

GROUPS

Thirteen years has changed Soromundi Lesbian Chorus of Eugene, which celebrates its anniversary with a spring concert June 1 at the Hult Center.

Founder and co-director Karm Hagedorn and original member Pat Shirley were at Portland's Pride Parade in 1989 watching the year-old Portland Lesbian Choir march by.

Shirley asked Hagedorn, "Why don't you start something like that in Eugene?" The rest, as they say, is history.

In the fall of that same year Hagedorn and her partner invited five women into their home to sing—camp songs, Beatles tunes and high school favorites. The women played records, sang along and harmonized to oldies. The group of seven soon became 20.

Named after a star and literally translated "Sisters of the World," it's always been important to members (or "mundis") to identify the chorus as lesbian. Before a recent performance, the venue's staff suggested marketing the group as a "women's" choir rather than a lesbian one. "Well," Hagedorn replied, "that's the whole point."

Hagedorn's experience in group song was part of the original impetus to start her own thing. "Women sang soprano, second soprano, alto and second alto but were not allowed to dip below middle C," she explains. "I have a voice that occasionally dips down to the low C. I was rarely given the opportunity to sing where most of my natural chest voice wants to be."

Hagedorn began arranging parts for women's voices with deeper capacity, which created a unique sound among choral groups. Audience feedback was immediate, and she continued to arrange the music according to the power of the voices.

In less than a year, the women were performing at Eugene's Unitarian Universalist Church and at the Eugene Celebration, while rehearsals were moved from Hagedorn's home into an elementary school.

Co-director Lisa Hellemn soon joined as accompanist and provided support to Hagedorn, she says, by "pulling the parts out."

Hagedorn adds with a laugh: "Nothing at the time was written down. I had an idea in my head how I wanted the harmonies to come out, but I didn't give them music or words or anything. I made them stand on risers and learn their parts, by god." Hellemn's background in choir music created some structure in the burgeoning group.

By 1993, the choir had grown to 35 members and created a steering committee. In the midst of conflicts and challenges during this time, Hagedorn and some other members left the chorus, and Hellemn agreed to lead remaining members through 1995. Hellemn characterizes it as a "painful...year."

Hellemn reorganized and revamped the group in 1996, and after much hard work and practice Soromundi set off on its first tour in 1998, visiting various Oregon cities. The trip and its preparation gave the chorus an opportunity to develop pride and improve performance quality.

In 1999 Soromundi recorded a CD, *Sentimental Journey*—a project that provided the opportunity for Hellemn to ask Hagedorn to return to the choir she started. Hagedorn returned to share directorship.

"I had always wanted to work with Karm again," Hellemn shares. "We had great fun working together, and I...always had wanted to reunite the choir and Karm."

Hagedorn remarks, "I am very grateful for that."

In August of last year, Soromundi opened the Gay and Lesbian Alliance of Choir Directors conference at Portland's Performing Arts Center. "The group just blew them away!" Hellemn exclaims. "The audience would not sit down."



Loud and proud: Soromundi is not taking the lesbian out of lesbian chorus

Sisters of the world

Lesbian chorus celebrates 13 years of ups (and downs)

BY SUSAN DETROY

Soromundi's music is more ethnic in style, less formal in

genre. It's music about "the roots and connectedness we feel," Hellemn offers. Hagedorn's non-traditional use of the whole lower register of women's voices and Hellemn's musical arrangements have created an unusual style.

"It is really rare that Soromundi would see sheet music from a publisher," Hagedorn says. "Most things are arranged by Lisa or by me specifically for our choir."

Development director Amber Lunch adds, "A lot of gay choruses have people who have some musical ability, but their directors don't arrange the music or have the expertise that we have...we got lucky."



Co-directors Karm Hagedorn (left) and Lisa Hellemn keep the spirit up and the harmonies flowing

Soromundi offers pop and classical as well as lyrics in Italian and Swahili. This year's repertoire includes Ann Reed's "Heroes," a beautiful memoir of women who've shaped our world; "Everything Possible," a lullaby by Fred Smalls; "Museum Cases," originally performed by Ulali, which explores representations of Native Americans in museums; and "MLK," a song by U2 about Martin Luther King Jr.

New member Chris Ashburn, graphic designer by day and tenor section leader by night, is learning what the development

director does. Cross-training each other keeps individuals from "burning out," Lunch explains, and allows members to build connections and learn to work together. The departure and return of Hagedorn has worked as a tool in making the group more resilient.

Ashburn comments that she was drawn to Soromundi (now about 58 strong) because "the trust and camaraderie of people on stage was visible. It was so compelling. I wanted to be part of what I was seeing."

She then explains what keeps her coming back. "I get to hang out with a group of strong-minded, independent, well-educated, outspoken women who like to sing... It is one of the most supportive groups I have ever been a part of."

The co-directors' skills as musicians and leaders have contributed to the high trust level, maintains Hellemn. "We work together really well...the organization is very healthy."

Soromundi is a nonprofit but still contributes to organizations such as Basic Rights Oregon, Siuslaw High School Band, the Florence Middle School Band Travel Fund and Mother Kali's Books. It performs at Eugene Pride Day and provides gift baskets for the event's raffle. The choir lent money to the popular Eugene women's a cappella group the Motet Singers to finance production of its acclaimed debut CD. It also sponsors a women's softball team, the Soromundi Sluggers, with members ranging in age from 19 to 63. Soromundi sings at local and statewide events, including the Holiday Market, the MLK Celebration, memorials, weddings, political rallies, vigils and church services. "I would say that everything we have done has made us more and more and more open and welcoming," Hagedorn concludes.

SUSAN DETROY is a Eugene free-lance writer.

From the writer and producers of SMOKE SIGNALS

A new film written and directed by SHERMAN ALEXIE

the business of FANCYDANCING

Falls Apart Producer EVAN ADAMS MICHELLE ST JOHN GENE TAGABAN THE BUSINESS OF FANCYDANCING starring KEVIN PHILLIP REBECCA CARROLL and SWIL KANIM Production Designer JONATHAN SATUREN Line Producer CRAIG MARKEY
Co-Producers DANIEL ARMSTRONG and CHRISTY COX Executive Producer BRADFORD C. BOND and JOHN BENEAR Director of Photography and Editor HOLLY TAYLOR Producers LARRY ESTES and SCOTT ROSENFELT Writer and Directed by SHERMAN ALEXIE

Guild Theatre May 31—June 6: Fri—Thur, 7 & 9pm; Sat & Sun 3, 5, 7 & 9pm
Sherman Alexie will introduce the film May 31

OUTRIDER PICTURES