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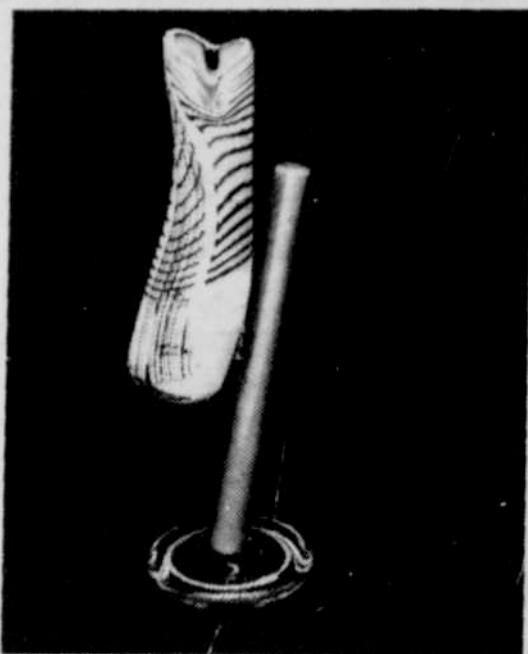
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Covering all the bases

*Finding material that is simultaneously challenging,
entertaining and original is no mean feat, in spite of the
veritable plethora of Christmas music.*

BY DR. TANTALUS

That venerable institution, the Portland Gay Men's Chorus, provided yet another evening of song with "Strike the Harp and Join the Chorus." Performing not one, but two, complete concerts to near capacity crowds at the Intermediate Theatre, the Chorus received a deservedly warm ovation from both audiences.

Such seasonal offerings must present a challenge for conductor David York (beginning his seventh season) and the Chorus's musical

Music

committee. While other occasions allow the Chorus to be somewhat selective in setting the tone and style for their performance, a December concert crowd seems to arrive with more fixed expectations about the music that lies ahead. The concept of "Christmas music" must sometimes seem as confining as a "straight" jacket in such circumstances.

An additional problem is that the season provokes outpourings from every ensemble, chorus, and duo that ever raised a glass of grog. Finding material that is simultaneously challenging, entertaining and original is no mean feat, in spite of the veritable plethora of Christmas music. When the audience broke into harmony during the sing-along portion of the program it was, as Yogi Berra used to say, like déjà vu all over again.

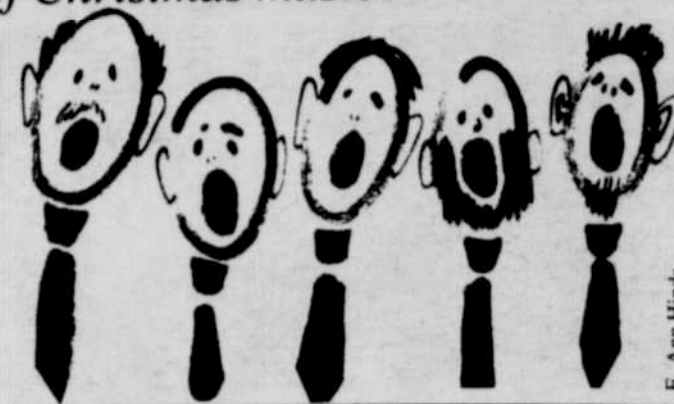
In the past, the Chorus has had occasion to employ many different tactics in its assault on this annual dilemma. Nurse Consuelo is still laughing about the novel use of beach balls, two years ago, during the Hawaiian Christmas number of "Meli Kalikimaka."

In an attempt to cover all the bases — something Yogi would be proud of — the Chorus provided a diverse range of musical offerings. As might be expected, the longer, more complex portion of the program came before intermission, while the more popular tunes were reserved for later. As a result, the Chorus's musicality was more clearly revealed by the first portion of the performance.

In general, the Chorus performed admirably throughout the opening section of their program. With 67 members onstage, the Chorus appeared to be at somewhat greater strength than last year, which is a benefit in a theater that at times can seem acoustically dead.

"Wassail!" was solid throughout and "Carol of the Birds" opened nicely. Pitch problems surfaced near the beginning of the four Hanukkah songs, but the cohesion that followed in "Chana Kah Has Come Again" — with the piano pursuing a quite different accompaniment — was solidly impressive.

The choral highlight of the evening was "My Gift" by John Chorbajian. With controlled emotion and dynamics, the Chorus allowed the song to expand while the narrator, in spite of poverty, seeks to give the perfect gift to his true love. When the Chorus reached the song's climactic moment — the narrator deciding to "give him my heart" — the Chorus achieved a



E. Ann Hinds

delightful combination of music, emotion and drama.

One device designed to provide unity to the program was the harp playing of J. Scott Grimes. Employed in a trio of nativity carols however, the harp was sometimes lost in the sound of the Chorus and when found, it was somewhat superfluous.

The harp sounded somewhat better when Grimes performed a solo of the first movement of Handel's "Concerto in B-flat for Harp" Op. 4, no. 6. Grimes indicated that this piece was for those who thought that there was not enough classical music in the program and that "you know who you are." Indeed we did. The difficult fingering went very well generally, although Grimes's overall style is somewhat florid.

Following the Handel were two throw-away pieces: variations on "Greensleeves," and yet, another medley of Christmas carols. The Doctor hopes that concertgoers did not take Grimes's remark that "Greensleeves" was "as old as the harp" too seriously, since the latter can be traced back to the 13th century B.C. in Thebes.

As noted, the second half of the concert was intended to reflect more popular songs of the season. A new small ensemble, Cascade, opened with "Jingle Bells" and "Jingle Bell Rock," which were done with good cheer but could have used somewhat more invigoration.

A medley of "Santa" songs provided the comic relief while "Baby, It's Cold Outside" and "White Christmas" were nicely done.

Not to be forgotten, however, was the interpretation provided by Kevin Gallagher, justifiably credited in the program as "Sign Language Artist." Gallagher's presence was strong, intense and compelling. Moreover, his signing must have been readily understood by every member of the audience, whether versed in sign language or not. His performance was, by far, the evening's most charismatic stage presence. The spontaneous burst of applause Gallagher received at the conclusion of the evening's performance was well deserved.

Two minor points deserve attention. First, the Chorus seemed to do a great deal of shuffling about as it reconfigured for various songs. Second, the occasional Chorus member — the Doctor remembers one in particular — who appeared to spend more time looking at the audience than at conductor York. Audiences do not look at groups, they look at individuals within the group. Unfortunately, this member proved to distract the audience from the fine work performed by the rest of the chorus.

The encore, a parody of "The Twelve Days of Christmas," was a popular and fitting conclusion to the performance.

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