

PHOTO BY LINDA KLIEWER



Members and leaders of SPIRIT—a group dedicated to strengthening and organizing women and girls in low-income communities and communities of color in Portland—celebrate their new space on Northeast Alberta Street

## GUEST EDITORIAL

BY BOB MENSEL

## Breaking barriers

The artistic director of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus makes a plea for intracommunity harmony

**O**n March 20 and 21, the Portland Gay Men's Chorus will present *In Celebration of Women*, a concert that has been in the planning for several years. I was originally drawn to this concept by a fascination with what a men's chorus would sound like singing music that was originally fashioned for women's voices. (The two genres can utilize quite different harmonic languages.)

However, as ideas evolved, I abandoned this original premise in favor of commissioning women to compose for men and invited my friend Sue Coffee and her internationally renowned women's ensemble *Sound Circle* to be our guest performers. It will be a joyous concert, full of spectacular music. Despite that, I find myself pondering why it has been so difficult to generate interest in a concert that I believe is the chorus' most important of the last two seasons.

The answer is glaringly simple and extremely eye-opening: Having adopted the music of women, we are being treated like women.

I first became aware of this phenomenon at a season budget planning meeting when it was suggested that the chorus eliminate the entire marketing budget for this concert since, some felt, no one was going to come to it anyway.

Later, at this year's holiday concert, my sister talked with some patrons who expressed how much they were looking forward to *In Celebration of Rodgers & Hammerstein* in June, but had no interest in attending the "boring" women's concert.

What concerns me about this attitude is that it is held by people who had no knowledge of the content of the women's concert. Most alarming, however, is the manner in which the claim was made—as though it is perfectly logical and common knowledge that "women" equate with "boring."

A recent letter to the chorus further illustrates this dismissive attitude. Its author attended our *Classical Matinee* on Feb. 7, and commended PGM—specifically the men—for a "wonderful performance."

"The only discordant notes...were the two women who performed and the drag queen," he assessed. "Although the women's performances were adequate, my friends and I all agreed that we don't attend a gay male chorus performance to hear and see women.... In the future please note on the performance announcement if women will be featured, so we as your gay male supporters can choose not to attend and take our support to more appropriate arenas."

I responded that women have long been a fundamental component of PGM—our president is a woman, as are two other board members, as well as our new development director.

I also told the letter writer our mission is to "promote harmony among people." I added that I found his "anti-woman statements no different than the anti-gay rhetoric that we constantly endure from the OCA."

(I am also aware that lesbians are not immune to a range of opinions—some equally dismissive—concerning men.)

While reflecting upon this, I came back to an old phrase: "the enemy within." This enemy, I believe, is comprised of our own attitudes, inhibitions, prejudices and, perhaps most of all, our reluctance to fully examine our own conscience.

I propose that we devote more attention to encouraging our own interpersonal growth through discussion and, when necessary, challenging each other on improving our own shortsightedness.

As lesbians and gay men we stand to gain so much by our ability to work with and support each other.

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