

Clackamas Choirs spotlight traditional and jazz music

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Copy Editor

When voices echo through the halls of Randall, it's usually not the basketball team holding a gymnasium singalong.

Chances are it's one of the five vocal ensembles organized by Clackamas Choral Director Lonnie Cline, rehearsing for another showcase of their diverse talent.

When Cline first arrived at Clackamas 19 years ago, there were two vocal ensembles—a concert choir and a swing choir. Now there are a total of five, all working on an eclectic array of music.

In addition to the mainstay Clackamas Chamber Singers, there are currently two vocal jazz ensembles, Mainstream and Straight Ahead, each preparing their own distinctive material, and Cline's Tuesday night Clackamas Chorale has been split into a Male Choir and Female Choir.

The Chamber Choir, along with its sister ensemble the Chorale, has achieved major accolades hosting Estonian composer Veljo Tormis and conductor Hirvo Surva, singing with the Sinfonia Concertante Orchestra under German Conductor Stefan Minde, pioneering a cross-cultural showcase in the Portland Rose Festival, and premiering compositions by Clackamas alum Ostin Drais.

Mainstream is approaching the release of its third CD and this year features a full backup ensemble with rhythm section and horns. Straight Ahead, Clackamas' original jazz choir, has been on hiatus but is back with a vengeance.

This Chamber is loaded

The Chamber Singers, with the Male/Female Choirs, performed last Sunday in the Gregory Forum, celebrating an eclectic array of compositions and folksongs from the recently independent Baltic State of Estonia, as well as some pieces in English including Negro Spirituals and the premiere of Ostin Drais' work "Gloria," the young composer's first accompanied piece.

The Chamber Singers will be performing for the Foundation Board this evening, and their next major event is Clackamas' annual entry in the ACDA College Choral Days in April, where groups from schools statewide assemble to sing.

"It's always very exciting to listen to other choirs and share what we've been doing as well," said Cline.

Cline is pleased with the continual growth of the Chamber Singers as individuals and as an ensemble. His longtime shepherding of the group has created a respected and consistently strong ensemble.

"The interesting thing is that a chamber choir used to be about 12-16 voices," related Cline. "Today, even in Europe, you can have 12-40."

The change has benefits, he continued, because "it allows a group of about 40 to do just about any music

they want to."

And the Chamber Singers have done just that. In addition to celebrating Estonian music here (composer Tormis visited two years ago and Rene Eespere is expected next year) and abroad (the choir is singing in the International Song Festival this July in Tallinn, Estonia), they have also performed works by student composers, and participated in high profile, challenging concerts, such as J.S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*. Stefan Minde has in fact invited Clackamas to sing the *Oratorio* yet a third year, and also to sing Bach's grandiose *Passion of St. Matthew*.

"We're performing the same kind of literature that professional choirs do," Cline said, adding that Clackamas has a choral standard lacking even at many four-year schools.

The community voice

Though at one time the Chorale "Community Choir" had swelled to 100 members, Cline had noticed a slump of late, and so last year initiated a change.

"As the state began to require more of students and our society began to acquire a faster pace...there's not as many casual singers as there used to be," said Cline.

There are distinct benefits to the group's current male-female split. "You get three choirs in one," Cline explained. "You can mix them, or do separate material. It's just an opportunity for people to experience choral music in a different way."

Straight into the Mainstream

Lonnie Cline's jazz choirs have an exciting year to look forward to as well. First on the agenda is the Clackamas-hosted high school Vocal Jazz Festival on March 19, dedicated to jazz musician Dave Bardoun, where both groups will perform. Then later this year the vocal jazz ensembles will be joining the Chamber and Male/Female Choirs in their Estonian tour, sharing a uniquely American form of music with a people recently under Russian domination.

When Cline transformed the swing choir 19 years ago into what would become Straight Ahead, he recognized to expand to a wider spectrum of jazz. He later expanded even more with the formation of Mainstream, splitting different influences between the two groups.

"Straight Ahead would still continue to focus on traditional jazz with some different styles," explained Cline. "Mainstream, while paying homage to the traditional, is looking to break new ground," experimenting in pop, jazz, fusion, and other contemporary styles.

Mainstream is, in fact, able to balance these styles smoothly thanks to the work of jazz arranger Jason Womack, who puts together most of the pieces the group performs.

"That's a luxury that a lot of schools don't have: someone writing just for them," Cline said.

Both Mainstream and the recently reinstated Straight Ahead are going strong, says Cline.

"They're pursuing a lot of new influences, which is always exciting."

there's a lot of talent in both groups," he related.

"Mainstream's really fun," he went on to say, "because they've got this 'band' thing going." The backing ensemble consists of drums and assorted percussion, electric and acoustic bass, a three-piece horn section, and the piano improv of Jarrod Lawson.

Of art and excellence

In a situation where the membership of a group can completely change every two years, consistency can be a challenge, but is one that Cline rises to with tenacity.

"I'll use the word 'challenging,'" he joked. "What it is, is an intense amount of pressure...sometimes I feel overwhelmed."

The outlook, however, is bright.

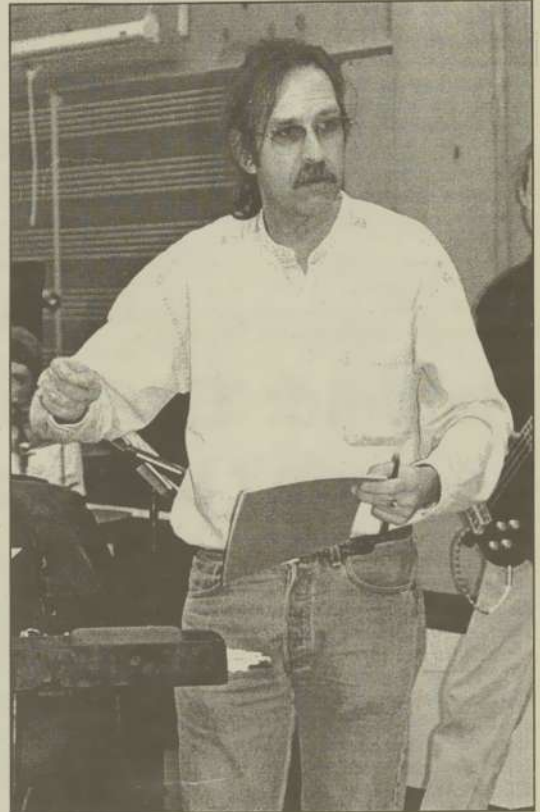
"It's been a gradual evolution...over the years we've built a reputation, and now we find that it precedes us wherever we go," Cline said.

Lonnie's Clackamas crusade may be a harrowing one, but he insists he'd have it no other way. He is working for something he believes in.

"I try to convey that art is important...to create an environment where [students] can express themselves—express the truth in a really honest fashion," Cline shared.

The bottom line is always students. Cline may push, cajole, and even fight at times, but it is all in the pursuit of a single goal:

"I just try to allow singers to achieve their potential."



TONI MCMICHAEL / Clackamas Print

Conductor Lonnie Cline leads the rehearsal of the Mainstream Vocal Jazz Ensemble Choir. Cline is interested in bringing both the traditional and jazz choirs closer in touch with music.



TIMOTHY A. BELL / Clackamas Print

Sopranos Molly Corcoran, Danielle Natie, Joanna Jenny, Kailyn Daniels and Amanda Bolts of the Clackamas Chamber Singers, one of the Northwest's top college choirs, rehearse the Bach Christmas Oratorio for last December's concert. The group sings material ranging from Renaissance and Baroque to Modern style periods.



TONI MCMICHAEL / Clackamas Print

Mainstream jazz singers Kevin Thompson, Corey Rabe, Trecia Curry, Bethann Philipps, Kairi Rand and Haley Horsfall practice in preparation for the upcoming Jazz Festival. Both Mainstream and its precursor, Straight Ahead, are working on a wide variety of both acapella and accompanied material.