsweet](http://facebook.com/harmonietootsweet)), who rehearse in Chateaufort de Grasse on Mondays from 20h30-22h30.

Led by Gideon Levingston, the speciality of this 25-to-30-strong choir (pictured opposite page) is singing American close vocal harmony barbershop-style songs dressed in their striking traditional outfits of striped waistcoats and straw boater hats.

Although the choir's members are predominantly French at the moment they sing in English as well as including some Italian numbers.

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New kids on the block Big Blaze Chorus perform mostly original arrangements by founder Lizzy Parks.

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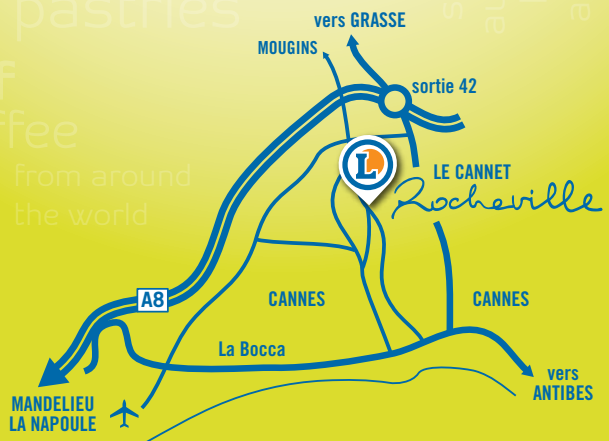
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**TWO CHOIRS, ONE BATON:** Under the direction of Errol Girdlesotne, the Ensemble Vocal Syrinx performs classical and contemporary music while the Ristretto Choir and Orchestra (below right) perform a variety of challenging works. **BELOW:** The Sagesse Gospel Singers started six years ago and well-known British vocal coach, Mark De-Lisser, who works with the hit BBC programme, “The Voice” leads their very popular weekend master classes.

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“I’ve also introduced a little bit more jazz and a little bit of light classical,” Levingston expressed.

“Anyone wanting to try out for Harmonie Toot Sweet doesn’t have to read music but they must learn the music off by heart as that makes a big impact on the stage,” he stressed.

On a different note, residents looking to combine spirituality with music might consider joining The Sagesse Gospel Singers ([facebook.com/SagesseGospelSingers](https://www.facebook.com/SagesseGospelSingers)).

Started six years ago by English-born Shirley de Jonk, the choir now has between 50 and 80 members who practise on Tuesdays from 18h30-20h at the Eglise St Paul de Nations in Sophia Antipolis and sings predominantly in English.

She has also brought over to France well-known British vocal coach, Mark De-Lisser, who works with the hit BBC programme, “The Voice”, to lead very popular weekend master classes.

Shirley emphasised that her choir is open to anyone who wants to engage for a year and experience singing Gospel in a Christian context: “We propose, without any obligation, a journey for people to take towards God through Gospel music that can transform daily life.”

One choir member commented that: “Having sung in choirs as a child into early

adulthood, I missed singing. Five years on, the choir has become a living, faith-based community which provides laughter and support that goes far beyond simple singing.”

On a different note, the Ensemble Vocal Syrinx (EVS; [ensemblevocalsyrinx.com](http://ensemblevocalsyrinx.com)) has been entertaining audiences with top-level interpretations of both classical and contemporary music, since Errol Girdlestone started the choir in 1992.

Most recently, the 40-strong ensemble, comprising a number of different nationalities, has been singing a lot of sacred music though its repertoire includes many jazz pieces, some folk music and, of course, classical music.

“The Ensemble is made up mostly of people with a strong musical background. All read music and many have studied music professionally or semi-professionally, in the past,” Syrinx President, David Melville, mentioned, adding that “this enables us to put together concerts with professional orchestral accompaniment and maintain the high quality of performance our public has become used to over the years.”

“What I really like about singing with the EVS is their professionalism and the effort that everyone in the choir puts in to



getting it right. I also love singing with an orchestral accompaniment, which we do about once or twice a year and is really an amazing experience,” asserted Melville.

He said the choir is always looking for new members who can read music as they need to learn the music relatively quickly and, like most choirs, he mentioned, “We are looking for men to join our ranks ... especially tenors!”

Lastly, but certainly not least, an exciting new musical ensemble and summer school for serious amateur and professional musicians has been set up under the aegis of well-respected local musician Errol Girdlestone.

The Ristretto Choir and Orchestra ([ristrettovoices.com](http://ristrettovoices.com)), formed in 2009, has a pool of some 30 top amateur and professional British and French singers and instrumentalists to choose from and works in a more intense way on a variety of challenging works.

Ristretto’s Kate Cobb explained, “We are very, very different because we don’t rehearse on a regular night every week. We rehearse once we’ve got a concert. It’s really a chamber choir, which means it is small and works in a more intense way on different pieces.”

Ristretto, along with many of the local choirs featured here, can be hired to play and sing at special events such as weddings.

“We are definitely for hire, as we aren’t funded,” Kate Cobb stressed, adding: “What is nice about this area is that there seems to be a choir for about every level of voice.” ■

