



PHOTO BY LAUREN GERVURTZ

On a rising note

Lesbian Sing" sprang from the brightly colored (biting hot pink, maybe?) signs. Two short, simple words, scribbled on placards and placed in women's hangouts 10 years ago.

"Lesbian Sing"—it was a bare-bones yet bold pronouncement, given the political climate of a decade ago.

"But it wasn't the most novel idea—the idea of bringing women together to sing, that is," says 37-year-old Cathryn Heron, perhaps a smidgen too humbly.

After all, while it was certainly true the notion of women creating music en masse was not a new one, novelty clearly existed in the idea of establishing an undeniably lesbian-oriented organization of women singing with one another.

Heron, who was quickly joined by Amy Valentine, an ardent enthusiast of the concept, constructed the "Lesbian Sing" signs and went in search of other like-minded souls. That was during the autumn of 1986.

"I had just moved back to Portland. I was young, political and out. And I loved music," explains Heron, a third-generation Oregonian who came from a home where music was practiced and appreciated.

"I noticed that the Portland Gay Men's Chorus was very visible and accepted in the entire community. It struck me as such a positive thing, and it also got me wondering why there wasn't a women's equivalent."

Her first step was to place a little sign in a local women's bookstore.

"At that point I didn't really know what the group would be. Would it be an ensemble, a jam session or what? That first time I got four or five calls," she says.

Three women—Heron, Valentine and "somebody else"—met. "I think Amy and I scared the other woman off, so it was the two of us."

Undaunted, the duo orchestrated a more vigorous campaign. They crafted their "Lesbian Sing" signs out of what Heron calls "vivid fluorescent paper" and plastered the notices in a variety of locations including college campuses.

They also talked up the idea, and it worked.

Soon after, an estimated 30 women were sitting in Heron's living room eagerly chatting about the possibilities.

"We decided very quickly that we wanted to be a choir. Then the question was whether we would publicly be known as a lesbian choir," she recounts.

One meeting, one controversy, and the first of many a processing session.

"There was a pretty strong split down the middle," recalls Heron, adding that she personally opted for full disclosure. "Many in the group wanted to include the word 'lesbian' in our title, but there were others who said they couldn't be a part of an organization that was publicly identified as being lesbian, because of their professions, or they lived in rural areas, things like that."

"The discussion about how to deal with that was heated. It was even suggested that women could place paper sacks on their heads during performances," she continues. "You have to remember that it was a very different time."

The Portland Lesbian Choir soars triumphant over discord and prejudice to enter its second decade of song

by Inga Sorensen



PHOTO BY LINDA KJUEWER

PLC at the GALA gathering in 1989, Christina Blount directing



In Denver for GALA '92 the choir marched in the Denver Pride parade protesting Amendment 2

By meeting's end, the decision had been made. The fledgling group would be called the Portland Lesbian Choir.

Some of the women who attended that first meeting never came back. Others, meanwhile, have never left.

"I'd say about a third of the women who were there did not come back again," Heron says. "It was hard, because inclusiveness was obviously important to us, and here were these women who felt excluded because of the decision of what to name the group. That was painful."

Nonetheless, the deal was done, and PLC would go on to perform for the very first time in December 1986 at Reed College. Under the direction of Jeri Hendricks, they sang "Here We Come A-Caroling."

Inclusiveness has been a philosophical mainstay of PLC. From the beginning, it was a nonauditioned community chorus open to all women.

According to the organization's mission statement, the choir's goals include promoting musical excellence and performing gay- and lesbian-positive music with a special emphasis on music by, for and about women.

Its nonaudition framework allows women of varying skill levels to participate in some way. (Between 1990 and 1991, PLC's membership jumped from 40 to 80. It has since grown to an organization of more than 100 singers and volunteers.)

There was also a desire to strive for consensus.

"We used to have large consensus-based processing sessions which were very empowering in some ways. For some women it was the first time they got to participate in a group decision-making process," explains Heron. "We don't really do that anymore. Certainly everyone is free to speak her mind, but we've learned to trust each other enough, and have empowered those we elect to our committees to make decisions."

The choir is a community, and everyone is an indispensable part of that community," explains Lynda Garner, 50, who has been PLC's musical director since 1991.

"These are women who may not necessarily have the same skill level but do have ideals and ideas of what they want the world to be like," says Garner.

"The most moving thing I have experienced with the choir is watching a woman who perhaps may not have as much natural talent work with a member who may have more skills. To see the bond that forms, and to witness that cooperation, is very touching."

"When I think of the choir, I think of family," adds Heron.

For Mary Larsen, PLC's steering committee coordinator, the choir was a way to find lesbian community.

"It was a wonderful coming out tool for me," explains Larsen, a 36-year-old nurse who has been with the choir for about seven years. "It was part of the 'community' experience and the first big association I had with a lesbian group."

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