



The Sound of Men Laughing This Christmas

By Stan Jenson

At a time when most gay businesses and groups are dwindling, Men Alive – The Orange County's Gay Men's Chorus continues to grow, both on stage and in the audience. When the curtain rises on the group's Christmas concert in December, almost 130 gay men will be seen — and heard! And oh, what a glorious sound they make!

To trace the history of the group, we need to start with Artistic Director Rich Cook. Born in New Jersey, Cook was interested in all things musical and the artistic from childhood. As a boy, he would set up a stage in the cellar or garage, build sets and charge the neighbors a nickel.

As he grew, he got heavily involved in the Episcopal Church and especially loved the choral music. He studied to be a minister and a choral director, and eventually worked with some big churches on television. He was music director of Melodyland Church in Anaheim for almost two decades and also worked on television with Pat Robertson and Trinity Broadcasting, writing a lot of the theme music.

Eventually, Cook realized that living with a wife and children in a conservative church setting was not what he was about. He set out on his own and started a production company to do industrials and trade shows, but he missed choral music. He knew that gay men's choruses were springing up around the country, so in 2001, he formed one in Orange County with 13 voices. Their first concert in a church hall was a modest affair, but it created a spark in both the performers and the audiences.

As it starts its 2009-2010 season, Men Alive is virtually an industry, with an active board of directors. Cook is still at the helm, but teams of individuals — male and female, gay and straight — raise money, sign contracts, sell tickets, sew costumes and offer every form of support. And much support is required, because Men Alive has never thought small. If it wants a Broadway diva, it imports Bernadette Peters; if it wants to do highlights from the Broadway blockbuster "Wicked," it finds ways to put 120 chorus members in multiple costumes and fly actors all around the stage.

For 2009-2010, the group has taken a look at the current state of our society and called the season "Laugh out Loud! Love out Loud!" This month's concert is titled "Laughing All The Way" and combines some of the most beautiful Christmas music with some of the funniest and most outrageous songs. The choir's musical integrity is confirmed with its renditions of "Ave Maria" and "Ose Shalom." The laughs will come from "Christmastime in California," "Ate Too Much at Christmas" and "The Dieter's Prayer." Rumor has it that a certain popular fat gentleman will coordinate the onstage activities!

The season continues with "Fever of Love" in March and "Comedy Tonight: The Funniest Music and Comedy of Stage & Screen" in July. A special masterpiece matinee in May will present songs of hope and showcase the classical side of the chorus.

Season tickets are available at www.MenAliveChorus.org, and, considering the sold-out concerts in 2008, season tickets are a wise investment.

In addition to the spectacular music, there's always plenty to look at in a Men Alive concert, with lots of sight gags, dialogue between the songs and choreography, including some specialty dance groups. Plus, there's nothing wrong with just looking at 130 gay men for a couple of hours.

"Laughing All The Way" plays Dec. 4 and 5 at 8 p.m. at the Irvine Barclay Theatre on the University of California, Irvine Campus, located at 4242 Campus Drive. Tickets are \$25-\$47.50 and available at www.TheBarclay.org or by phone at (949) 854-4646.

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