

MUSIC

Morris' 'Strict Songs' gets superb premiere

By Louise Kincaid
Special to The P-I

In just a few years, the Seattle Men's Chorus has gained a strong following, a lot of support and some impressive credentials here and throughout the country. All very well deserved indeed. The 120-member chorus continues to challenge itself artistically, and the results have been rewarding.

The chorus has been noted for its distinctive and versatile programming — and last evening was no exception.

The program consisted of a richly varied program that included the world premiere of newly commissioned work by Seattle choreographer Mark Morris, along with the local premiere of a new composition by composer David Conte. The Northwest Chamber Orchestra ably accompanied the chorus.

Kevin Gallagher provided sign language for the entire program. Gallagher is much more than just a signer for the hearing impaired. He is an artist first and foremost, seeming to combine mime and choreography into his own unique craft.

But the centerpiece for the evening was the world premiere of Morris' "Strict Songs" set to the music of Louis Harrison.

A perfect blending of movement and music, "Strict Songs" is enormously successful. The work is set in four minimal movements to the haunting background of chorus and chamber orchestra, which are placed behind a scrim. The music is simple, exact and rhythmic. Likewise the choreography.

Each movement explores little more than one gesture. This gesture formed the motivic material that Morris built on, continually expanding and condensing the single element. Like a kalei-

Review

Seattle Men's Chorus performing works by Holst, Harrison and Conte along with Elizabethan, Victorian and Early American selections. The chorus was joined by choreographer Mark Morris and the Mark Morris Dance Group and Kevin Gallagher. Dennis Coleman conducted at Meany Theater at the UW last evening.

doscope, the patterns never stopped changing.

Morris' use of movement and music is so simple and understated that it seems as if something should be wrong, but everything is exactly right. No more, no less. The work was energetic and explosive, provocative and poignant. The only negative criticism I have to add is that the costumes looked both thrifty and ugly, flattering for neither the girls nor the boys.

David Conte's "Invocation and Dance" also highlighted the program. The opening "Invocation" with its persistent pulse and long, languorous lines reflected peaceful resignation and repose. The following "Dance" with its mixed metric exuberance suggested joy in a spiritual affirmation of everlasting life. The work was lovely and touching.

A small ensemble called "Philandros" made up of members of the large chorus sang a set of Elizabethan and Victorian songs. The countertenor's work was noteworthy; however, the group had some major problems with intonation, ensemble and blend.

Although the chorus has 120 members, it is not unwieldy. The chorus is a model of blend, diction, precision, phrasing and ensemble. The tenors were terrific, while the baritones were warm with big, burnished sound.