

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus has been around since 1981, making it the third-oldest gay-identified chorus in the world. That's kind of a surprise to people like Gary Coleman, one of the founding members.

"We thought it would be a one-time thing. We put an ad in the Portland Town Council in April 1980. Twenty men showed up and that was that."

But after their performance at that year's Pride

Music

festivities, no one wanted it to end. Now, 16 years later, with new members, a new board of directors and a new vision, they begin again.

"We all knew that we got up on stage and did these concerts and that's about it," said Joe Jefferson, the new president of PGMC. "The chorus had lost so many...it had gone from 100 singers down to 32, at its low point. There was pain and grieving. We needed a focus."

So Jefferson and artistic director Bob Mensel set out to create a plan. "What happened next was pure synergy," Jefferson continues. "And the old board liked the positive shift. Now we know that we have a mission, and that is quite simply to expand our audiences so that we can change attitudes toward the gay community. The message in the music is the conduit for that."

Today, PGMC boasts as many as 80 voices. They do not ignore those voices who came before and are now gone, but they sing that we all may be known, that they may help ease the hurt of those who are alone—either closeted or abandoned by families of origin or left behind by a lover lost to AIDS. And most importantly, to instill a greater understanding of the gay experience.

That is why the chorus has chosen *Naked Man* for its June 28 and 29 concerts. This choral work is a musical essay, much like the art song cycles of Schubert or Ned Rorem or Kurt Weill, where we are presented the phases of season or love or age. Except that in this case, it is gay men singing the gay man's experience. And while we can say "Ned Rorem is gay, Edna St. Vincent Millay was

A MODERN RENAISSANCE

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus is thriving, with a growing membership and a new mission for change

by Flora Sussely

homosexual, Oscar Wilde was, Tchaikovsky, Rauschenberg, Colette... unknowingly, the world has already embraced 'gay' art," the fact of the matter is that this is art with the pronouns left intact. This is art that spells it out. And it is arresting.

The lyrics, taken from 60 interviews with gay men, are a poetic rendition of the experience of the gay male community of this country in 1997. Plain and simple.

Except that musically, it is not plain or simple. Walking up the steps to the rehearsal, I was

have another, social context in which it thrives as well. Speaking with chorus member Kip Beardsley, who works for the Oregon State Health Division, I learned that PGMC also helps throughout the state raising funds and public awareness for and about HIV prevention.

"Part of what we realize in HIV-prevention work is that you need a community, and the chorus is a prime example of an instrument to support the community, to encourage our allies and set the foundation for previous issues and other issues that affect us. It takes a village,"

Richard Griffith, now an active member of the chorus, told me that prior to joining the group he "didn't know how to live a life." He knew he was gay but "saw no future" and had chosen "to just be nothing." Until a friend took him to a PGMC concert. "It literally changed my life," he said. That concert became the catalyst for Richard to embrace his truest self. "It took me 10 years, but here I am!"

Now, with a clear mission statement, new and veteran voices, a new board of directors and marketing committee, and a great new piece to present, the Portland Gay Men's Chorus is in a true renaissance. And they audition year-round.

"We want to be inclusive, not exclusive, so that even if someone doesn't want to sing, they can still be a part of the organization," Jefferson enthuses. "We invite people to get involved. We have members behind the scenes, including one straight singing member and his wife, who helps with marketing!"

As the choir ends its rehearsal, Coleman takes the floor for a couple of announcements. First the news that AIDS has taken the choir's 90th member. The news is met by a matter-of-fact silence. Then the news of profit from a fund-raiser is met with loud and lively cheering. Then the members sing "Happy Birthday" to all of us born in June.

In their clear, strong voices I can hear the echoes of those who sang before. I feel uplifted by their courage in keeping and nurturing this growing place. And taking the lines from *Naked Man* that I have jotted down:

Oh, Life will take us
where it will
...each moment as a
gift
each moment as a
gift
give it back
give it back again.

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus performs *Naked Man* on Saturday and Sunday, June 28 and 29, at the Portland Community College Sylvania Performing Arts Center. Tickets are available at Gai-Pied, Jelly Bean, Twenty-Third Avenue Books, It's My Pleasure and A Gentle Strength. Call 460-3689 for more information.



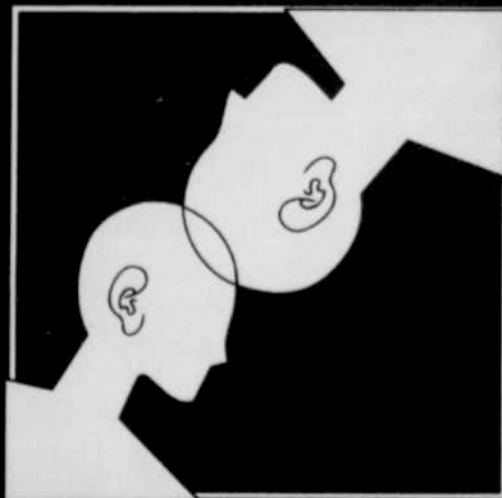
overcome by the sheer texture of sound. This piece is opulent, and PGMC has strength and nuance and vigor and pathos. In some places the music wafts classically, then suddenly it is starkly, unabashedly contemporary. Then, stepping into the room, I was struck by the diversity within the experience held in common. Old, young, very young, some in black leather, others in shorts and tank tops, others in pressed white shirts, all with one common denominator: They were there for the music.

But aside from the aesthetic, the chorus does

Beardsley says, smiling broadly at his political reference, and continues, "This becomes our culture, a community to live for."

Sometimes, Beardsley says, right-wing demonstrators show up holding placards that say Burn in Hell but, at least once that they know of, homophobic pamphlets were left uncirculated after a performance. The person was affected just enough that he or she tucked them under the chair after the concert. This is the stuff of social revolution.

STEREO



TYPES

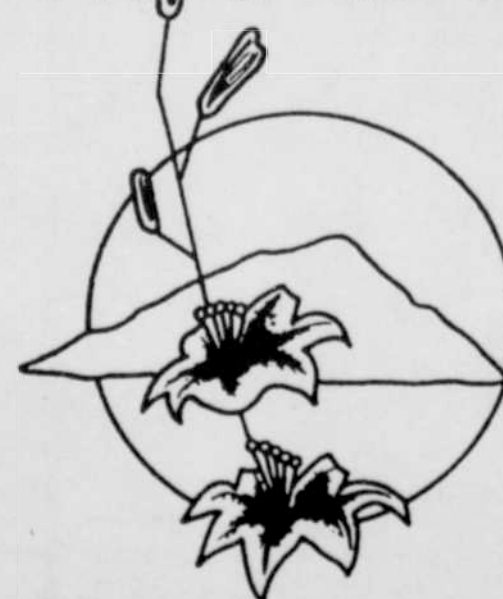
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