

Saturday, March 15, 2003

# Group Has Something to Sing About

Men Alive - The Orange County Gay Men's Chorus presents "International Voices" on March 22.

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Special to the Register

Dramatic. Bombastic. Serious. Sublime. On Saturday, March 22, the boys of Men Alive-The Orange County Gay Men's Chorus will present "International Voices," the second part of its premiere trilogy season. The annual three-concert series represents the usual format for the more than 180 gay and lesbian choruses worldwide. The traditionally somber spring concert showcases both classical and folk music from around the world. The program includes highlights from the classical giants including Verdi, Mozart, Beethoven and Rachmaninoff. In contrast, the event is laced with moments of comic relief, thus promising to entertain and amuse with some surprising lyrics and an American Gay Anthem. Bach's Fugue in G Minor presents as the vehicle for a special cold and "fugue" season arrangement. And...representing the folk genre, Men Alive will perform an exquisite rendition of "Danny Boy", in addition to the Swahili "Jambo Rafiki Yangu" (Welcome my Friend).

In response to the absence of a gay chorus in Orange County, founding Artistic Director Rich Cook created Men Alive in September 2001. The gay and lesbian vocal presence has been heard in major cities across the nation including Los Angeles, Long Beach, Portland, Denver, Dallas, San Diego and San Francisco, where the San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus first performed in 1978. The mission of Men Alive is to create beautiful music as a vehicle for both joy and healing, and, to bridge the divide between the gay community and the community at large. The classical repertoire is typically religious in nature. Historically, the Church has marginalized homosexuals. Therefore, gay choruses, with few exceptions, usually dwell in the house of Broadway, Pop and Cabaret. "For religious choral members, it's wonderful to be able to embrace the sacred aspect of singing again," said Paul Findlay, Marketing Director. Of course, during the past decade many choruses have sung commissioned works based on political themes such as: living with aids, the right to marry, family reconciliation, etc. The SF Gay Men's Chorus performed Nakedman in 1996; a song cycle solely dedicated to political issues.

Artistic director, conductor and ASCAP composer Rich Cook was born into a religious family. As far back as he can remember, "I was called to work in Christian ministry." His talent led him to work as musical/artistic director for Trinity Broadcasting, Melodyland in Anaheim and Pat Robertson's political campaign in 1988. Additionally, he wrote music for

televangelists Jim and Tammy Baker and performed original songs on their PTL program. Eight years ago, at the pinnacle of his career, Rich "experienced a spiritual implosion and could no longer go on with the masquerade." Years of therapy, exorcism and denial would no longer suffice. Rich came out and the aftermath left him devastated. He was fired from his high-profile job at a large Christian ministry, and his wife left the state with their youngest of three daughters. Fortunately, the largest gay church in the world, Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, opened their doors to him in 1995 and hired him to direct the music for their Christmas show. Finally, Rich was able to integrate conducting sacred music with his true identity. Cook then became acquainted with the Turtle Creek Chorale, a prominent gay men's chorus with 250 members. Their success and commitment to the classics served as a major inspiration for the launching of Men Alive.

Cook wants to continue to establish the concert season in the community and research prime touring sites. Men Alive will perform their "Summer Cruisin'" concert in July at the South Coast Repertory Theater, and has plans to travel to Montreal next Spring for the international GALA (Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, Inc.) Festival.

Inspired by a "Will and Grace" episode where Jack joins a gay chorus, and by a therapist's Rx for shyness, Michael Quintos, age 28, joined the chorus in March 2002. Michael is one of those rarest of breeds in the music world, a counter-tenor or male soprano. He was a featured soloist in the December holiday concert, singing Joy to the World. For this concert, he has chosen to "take a rest and just blend in." Michael was born in the Philippines, where he placed as a junior vocalist champion in Star Search. When he turned eleven, his family moved to Las Vegas. While performing in a junior high musical review, "someone in the audience yelled out faggot and it just shut me down." Michael didn't sing again until 1993, when he attended Chapman University and performed at Gay Pride festivities. Growing up, Michael's parents were often heard making "snide and disparaging remarks about homosexuals." He spent most of his young adulthood tortured and in abject fear of rejection. Courageously, he decided to come out to them two weeks before his choral debut. To his utter surprise, "they were completely accepting and supportive," and have since become two of his most devoted fans. For Michael Quintos, singing in Men Alive "was a catalyst to transform my parental relationship and has given me a better outlook on life."

Men Alive juggles a delicate balancing act between entertainment and quality music. Although their mission is far from message driven, "it certainly makes a political statement to watch 70 gay men stand up and sing everyday songs," says Paul Findlay. As Rich Cook says, " We're not trying to convince anybody that gay is ok, we're just a group of gay men that ARE ok."