

David York: musician

By our choosing music that is reflective of the choral art, it's granted a listening by a body of people who might otherwise not be prone to support gay rights as such

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

David York hops around the front of the room like a staccato quarter-note in a jazz riff. He leans toward the 19 singers, rocking a little on the balls of his feet. His hands mold the sound, nursing a little more volume from the baritones, hushing the voices with the flick of a flattened palm. Lean, boyish, he coaxes the music out with his whole body.

Profile

"Now listen up because this gets tricky," he says. "When there's a three-part men's division, you three sing the top part; you three sing the middle part; you two will be singing the bass part. . . Is anybody unclear about what part you sing in a one-part, two-part, or three-part division? Okay. In English, from the beginning . . ."

A few measures into the piece, the choir falters; a chord curdles like sour milk. "Okay, I'll help you," York says, and scurries behind the piano, walking the singers note by note through a difficult passage.

York, conductor of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus for seven years, guides this smaller, mixed group, the Concord Choir, with precision and humor, alternately shushing these adults like a grade-school teacher, prodding them like a soccer coach, teasing them along like a playground buddy.

"I dare you to read some of the dynamics; I double-dare you to read some of the dynamics," he says, and the singers rise to his good-natured challenge, their voices swelling in crescendo.

York smiles; his hands dice the air. This music is his work, his play, his home.

I think most musicians and artists really live, eat, drink and breathe their craft. They don't choose it, really; it just sort of chooses them. And they can ignore it for as long as they want to ignore it, and then it eventually finds its way to expression. In my case, I just chose it from the onset. I remember being in high school, making the decision that, you know, if it got as bad as putting my piano in the back of a pick-up truck and playing at Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, I will eat as a musician. I've always done it. There's always been a piano in my house; I've sung in church forever, seemingly.

"What do I learn from music? That's a very interesting question. That's a very curious question, and the way I hear it, it would be like asking, 'What do we learn from drinking or eating or doing what we do, from breathing?' I can't imagine *not* doing music. I just really can't. I almost have to say it's a meaningless question to me, because I can't imagine being without it.

"I don't want that to be interpreted as saying that music isn't a powerful medium. I think a lot of people *do* learn from music. For example, with the Gay Men's Chorus. Recently we sang for City Club. We were doing Christmas music. And one of them was 'White Christmas.' And you could tell by the audience's body postures — at least, it's my interpretation — that at first there was some 'tolerance' in hearing us. Like it wasn't necessarily their ideal to be sitting two days before Christmas listening to a bunch of gay men singing. And yet, I know they were changed after that performance. The men were really jazzed. We were in good form. And I could tell by the reception after our performance that real communication occurred, far beyond the text that we sang. Far beyond Portland Gay Men's Chorus. There was a real



David York

sense of community that wasn't present before we started.

"You can't proselytize peace or civil liberties. [As gay men] it's legal to fire us and to evict us and all that stuff. So by our very nature we're inherently political. But I think our greatest effectiveness is when that is not a priority. The attitude of most of my very close friends — and my attitude — is that the chorus is a political statement. It just happens. And that's not necessarily our driving force. Our catalyst really is the music.

"It's interesting to me that the PGMC has our name in the phone book this year [in the glossy pages under 'entertainment']. Think about what that does for the community. I mean, that's in every bedroom, that's in every church, that's in every school. Every place there's a phone book, the PGMC name is written. Without saying anything. There's as much meaning in 'Portland' as in 'chorus,' as in 'gay men.' To say that's not a political statement is just false. Yet, had we created that as an intention four years ago, that we were going to get our name in the phone book, it would have been very unlikely to have occurred.

"We choose good music, whatever that is. Music that we learn from, pedagogically, to learn the discipline of the choral art, as well as fun stuff. As well as stuff that we can relate to. And then we stretch in all of those areas. We'll choose music that is technically, what I think some members of our organization would call, simplistic. Other people just love it. So it's a stretch for the people who consider it simplistic. Then we do things that are in other languages and very modern and they're a musical challenge for most of the choir. That's a stretch for us, too.

"My basic attitude is: when organizations make it their priority to choose politically oriented music, that's what they communicate. And the listening audience they get, more often than not, are the people who are already sympathetic to what they're going to say. By our choosing music that is reflective of the choral art, it's granted a listening by a body of people who might otherwise not be prone to support gay rights as such.

"The PGMC is a bona fide democracy. It's a unique organization, not only among the choirs of this city, but even among the gay chorus network. There are better men's choruses in the gay network, in the nation. There are bigger ones. There are richer ones. But as far as impact on the community and being a political cutting edge and a really joyful fraternity for participants and rendering a fine musical product. I think Portland makes a tremendous difference comparable to any of the other big cities in the nation.

"I remember a brainstorming session some four or five years back, asking, 'Where do you

want the chorus to go? What do you want the chorus to do?' Somebody said, 'To do a whole concert by memory,' and now we've done that many times. We don't do it always. But at the time, the feeling was: 'Could we *ever* do that?' And another person said, 'To be invited to sing at the state Capitol or something like that.' And we've done that. Someone said, 'I want to do a concert at the Civic Auditorium.' This was before the Schnitz was ever even around. 'I want to do a concert at the Civic Auditorium and actually draw a crowd size that will communicate that this choir is good enough to attract that sort of community support.' Now we've done that twice and are looking to do it again.

"That happens because of a commitment to musical excellence and a commitment to getting better. Not settling in, not saying, 'That's good enough. We don't need to be doing harder music. We don't need to be getting bigger grants or more commissions.' But it also occurs because of some administrative visioning.

"The very first performance I ever conducted was in San Francisco, when all the west coast choruses came together. That was the thrill of my life. I thought, 'My gosh, I can't believe it. This is great.' And then there was a national convention in Minneapolis. And Portland was reviewed just beautifully. Audience response was such that we were the only choir that was actually called back onstage after having completely left. That, I think, is a representation of the spirit of PGMC. There's a spark and an enthusiasm that I say comes from this democracy that we've created here. There were choirs that sang better than we did. There were choirs that sang funnier stuff than we did. But they really liked Portland.

"There are two other projects that really absorb my concentration and attention. One of them is Concord Choir, which is a chamber-

sized mixed choir, men and women, dedicated to affirming peace. We're planning a tour to Russia in 1991. We're just entering our third year. So that's a new organization, comparatively. I conduct choirs for a living. I make music. Concord Choir is kind of like the one I dreamed of even as a young musician. You know, that someday I could conduct a stellar mixed choir. And Concord Choir is that. We're just beginning, and in another ten years the choir will be of world-class stature. And that's possible to do here in Portland, believe it or not.

"It's my intention to produce, in the early part of 1990, a techno-pop album. It'll be in a new tuning system, an unprecedented tuning system. It will be designed and written with the intention of wide audience appeal. As I said, techno-pop. Boogey music. Something with a beat. Something you hear in bars, you hear on the radio. But the text would be very global-oriented. It wouldn't proselytize; it wouldn't 'teach peace,' like I was saying earlier, yet that is what would be created from it. As opposed to creating tension or lust or infidelity or all of those things. I don't want that to be interpreted as those things being 'bad.' They're fine. That's just not what I'm about.

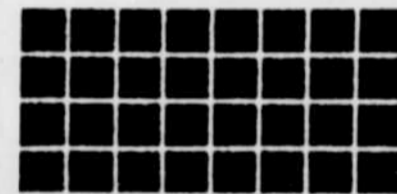
"The intention behind all the music I create, perform, compose, sing, whatever, is to heal and invigorate and vitalize and unify. It's an illusion that we're separate beings. And music is capable of getting beyond our identities, getting beyond our language and just really bringing present the reality of our oneness. It's a tricky thing to talk about because as soon as you assign words to it you sort of mitigate the power of that reality. Music gets to it far more effectively without ever saying so. And that's what I'm up to. I'm up to a very large conversation."

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