

Critical Review
The Longmont Chorale
Celtic Voices, Pipes and Drums
October 21, 2012

Last week I had the pleasure of attending one of Longmont's outstanding musical groups, the *Longmont Chorale*. This Chorale saw its beginnings in 1937, a very large part of Longmont cultural history to say the least. The Chorale has grown from a group of twenty-five to over a hundred voices, all volunteers who love music and want to share and educate their community with different music from all over the world. The large choir is a completely non-auditioned choir, the only one in the area but that doesn't mean poor quality. This group is completely professional in their demeanor, the way they present themselves, and their sound. They also have had some outstanding artistic directors including the present day director, Scott Hamlin and associate director, Raymond Harrison. Both of these men have impressive résumés and expect and achieve excellence from the choir. The pianist, Karen Main has been associated with the Chorale for over 28 years and is an integral part of the Chorale.

The concert opened with a fanfare of the *Denver and District Pipe Band* marching down the aisles to the front of the house and whether you were of Celtic descent or not, you could not help but be moved by their music and precision playing. I was very impressed at the choreography of the drummers and how they twirled their sticks in almost perfect unison. The Highland and Irish Dancers are a must in this type of concert and they never fail to put a smile on everyone's face and also make one wonder how they can remember all those complicated steps.

This was a lovely opening to the main part of the concert and my only constructive criticism would be to watch the time. The pieces were not in the program and I was wondering how long this was going to be before the Chorale began their part of the program. Just as I was thinking this, there began an excellent transition from the *Denver and District Pipe Band* to the *Longmont Chorale*. As the Band marched down and out the auditorium from the two center aisles, the Chorale filed on stage from the two farthest aisles and no time was wasted in getting this large group ready to sing. Everyone looked attentive and excited and this was one of the few choirs that I could say had more smiles on their faces than not.

The program was chosen with care and consisted of a good mix of styles, with folk songs being the main body arranged by various composers. Many of the songs featured choir members as soloists which gave those with more musical backgrounds an opportunity to highlight their talents. I found that as both a positive and slightly negative feature of the concert. It sometimes detracted from the smoothness and timing of the concert when chairs, microphones and stands needed to be rearranged for instrumentalists and vocalists. There were occasions when the sound system was overloaded and naturally, the microphones started giving too much feedback causing everyone to grimace at the noise but that was not often.

I really enjoyed the mix of accompanied and unaccompanied pieces. This showed the high skill of his singers. "Danny Boy" was one such unaccompanied piece and since this is a tune everyone knows, it can be quite challenging. They blended very well with no voice part overshadowing another. "Mairi's Wedding" was just plain toe-tapping fun and you could see how the choristers were just having a ball singing this piece.

How lucky this chorale is to have such two talented directors. Raymond Harrison conducted the smaller, auditioned group and arranged several pieces for them. This group performed more intricate pieces and the song "My Wedding Day" was a beautiful, haunting arrangement by Raymond Harrison with the choir simulating rain on the moors through hand movements and a piper using his practice pipe to create the sound of a bagpipe in the distance. For a change of pace and to bring this section to a close, Raymond chose two pieces that had everyone smiling and clapping their hands. "I'll Tell My Ma" was arranged by Mr. Harrison as if everyone was sitting in an Irish Pub drinking and singing. Very lively and by the end of the piece, I think we all could join in the chorus. The banjo, violin and bass just added to the pub atmosphere all the more. It was very nice to have explanations and some backgrounds of these songs which made their last piece, "Oliver Cromwell" much more entertaining and even helped with understanding the words since the tempo was lightening speed which is indicated by the composer, Benjamin Britten.

The *Denver and District Pipe Band* joined the choir in a rendition of "Amazing Grace". This is always a favorite of mine with the pipes. Unfortunately, the band's placement around the audience made it quite impossible to hear the Chorale even though at the climax of the piece, they were probably singing full voice. Mr. Hamlin was aware of this and I know if the situation arises again to have pipes and the choir together, he would change the arrangement of the groups. No one can out sing a pipe and drum band. Mr. Hamlin brought the concert to an end with the Chorale encircling the audience and singing the very thought provoking "Deep Peace". He paired the music with slides of beautiful scenery and the combination of auditory and visual art had the audience in a tranquil, 'all is right with the world' mood at the end of the concert. Very well done and the combination of professionalism and community singing I heard coming from The *Longmont Chorale* makes this one of the top Chorales in Colorado and I would definitely mark their concerts on my calendar as a must to attend.

It is exciting to note that this choir is going on its first European tour to the UK. This chorale has come so far -- from just twenty five members singing only the Easter portion of Handel's Messiah in 1930. Here's to another 75 years of excellence by the *Longmont Chorale*.

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