

Portland Symphonic Girlchoir

By Daryl Browne

The Portland Symphonic Girlchoir, the city's first public choir for girls, was launched by the Portland Symphonic Choir in 1989. It was a volatile period for the arts, as school funding was threatened by the passage of Measure 5 and Portland-area school music programs faced devastating cuts. Now at the beginning of its fourth decade, Portland Symphonic Girlchoir continues, with founding director Roberta Q. Jackson at the podium sharing artistic reins with Co-Conductor Debra D. Burgess.

The Portland Symphonic Choir was in its forty-fourth season when its board approved a new budget line for the Portland Symphonic Girlchoir (PSG). With a \$2,000 grant from the Oregon Arts Commission to fund artistic leadership and help from a Portland Symphonic Choir subcommittee, Portland-area educator Jackson began recruiting singers, acquiring a venue, and planning concerts. Thirty-nine girls showed up for the first rehearsal, and the choir premiered at the Portland Symphonic Choir concert in Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall on Thanksgiving weekend 1989. The choir performed its first solo concert the following year and in 1997 became an independent nonprofit organization. With a growing reputation of musical excellence and the commissioning of new works, PSG was attracting girls of all ages.

What began as one ensemble, a Premier Choir for girls in fourth through eighth grades, blossomed into a program with four choirs for girls and young women: Debut Choir (1994), for ages five through ten; Intermezzo Choir (2000), for ages ten through thirteen; and Encore Singers (1997) and Premier Choir, for ages thirteen through eighteen. PSG singers pay tuition, with scholarship funds available for those in need. Auditions take place annually, with the youngest singers evaluated for their ability to match pitch and sing with a pure and natural voice.

Championing new choral works for treble voices has been a hallmark of the choir's mission. Beginning with Northwest composers Margaret Vance and Valerie Shields in 1992, the choir has commissioned and performed forty-five works and sponsors *Music in the Making: Workshop/Concert Artist-in-Residency* each spring at which PSG and six guest choirs work extensively with a composer/conductor-in-residence. Since the choir's founding, several accompanists have served the choir, including Kay Doyle for twenty-one years.

Conductors Jackson and Burgess and the accompanists offer performance-based choral music education, including vocal coaching, training in notation and sight reading, and sound performance practice. Singers receive assistance in preparing solo repertoire for college auditions and other performances.

Portland Symphonic Girlchoir has been recognized for its artistry and its commitment to collaborative ventures. It was the choir-in-residence at festivals in Victoria, B.C., and York, England, and at the Pacific International Choral Festivals. In both 2003 and 2015, PSG received the prestigious Chorus America/ASCAP Award for Adventurous Programming. The choir also has performed for Northwest American Choral Director Association and Oregon Music Educator conferences. Jackson and Burgess have been active in ACDA as Oregon State President (Jackson), committee chairs, and board members. The choir has enjoyed artistic collaborations with musical arts organizations in the Pacific Northwest, including the Oregon Symphony, the Portland Youth Philharmonic, the Columbia Symphony Orchestra, and the Youth Choir of Central Oregon. The Premier Choir toured Central Europe in the summer of 2022.

Since its inception, the choir has worked to empower the voices of young women, and PSG alumni number just over 2,000 singers. One of them, composer and singer Amy Burgess, composed the commissioned piece performed at the twenty-fifth conducting anniversary event honoring her mother, Debra D. Burgess.

Sources

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