

Experimenting their way to success

The centerpiece of the evening was the world premiere of "In the 'Presence of Things Past'" commissioned from Ballet Oregon

BY DR. TANTALUS

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus and Ballet Oregon presented "Song and Ballet" at the Chorus' spring concert. Not since their performance of *Young Julius Caesar* a year ago had

Music

the Chorus received such a "spate" of publicity preceding an event. The presence of Ballet Oregon and its artistic director, Dennis Spaight, and a grant from the Oregon Arts Commission focused more attention on the Chorus than it had received in months. It was a public relations dream come true.

Perhaps it was the memory of *Young Julius Caesar* that kept every seat from being filled. Yet it was the same sense of experimentation and willingness to climb new musical heights that produced both last year's flawed concert and this year's successful presentation of "Song and Ballet." Those who stayed away simply missed the Chorus at their musical best.

The centerpiece of the evening was the world premiere of "In the Presence of Things Past," a ballet which had been commissioned by the Chorus from Ballet Oregon. As the piece opened, the Chorus, dressed in black and obscured by a transparent screen, appeared as a ghostly presence behind the dancers. The staging was a highly effective visual presentation.

"In the Presence of Things Past," a five

part dance, was set to the music of Franz Schubert; the Chorus' performance of this difficult score was uniformly good. Set against the romantic 19th century score was a ballet that acknowledged the classical underpinnings of the music, but strove to imbue it with elements of modern dance. The resulting choreography was effective and was entertaining throughout.

In "Liebe" ("Love"), performed by Thomas Teague and Denise Glines, the lyrics present a traditional view of soft, romantic love, but the dance was more forceful and powerful than those tender images evoke. Another example came in the positioning of the dancers' arms and legs as they turned about. While the men would hold their arms rigidly forward from the shoulder, the women, lifted up, might have their elbows flayed out away from their bodies as they were turned.

My only complaint about Schubert's score was that it could not be heard clearly enough. Given the space requirements of the dancers, the Chorus seemed backed up to 23rd and Burnside on the cavernous Intermediate Theatre stage. The effort of singing through a screen, past the layers of curtains and out into the audience sometimes resulted in music that was

a little ghostly as well. While this may have been the intent, the Doctor casts his vote for turning up the volume in the future.

Another dance, featuring Dennis Spaight and Pamela Hayes in a *pas de deux* from "Triptych" (which Spaight also choreographed), was the evening's dance highlight. The chemistry between the pair of dancers was clearly evident and the sheer physicality of their performance was both compelling and graceful.

On the musical front, the Chorus was most successful in presenting Benjamin Britten's "The Ballad of Little Musgrave and Lady Bernard." The piece required crispness, clarity, sureness of direction and a wide range of musical dynamics. It is a pleasure to report that the Chorus was up to this challenge in every respect. The piece, to be performed well, requires a sure touch on the part of the conductor, and David York brought the best out of his Chorus on this occasion.

More troublesome was an uninspired boat ride down "The Blue Danube." At best, this piece of music is a chestnut that requires inspiration, a quick tempo, and lots of verve. Unfortunately none of these elements were present, and the piece could have been performed at an Austrian funeral. By the time the Chorus began departing from the original text and singing "Baa-baa-baa-baa-baa---Boop boop, boop boop" (or something to that effect) one could only hope that Little Bo Peep would come and take her lost sheep home. Just because Strauss put words to the piece doesn't mean they have to be sung.

Of the remaining musical numbers, the three Slovak songs were of more interest than the three English Madrigals which were performed by Cascade, the "group-within-a-group." The former permitted the audience to reap the rewards of difficult musical material while the latter, although pleasant, seemed frothy in comparison.

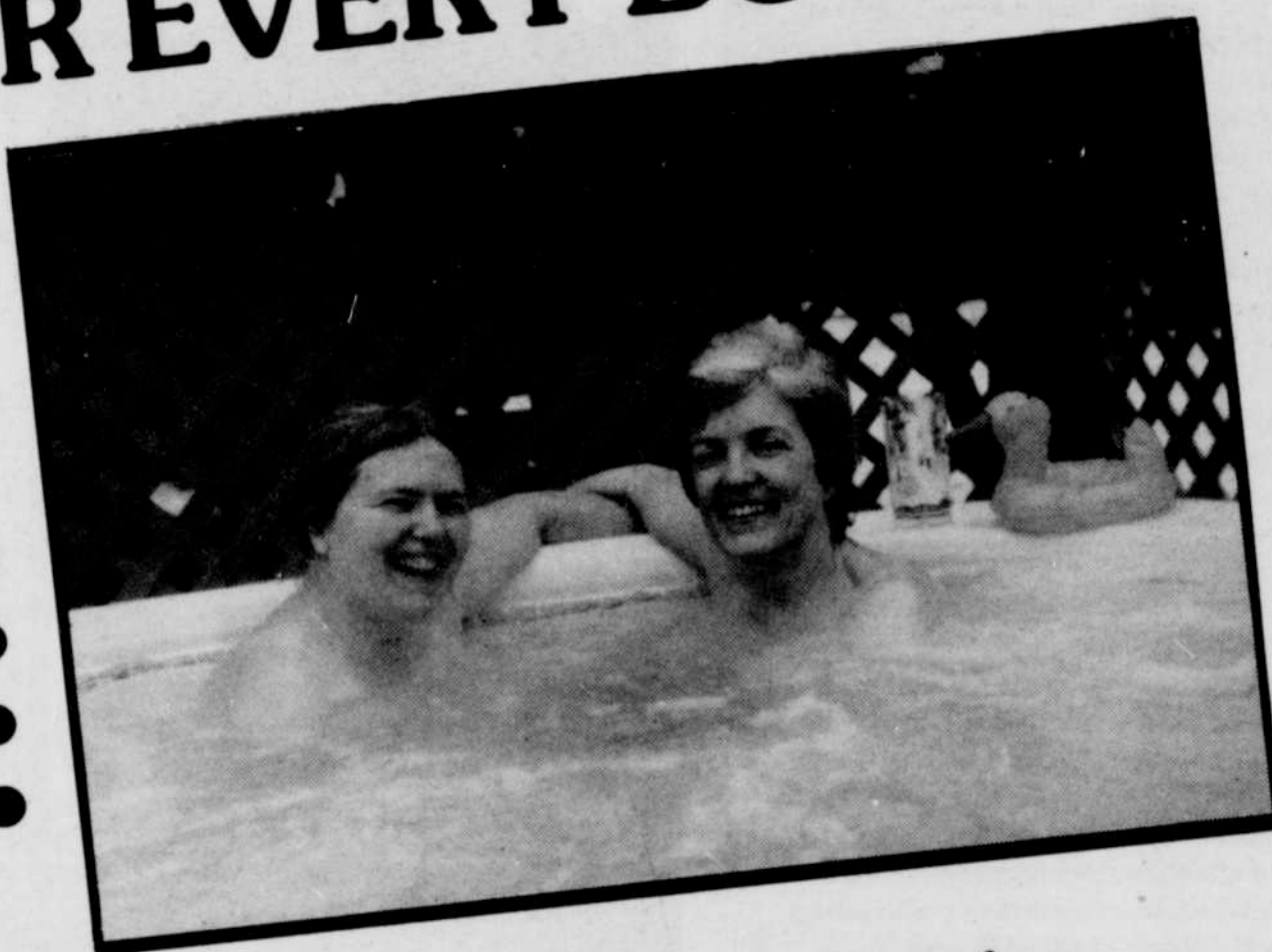
The audience also enjoyed some fine solo work during the concert. As always, Steve Fulmer provided some nice moments during his solo in "Trinklied" ("Drinking Song") during the ballet. Mark Steerking, Mike Pickrell, and Scott Tuomi also shone in more limited roles.

If the last two years are any indication, the Chorus presents its more challenging and experimental work during its spring "classical" concert. As a result, the Chorus' musical talents are displayed in the best possible fashion, and one suspects the process of learning more difficult material adds to its overall musical growth. With that in mind, the Doctor looks forward to next year's program. ▼

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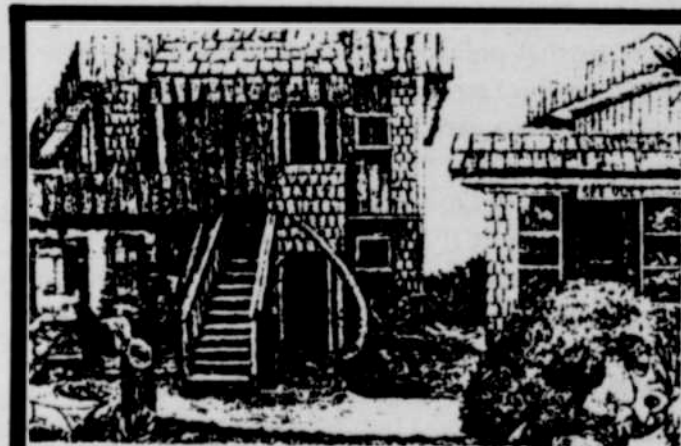
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