

[Home page](#) > [Entertainment](#) > [Arts](#)

Monday, December 11, 2006

## Bringing the holidays to life

Review: A few fun moments at the end offset a sluggish start by Men Alive – the Orange County Gay Men's Chorus.

By PETER LEFEVRE

Special to the Register



*Men Alive: the Orange County Gay Men's Chorus performs the first of two holiday shows at the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Hall on Sunday.*

One Christmas, I found under my tree a plaster-of-paris lamp in the shape of a cottage on a hill. The lampshade depicted the changing of the seasons. It was the tackiest piece of kitsch I have ever received. Even Thomas Kinkade would have winced. Then, more than ever, it was the thought that counted.

You have to laugh. And having a little fun with the 12 clichés of Christmas is a time-honored tradition. Faced with stop-and-stop-again traffic, the Dante-esque world of the shopping mall, and all-carols, all-the-time, we generally accept that the commercialized aspects of the holiday need a little nose-tweaking.

Enter Men Alive - the Orange County Gay Men's Chorus, which brought some of that spirit to its holiday pops performance at the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Hall on Sunday afternoon (with a second performance that evening). The concert kicked off the group's sixth season and served as the chorus's inaugural appearance in the hall.

Interspersed among the many button-down, earnest selections were some genuinely hilarious production numbers that represented, to my mind, much more of the true meaning

of Christmas: laughter, warmth, community.

The light-hearted and theatrical moments represented, unfortunately, comparatively little of the program. There was a whole lot of nice and not so much naughty, and when the 110-member chorus turned to traditional fare, more often than not the results were uninspiring: superficial arrangements and good but not great choral standards.

The West Coast premiere of Morten Lauridsen's "Ave Dulcissima Maria" (2004, commissioned by the Harvard Glee Club) provided the musical highlight. A sacred motet sung a cappella, the setting alternates haunting chant-like passages with densely layered harmonic texture. Well-sung with confident and reverent solos from Andre Chasse, Ron Leon and Larry Gates.

The afternoon also offered the premiere performance of "Festive Joy and Peace," from Rich Cook, the chorus's artistic director, who also oversaw matters from the podium. As a conductor, Cook was fully invested in the performances, enthusiastic and energetic. As a composer and arranger (several of the pieces on the program were his handiwork) he tends to the easy gesture, harmonically simple, melodically predictable. "Festive Joy and Peace" was just such a confection.

The sluggish first half (a Bolero-style "Little Drummer Boy," Jule Styne's ubiquitous "Christmas Waltz") came to life toward the end. The Orange County Women's Chorus, expertly directed by Eliza Rubenstein, performed three numbers, notably Daniel Pinkham's deceptively complex "The Queens Came Late," and "Follow the Drinking Gourd" with an affecting, plaintive solo from Sarah Iyer. Both choruses joined together for Jester Hairston's ebullient "Wonderful Counselor."

Then, the fun. Berman and Clark's genius-level parody of Jerry Herman, "We Three Kings," a raucous rendition of Menken and Ahrens' "Mr Fezziwig's Annual Christmas Ball," and "Too Fat to Fit" (tongue-in-cheek dieting advice for Santa). A singalong filled out the afternoon, with the program proper capped off by a nod to the "heroes" alluded to in the program title: Frosty, Rudolph, The Grinch, Santa.

An ad hoc orchestra provided admirable support all evening. Bob Gunn was the hardworking and gifted pianist.

As a unit, the chorus can use a little more heft in the lower end, a little more precision in its attack, some more ambitious programming. Such Scrooge-like sentiments seem small, though, while recollecting a group of grown men dancing a Folies Bergère kickline in tree skirts and santa caps.

#### 'Holiday Heroes'

- With: Men Alive – The Orange County Gay Men's Chorus; Rich Cook, conductor; The Orange County Women's Chorus, Eliza Rubenstein, conductor
- Where: The Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall, Orange County Performing Arts Center, Costa Mesa
- When: Dec. 10