

The Olympia Choral Society: Serving the Community While Creating Great Music | ThurstonTalk

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By Laurie

The Olympia Choral Society will perform their annual free holiday concert, *A World of Christmas*, on December 9th and 10th (7:30 pm) and December 11th (2:30 pm) at the Koval Center for the Performing Arts at North Thurston High School, 600 Sleater-Kinney Road NE in Lacey.

The Olympia Choral Society (OCS) has been under the direction Terry Shaw since 1998 when he and a handful of other musicians decided there was a need for another choir in the area.

“The idea of it to start with, was (just) to do a Christmas concert,” Shaw explains. A senior at Pacific Lutheran University at the time, Shaw and the 15 other original members of the group made the decision to offer the concert free of charge so that even those without a lot of disposable income could enjoy some well performed holiday music. “The more we kind of started thinking about it, it was more of a ‘Why do we need to charge money? Just because everybody does?’ Well it didn’t cost us money to open our mouths,” says Shaw.

From that original group of 15, the chorus has blossomed into a 95-voice group that draws talent from as far away as Shelton and Centralia.

Starting with that first free concert, the choir has been civic minded. They have adopted a mission to serve the community by raising funds to benefit local charities and organizations. They also offer a \$1500 scholarship, awarded annually to a student from the area who plans to study vocal music in college. Since 1999, OCS has donated more than \$100,000.

The choir performs two concerts each year, a Christmas Program and a spring concert. Although admission is free, donations are solicited. Traditionally the Christmas Show brings in between seven and ten thousand dollars with the choir giving the bulk of that to a selected charity. This year’s beneficiary will be the Safe Place Children’s Program which provides children with emergency shelter, food, clothing, advocacy and child care.



Since the beginning, the emphasis has been on helping groups that advocate for children. Says Shaw, “That was just something I decided a long time ago. I want us, as an organization, to embrace children, to embrace youth in our community.” He knows that focus is a draw for many of his singers, too. “I want to do what I can do to help, and I ask 95 of my closest friends to do it with me.”

Suzanne Grimm, an Olympia School District music teacher confirms the unified mission. “I think that the singing aspect is so fantastic – to get together with all these fabulous singers – but the part that draws

me also is the community service part of it, where we get to raise money for people in the community that need that extra help. It’s kind of a nice blend of being able to continue singing and create some great music that people can come to for free, which is fabulous – you don’t find that

everywhere – and the community service piece is a great part of this group also.”

As a fellow music educator, Grimm has nothing but praise for Shaw, whose full time gig is as choir director at Timberline High School in the North Thurston School District. “Terry is a great director. He’s brilliant at what he can get out of this group,” she says.

Alan Newman agrees that the level of singing in the group is a huge draw. A charter member of the group, Newman is a civil engineer, but he has an extensive background in choral music and has sung in a number of Operas, too. “There are not a lot of opportunities around to sing this kind of music at this level,” he says. “I also like the fact that we do free concerts and we give away our money.”

Twenty-three year old Karina Walthall was introduced to the choir during one of their Christmas concerts. “I’ve always loved being in choir, and I was in choir in high school,” she says. With a year of collegiate choir singing under her belt, she was living in a different part of the state and singing with a local group when she got married and moved to the Olympia area. Coming from a much smaller, less professional group, she was impressed by the level of singing she heard at the concert and decided to audition.

Says Newman, “We have a pretty broad range of musical ability, skill, and background from people. In some cases, this is almost their very first choral singing experience to others who used to do this professionally.”

Attrition is low, and Shaw loves that his group is so dedicated. “We can’t get any bigger as a choir. We can’t get any more people in the room. We can’t get any more people on the stage. We’re locked at about 95 people. It’s a matter of replacing people when they leave. There really aren’t that many openings.”

He is also looking forward to their upcoming Christmas concert, *A World of Christmas*, which consists primarily of Christmas songs taken from around the world with a few standard ones thrown in.

“I love the idea of getting these unfamiliar tunes from unfamiliar places and unfamiliar peoples. Our world, honestly, is in a place right now where everybody’s falling apart right now. I think there’s a peace in embracing each other that we all need to take part in. What better way to do it than through music. I don’t have to get up and give a sermon at this concert. All we do is get up and sing, and people can take from that what they want. I think it’s a necessary concert for us right now.”



For more information about the Olympia Choral Society:

<http://olympiachoral.org/>

To find out more about applying for the OCS Vocal Music Scholarship:

<http://olympiachoral.org/communityservice/highschoolscholarship.html>

(Applications due on February 1, 2012.)

To find out more about applying for the Christmas Community Charity Grant: <http://olympiachoral.org/communityservice/christmascharity.html>

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