

Journal Newspapers

12/06/2005

Northwest Boychoir presents it's 27th holiday concert series

By: Chelan David , Journal Newspapers



Over 200 voices strong, the Northwest Boychoir provides a holiday tradition for many Puget Sound families.

As a 31-year-old entity, the Northwest Boychoir has gracefully reached adulthood while experiencing many memorable moments along the way. There was the appearance at St. Mary's Cathedral in Sydney, Australia, nearly 20 years ago, which marked one of the first times that a Western boy choir performed there. There are the numerous movie soundtracks that have been recorded over the years. And, of course, there have been scores of unforgettable performances in conjunction with the Seattle Symphony.

As with most forms of humanity, the organization has grown larger with age. In its adolescence, when Joseph Crnko took the helm as music director in 1984, the enrollment was about 65. Now the overall enrollment is about 200 strong. And in this case bigger is definitely better.

"As your talent pool grows the quality of your group increases," said Crnko. "What we've encountered as we've toured around and performed with other choirs is that our choir has a leg up musically."

Over the years the group's reputation has spread throughout the country and praise has been doled out by influential authorities. The director of the American Boy Choir, a full-time residency program based in Princeton which is considered the dean of boy choirs in the United States, was so wowed when his group passed through Seattle that he felt his boys might become a little unnerved.

"He said, 'I'm not used to hearing regional choirs that are this good. In fact, my boys are actually intimidated to sing in front of you,'" recalled Crnko. "It was pretty huge, although we were shaking in our boots too, so it was kind of reciprocal."

Crnko attributes the group's singing prowess to the formalized training curriculum that is in place. Music education is an important part of the choir's overall mission and the program enables the participants to become functional and literate musicians.

The ability to read music has proven invaluable during recordings for movie soundtracks, as oftentimes, the boys are handed the music for the first time when they arrive at the studio. In the past year the choir was featured on the soundtracks of two first-run movies: First Daughter, a movie starring Katie Holmes and Michael Keaton, and Millions, a family-oriented movie directed by Danny Boyle who is best known for The Beach and Trainpotting.

The Northwest Boychoir's role on the Millions soundtrack was bigger than expected.

"They came here and fell in love with the choir and wound up featuring us much more prominently on the soundtrack than they thought they were going to do initially," said Crnko.

To stay polished, the choir goes through rigorous training with two rehearsals each week. They also maintain a busy concert schedule including local performances, recording sessions and tours.

Graeme Aegerter, 13, embraces the dedication required to be a member of the choir and is grateful for the opportunities that it provides.

"Even though it's hard work it pays off," he said. Aegerter, who has been in the choir for three years, eventually hopes to become a music composer.

At a recent Monday evening practice, the studying, conversing and horseplay stopped instantaneously with Crnko's first piano note. Numbering approximately 35 strong, the members of the performing choir assumed their positions for a warm-up exercise, and like a pleasant summer breeze, angelic harmony echoed throughout the room.

Midway through the session, when Crnko mentioned he'd be bringing in a CD featuring Medieval English intonations, a chorus of "cool," arose. Later, when he announced "O Holy Night" would be the next song that the group would be practicing, clapping erupted.

While the training is technically time spent away from video games, roughhousing and other activities associated with young boys, the rehearsals exude a sense of merriment.

"I look forward to this everyday when I'm in school," said Theo Floor, 12, who would like to be a jazz musician someday. Many of Floor's friends are in the choir, including his best friend who was just elevated into the performing group.

The boys are divided into five distinct choirs, based on age and skill. The youngest boys are six, with nine being the youngest age in the top performing choir. Typically, the choir members reach their vocal peak at around 12, and within the next year or so, their voices begin to break.

The Northwest Choirs, which is comprised of the Northwest Boychoir and Vocalpoint! Seattle - a coed ensemble of high school students - is a nonprofit. Based in the U-District, the organization is supported by box-office revenue, fund-raising efforts and tuition paid by students. One third of the participants are on scholarship and no one is denied access to the program because of money.

During the course of a typical year, the ensembles give approximately 50 performances. This month the Northwest Boychoir will continue its 27-year tradition of presenting "A Festival of Lessons & Carols." The concert, which is patterned after the Christmas Eve observance at King's College in Cambridge, England, has become an annual tradition for many families in the Puget Sound area.

Crnko, of course, has enjoyed the past 21 versions and is able to recall many fond memories that have occurred under his tenure. A moment that still resonates with him is a visit to Washington, D.C. that occurred nearly 10 years ago. After performing at the National Cathedral, the choir was given permission by the U.S. military to perform in the amphitheater behind the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Limited to one song, they launched into a melodic rendition of "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

"After the performance, one of the attaches came up to us and said, 'You know the people who are closest to you in the ground are all Civil War veterans,'" recalled Crnko about the serendipitous song choice. "That was really a magical moment."

And the most rewarding aspect of the job he has held for over two decades?

"It's the long-term commitment to the kids," he said. "You meet so many great kids and you watch them evolve in to great young adults. My friendship pool is just full."

For information about concert dates please visit www.northwestchoirs.org.