Festival Chorale Oregon

By Daryl Browne

Formed in 1979, Festival Chorale Oregon began in Stayton, Oregon, as an a cappella choir with eight singers under the direction of Solveig Holmquist. Now with approximately a hundred singers, and still under Holmquist's direction, the Chorale performs regularly at the historic Elsinore Theatre in Salem. Its missions are to promote good vocal technique, present worthy major choral works, and foster an understanding of the musical arts in history.

Holmquist, a strong proponent of choral music in the mid-Willamette Valley, took degrees in voice and organ at St. Olaf College in Minnesota (1966) and music education at Oregon College of Education in Monmouth (1984). She received a doctor of musical arts in music education and choral conducting from the University of Oregon in 1995 and was director of Choral Studies at Western Oregon University from 1996 to 2011.

The decade-long transition from performing as a small a cappella choir to a large group suited for full choral and orchestral works involved recruiting singers and having a creative programming philosophy. The membership process of Festival Chorale Oregon stems from Holmquist's early experience with gender bias against female conductors and her belief that all who desire to should freely use their artistic abilities. Singers join the dues-paying membership through a self-audition process. At the beginning of each performance quarter, they are invited to rehearse with the choir and determine whether they can meet the musical and vocal demands and the rehearsal and performance commitments.

By 1993, the ensemble was performing three concerts a year, featuring such classic choral works as Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols* and the *Requiem Mass* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, as well as the music of Gilbert and Sullivan, George Gershwin, and Cole Porter. The independent choir is sustained through patron contributions, sponsorships, grants, and the efforts of the choir's Festival Carolers, who have performed at private parties, business gatherings, malls, retirement centers, and hospitals.

The Chorale has hosted a number of international choirs (German, Spanish, and Scottish) and has toured Europe several times, most recently in 2018. The group performed in New York City's Lincoln Hall and at Carnegie Hall five times. Festival Chorale Oregon also has collaborated with Salem-area arts organizations, including regional orchestras, the Salem Symphonic Winds, and area high schools. It also appeared with the Western Oregon University Theater Department in performances of Hugo Distler's *Totentanz* (*Dance of Death*). Theme programs have highlighted the music of Africa, a celebration of Cole Porter, and the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The choir's primary repertoire, however, has been large works with orchestra, including the *Requiem Mass* by Giuseppe Verdi, Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Felix Mendelssohn's *Elijah,* and J.S. Bach's *B Minor Mass*.

Sources

Festival Choral Oregon, website. https://www.festivalchorale.org/

The Oregon Encyclopedia

https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/festival-chorale-oregon/