

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Men's chorus teams traditional singing with new dance

by Melinda Bargreen
Times music critic

Once upon a time in America, every town had its male chorus and an assortment of ethnic choruses, too. People sang for enter-

tainment, instead of turning into couch tubers before the TV.

Now there are only a few such choruses left. But in Seattle, we have the Seattle Men's Chorus to remind us what the great tradition of male chorus singing is all about.

■ **The Seattle Men's Chorus**, with Dennis Coleman conducting, and the Mark Morris Dance Group; 8 p.m. Meany Theater, last night, tomorrow (sold out) and Sunday (a few tickets remain for the last performance; 628-0888).

Last night's concert was an excellent reminder that also demonstrated how popular choral music can be: Meany Theater was nearly sold out for the first of three performances. Only a few Sunday tickets remain.

The chorus serves two other purposes besides maintaining that tradition. It is a symbol of unity and pride in the gay community (though its artistic aims come first as the chorus' statement of purpose declares: "We are united in the pride we take in our singing and our being gay."). And the chorus with its director, Dennis Coleman, has taken a leading role in commissioning and performing important new works from internationally renowned artists — not just the avant-garde for its own

sake, but works that have something to communicate.

That role was exemplified last night in the arrival of a major and stunning new dance work commissioned by the chorus from Mark Morris, the young Seattle-based choreographer and dancer who has been garnering rave reviews from coast to coast. The work, premiered last night to the Four Strict Songs of California composer Lou Harrison (who was in the audience), full of animal vitality and beautiful images.

Harrison's texts are based on nature images of flora, fauna, earth and elements, and Morris interprets them sometimes literally, sometimes in geometric iconography. His dancers were barelegged and clad in the colors of earth and sky.

The choreography is complex and extremely active, with lots of leaping, becoming progressively more interesting in the stylized intertwining of poses. The final image is a gorgeous one: Dancers bathed in blue light, half the troupe floating in the air on the "pedes-

tals" of the other supine dancers' perpendicular legs, while the chorus sings "Here is splendor, of the galaxy, and the turquoise cloudless heaven" to Harrison's incantatory, mystical music.

The evening also saw the Seattle premiere of David Conte's *Invocation and Dance*, an attractive piece scored for orchestra (the Northwest Chamber Orchestra) and percussion as well as the singers. The program opened with Holst's fourth group of Choral Hymns from the *Rig Veda*, and also included a closing group of folk songs and a set of madrigals sung by a smaller group from the chorus (the Philandros Singers).

The singers looked sharp and professional, and they have been trained with a care and precision that speaks volumes about Coleman's choral conducting expertise. Nothing is left to chance; everything — even the contemporary scores — is memorized, and details of attack and diction are all in place. The group has its limitations (*a cappella* singing among them), but Coleman is adept at circumventing them. Hats off to him for his skill and daring, and for bringing first-rate new art to Seattle audiences.