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Chorale sets benchmark for creativity, excellence

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If there's one thing you can count on with Masterworks Chorale, it's that change is a constant in its programming.

For 36 years this select group of singers has brought the best of music old and new, sacred and secular to a loyal and discriminating audience.

Since Donna Tozer Wipfli took over leadership 18 years ago, the chorale's dedication to and presentation of high-quality music in exacting performance has noticeably increased.

Still, even for this group, last night's concert, *Collage*, set a benchmark for creativity and excellence.

In less than 90 minutes, the audience in the Maumee Performing Arts Center was taken on an artistic journey that began and ended with chorale music, yet comprised so much more: dancers and choreography from Ballet Theatre of Toledo, instrumentalists, the world premiere of a work by local composer Lee Heritage, and guest singers, percussionists, and pianists.

The total effect so clearly exceeded the sum of its parts, and yet each part was memorable and unique.

The choir's opening number, "Putting it Together" (Stephen Sondheim), spoke to the organization and discipline required to package the diversity of music - from Gregorian chant to ragtime and experimental 20th-century works - into a program that flowed seamlessly from number to number, thanks to clever staging and dramatic lighting.

Spaced in an arc from stage left to right, the full chorus sounded smooth and extremely well balanced in its big numbers, from the Sondheim to "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," "Epitaph for Moonlight," by Canadian R. Murray Schafer, and "The Promise of Living" from Copland's *The Tender Land*, with guest pianist Michael Boyd joining Chorale accompanist Jill Roth.

In between came smaller vocal ensembles plus Amy Heritage in the premiere of "Seeing," a work for solo flute written just Tuesday by her husband; a stirring rendition of "Lift up Your Heads" by guest soprano Joyce Rush, with Teresa Blowers, piano, and several eloquent and original works choreographed by Nigel Burgoine of Ballet Theatre of Toledo.

In the latter, while the chorale sang Lucy Simon's beautiful "Come to My Garden" from the opera *The Secret Garden*, young dancers Madison Riley and Spencer Hack brought to life the tender story of this classic tale by Francis Burnett. And, as cellist James Anderson drew out the notes of Saint-Saens' "The Swan," dancer Kelsey Carpenter provided a delicate and touching evocation of the music.

The second half moved from "Freedom is Coming," a rousing South African song, to Shostakovich duets performed by violinists Cecilia Johnson, Dana Clare Mader, and Alice Neff Peterson with Jill Roth, to a marvelous gospel number by full chorale: "Worthy to be Praised."

More stylish dancing by Mallory Pettee, Hannah Robinett, and Sarah Squillante energized Joplin's rag "The Easy Winners," and an intense performance by dancer Kalina Hillard of Bizet's "Habanera" added flamenco fire to music performed by Johnson, Mader, Peteren, Anderson, and Heritage. Steven Tozer Wipfli and David Wright were dynamic in "I Can See It" from *The Fantasticks*.

Finally, the finale: three sections from Orff's "Carmina Burana" summoned the spirit of the entire evening with percussionists Rob Donaldson, Jon Floering, and Jonatha Ovalle, Roth and Boyd, and dancers Carpenter, Hillard, Pettee, Robinette, Squillante, and Emma Wolfe in a splendid evocation of all that's wonderful about fine music, excellent dance, and brilliant staging. Well done!

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