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Happy Birthday to you

Portland's Gay Men's Chorus and Lesbian Choir sing out

by Dr. Tantalus

December marked the 12th year for the Portland Gay Men's Chorus and the 5th year for the Portland Lesbian Choir. These events allowed our intrepid reviewers, the curmudgeonly Dr. Tantalus and the lighthearted and forgiving Nurse Consuelo, to reflect upon the state of gay and lesbian choral music in the Rose City.

It cannot be disputed that PGMC, by virtue of its longevity, is the more successful of the two groups. Indeed, it can be argued that the Chorus is the most successful gay organization in the state. It has grown from a small band of dedicated volunteers producing small intimate concerts to a large chorus able to sell out two shows at the prestigious Intermediate Theater in the heart of downtown Portland.

Its audience has changed as well. While in the dim past its audience might include only members of Portland's gay community, its fans now include Gov. Barbara Roberts, Police Chief Tom Potter, and City Commissioner Gretchen Kafoury, all of whom were in attendance for its "Time for the Holidays" show.

Having begun somewhat later, the PLC is still in the process of establishing its own following. Its performance, entitled "Highlights and Candlelights," will go far to accomplish that end, judging from audience reaction. And this time Commissioner Kafoury not only was in the audience, but actually conducted a song, "Power," in honor of Portland's new civil rights ordinance. Can a guest appearance by Oprah be far behind?

As PLC looks to the future it can see a glimpse of what might lie ahead by observing the PGMC experience. As PGMC has grown, its programs have expanded to encompass more musically diverse styles. Comedy, elaborate staging and guest artists are now commonplace. Their most recent guest, The Flirtations, socked it to an adoring crowd with their soulful doo-wop renditions. The crowd favorite was "Everything Possible," that you-can-be-anything-you-want-to-be song that brings tears to dear Nurse Consuelo's eyes before it even begins.

Despite having all the essential ingredients to success, the PGMC concert was a mixed bag. The Flirts were indeed fabulous. A thousand Hosannas would not be sufficient to describe them. The Chorus' singing was steady and occasionally sparkled on such nicely arranged numbers as "Bye Bye Blues" and William's "Wassail Song."

But instead of letting their guests or their songs rest on their own merits PGMC apparently felt it necessary to impose a plot (and we use the term loosely) over the entire proceedings. In two words, it stunk.

Every time that Coyote Bob (that erstwhile radio announcer for KWER radio somewhere in the past, but here we digress, just like the show) appeared, the concert came to a complete screech-

ing halt. Fortunately for the Chorus, weapons were checked at the door or Nurse Consuelo might really have caused a scene.

Nor did things improve after intermission when Astro the Snowbot (don't ask) took the stage (we're now in the future but-don't ask) while some futuristic Raggedy Ann and Andy took over narrative chores. The term "high school production" might also be employed about these proceedings, but Dr. Tantalus does not want to be sued by all the high schools in town that put on better shows.

So there's your glimpse of Christmas Future, PLC, so please avoid it. You can't please all the people all the time (including Dr. T.) so don't try. Every concert need not be a comedy-drama-musical-whatchamacallit. Just doing one thing well (like singing) is often sufficient.

PLC's attempt to add special effects to its concert was far more successful. During its performance of "One Fine Day," a short film by Kay Weaver and Martha Wheelock highlighted women in the struggle from Emily Dickinson to Martina Navratilova. It was powerful, simple and effective staging done without a lot of muss and fuss. It's show, in contrast to the one offered by PGMC, moved along quickly and efficiently.

The kudos cannot be given for PLC's skit after intermission when the "collective unconscious voice" of the PLC spoke about its beginning. Does the consensus model of management really bring these skits into being? If so, its time for a little more facism and a little less democracy. (PGMC take note).

As a highlight show, PLC's concert demonstrated its emerging strength as a musical institution and convincingly demonstrated their musical growth over the past two years. "Wood River" with former conductor's Christina Blount's outstanding solo, never sounded so good. Nevertheless the Choir needs to focus on some of the basics: entrances should be strong and clear, not pick up steam as the musical line rolls along. And blend, that harmonious intersection of human voices, can sometimes be a problem, especially on more difficult pieces like Sondheim's "No One is Alone."

In contrast, PGMC typically has the basics down, but its song selection could use improvement. First, more new music, less rereads are the order of the day. Second, the Chorus is capable of singing more challenging music than it often presents. While songs such as William's aforementioned "Wassail Song" are undoubtedly more difficult to learn they are far more musically rewarding because there is simply more meat on that musical bone to chew one.

At the beginning of its 13th season, PGMC is at a point where it is trying to maintain the larger audience that it has tried to cultivate for the past several years. It will not do so unless it re-emphasizes the importance of performing good and challenging music. PLC, approaching year six, has more room for error, but also needs to continue its musical growth. Both groups have the energy and the talent to succeed. Let's hope they make the most of it.

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