

# Gay Men's Chorus

Continued from page 17

to be special," he says.

Two months later at MCC the group held its first concert.

"I still have the original poster from that concert. We asked for \$1.50 donation," Coleman says. "After expenses, we had \$39."

Brown, who is a former arts editor for the *Kansas City Star* and currently a Portland Art Museum trustee, found himself drawn to the chorus.

"I guess you can say that I'm a veteran of the bad old days, when you didn't say words like 'gay,' so I was quite intrigued when I read an announcement about an upcoming [PGMC] performance," he says. "It wasn't a polished performance, but they had enthusiasm. There was an obvious commitment there. I saw the chorus and its music as a very civilized way to reach out to people."

In 1981 Brown joined PGMC, much to the chagrin of certain members of his social set. "I remember being at dinner parties where some people would make disparaging remarks about the chorus," he says. "I lost friends because of that association."

Brown would eventually become the chorus' secretary, music committee chair and general manager. He would also write its first grant application to the Metropolitan Arts Commission.

The reasons other gay men were attracted to the chorus are numerous: they were looking for friends to socialize with; they saw music as a revolutionary tool; they were seeking romantic partners; they liked to sing.

"Getting involved with the chorus was an acceptable way for men to come out. They could say, 'I'm a member of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus,' which was less threatening to people. And it was an alternative to the bar scene," says Coleman, who is a community-resource specialist for Portland Community College. "There are so many options for men now, but back in 1980 we were just one of the few games in town."

That's not to say that some Portland Gay Men's Chorus enthusiasts didn't spend some time in the bars—recruiting potential chorus members, that is.

"PGMC had a musical subgroup of about 16 men known as the Other Side. They developed choral material with sexual-based themes to be performed in gay bars," says Fulmer. "It was material the entire chorus could not publicly perform—songs like 'Fire Island Baby' and 'Crisco and You.' It was musical theater. A bit of the Village People. But that's what the men in the bars got a kick out of, and it was a way to get them involved."

Not long after its first concert PGMC drafted its bylaws, which required that the chorus be a democratic organization. "We liked to say we were using the 'lesbian consensus model,' chuckles Coleman. "It really added spark to the way we operated."

As for the chorus' early audiences, it was a mixture of both gay and straight. "During our early days, P-FLAG would come to our concerts as a group. It was a way parents could help other parents deal with their kids' sexual orientation. It was important for them to see we were simply normal-looking guys," says Norton.

Norton estimates the annual budget during those first years hovered between \$2,000 and \$3,000—it would surpass \$100,000 during the late 1980s.



## Crescendo

By the mid-to-late 1980s, chorus membership dramatically multiplied, topping out at about 110. And performances were continually improving, due in part to the guidance of David York, who served as PGMC's conductor from 1982 to 1990.

The chorus began receiving favorable reviews from the mainstream press, and in 1984 it was invited to perform during the inauguration of the incoming secretary of state, Barbara Roberts. Portland Mayor Bud Clark declared June 28, 1985 "Portland Gay Men's Chorus Day," which also marked PGMC's first concert at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall.

The chorus subsequently received a series of grants from the Metropolitan Arts Commission and the Oregon Arts Commission—many believe it was the first openly gay arts group in the state to receive public funding. According to Norton, the chorus was also the first gay organization to perform in Eugene's Hult Center.

When the Oregon Convention Center opened in 1990, the chorus was there singing. In 1991, the chorus marched and sang in Portland's Holiday Parade, which attracted an estimated 50,000 spectators in addition to the thousands of others who watched it on television. In 1994, when Kris Olson Rogers made Oregon history by becoming the state's first female U.S. attorney, her swearing-in ceremony included a song from the Grateful Dead performed by a Portland Gay Men's Chorus member. And yes, says Coleman, the Portland Gay Men's Chorus has indeed been tapped to perform the national anthem at a Blazer game. "We tried out last year and were accepted," he says. "However we're not exactly sure when we're going to appear."

According to Norton, during PGMC's first year, half the members of the chorus listed their names in the program as "anonymous." Now, only one member refrains from listing his name in full.

The chorus' most notable performances include 1988's *Young Caesar*, the world premiere of a gay opera by Lou Harrison; *Zillions*, or *How We*

*Paid Off the National Debt* by Tom Simonds in 1985, which was the first musical commissioned and produced by a gay chorus; 1989's *In the Presence of Things Past*, a ballet choreographed by Dennis Spaight and danced by Ballet Oregon to Schubert songs sung by the chorus; and 1992's performance of John Corigliano's *Of Rage and Remembrance*, a haunting work for chorus and soloists written as a response to the devastation caused by AIDS. And then, of course, there were those countless vigils and memorial services...

## Requiem

It was the summer of 1982, and the Portland Gay Men's Chorus traveled to San Francisco to perform with other gay choruses during the first Gay Games. "It was so exhilarating," says Fulmer, who was making his conducting debut at the time. "We were the crown jewel of the choruses. Nearly every piece we performed received a standing ovation. People were actually reaching out to touch us. There we were at the first Gay Games in the mecca of the Castro/Mission—how could you not get swept away in the emotion?"

Fulmer continues, "I am now convinced that profoundly moving expression of one's pride..."

I half expect he'll complete the sentence with "...was the best thing to happen to us."

He doesn't.

"...was the biggest disaster," he says, pausing slightly before continuing. "I am thoroughly convinced that many of my dearest friends became infected [with HIV] directly from that week. And I think that event was a significant catalyst in bringing the AIDS epidemic to Portland. Sure, the epidemic was going to reach here, but I don't think with the same speed that it did."

He adds, "If I hadn't been in a monogamous

relationship at the time, I think I might be dead by now."

Though some may disagree with Fulmer's bold contention, there is no argument that AIDS has had a shattering effect on the chorus. An estimated 60 PGMC members have died of AIDS complications—more members than the chorus currently has. According to Coleman, the membership of the chorus dropped from 85 in 1990 to 35 in 1993, due largely to AIDS deaths. The chorus currently has about 55 members.

"You can't go to a rehearsal and see someone who isn't dying," says Fulmer. "But the level of love and caring is astounding. These men are literally holding each other up."

Literally and, says Norton, figuratively. "Those of us who have managed to survive have done so because the chorus gives us something to live for."

State health officials also recognize the power of the chorus to bolster gay men's self-esteem and provide them with a sense of belonging. The Oregon Health Division, in conjunction with local health departments, recently launched a program specifically designed to create a pro-social support network for gay and bisexual men throughout Oregon. The theory behind the project is that if men have a sense of community they'll feel good about themselves and will therefore be less likely to engage in risky behaviors.

Health officials are working to conduct outreach efforts, which include providing funding for the chorus to tour the state. Coleman says the health division and the Washington County Health Department are also providing financial support for a CD featuring music performed by the chorus, as well as members discussing HIV/AIDS issues. The CD is in the final stages of production and may be released later this summer.

Though the chorus has continued to perform Broadway show tunes and other lighter selections, the health crisis has understandably influenced its repertoire. There was 1992's "Time for Remembrance" concert (70 voices strong), featuring Corigliano's work, and this past spring the chorus performed *Hidden Legacies*, a seven-movement drama that tracked the various stages of grief: anger and shame, followed by numbness and then acceptance. The last movement, "Hallelujah Chorus," seeks to uplift listeners.

Throughout the years the chorus has performed benefits for AIDS service organizations, raising thousands of badly needed dollars.

## New Work in Progress

After dedicating so many years to the Portland Gay Men's Chorus, Fulmer, Brown and York eventually left to pursue other interests. Fulmer has become involved with the lesbian and gay vocal ensemble known as Bridges, Brown was hired as an administrator by Oregon Repertory Singers, and York joined the Concord Choir.

After years of touting itself as an essentially democratically controlled organization, the chorus plans to shift more control to the conductor/artistic director. Also, expect the chorus to perform only one of its three annual concerts at the Intermediate Theatre of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts next season. (It currently holds all three concerts there.) The rent, says Norton, is simply too high.

Despite all of the changes and challenges faced by the chorus and its current conductor, Bob Mensel (formerly of the Salt Lake Men's Chorus), the Portland Gay Men's Chorus vows to continue promoting its message through music.

Last weekend the chorus celebrated its 15th anniversary with a concert titled "An Outrageous Celebration," honoring its long history of outreach, celebration and education.

"There is no doubt we're going through a transitory period. And there is no denying that AIDS has taken its toll. But we've been through a lot and survived it all," says Norton, "and we're still here after all these years. Now that's something to celebrate."

For information about joining the Portland Gay Men's Chorus, call 699-8586.