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NOTEWORTHY DIRECTION
Gay Men's Chorus Artistic
Director Raises the Bar

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Inside OUT

Noteworthy Direction

Gay Men's Chorus artistic director raises the bar.

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It's just before 7 on a Wednesday evening at the Lutheran Church of the Holy Communion. More than 100 members of the Philadelphia Gay Men's Chorus (PGMC) are milling about, hugging, kissing and cutting up—squeezing in their last bit of socializing before the weekly rehearsal begins. The room is abuzz with anticipation of what's in store for the upcoming concert.

With a sparkle in his eye and a warm genuine smile, artistic director Joseph Buches steps up to the podium with authority.

"All right guys, settle down. Let's warm up." After a series of vocal exercises, Buches runs through the repertoire for the next show. It's obvious the singers can't wait to sink their teeth into the music.

PGMC has been on a high note since Buches, 41, took over as artistic director in 2004. The Bethlehem native and son of a singer and a church organist says, "Music was always part of my life."

When Buches came on board, PGMC was singing a different tune—literally. The repertoire was mostly classical and there were fewer than 40 members. Audiences were smaller and so were the productions.

In the last six years, PGMC has nearly tripled its membership and its budget. "We've broadened our scope with different styles of music to attract a broader audience," says Buches. PGMC audience and chorus members are singing the praises of the man at the helm.

"Joe brought new life to the chorus," says Robert Pompper, 67, a PGMC singer for 20 years. "He's taken it to another level. Our shows are more entertaining, with more humor and more fun."

PGMC, the largest LGBT chorus in the region, is attracting a bigger audience—a mostly-straight, mostly-female audience.

"Trying to break through to the gay community is somewhat of an obstacle," Buches admits. "I'm not sure if our own Philadelphia gay community embraces us as a strong asset here."

Whether the audience is gay or straight, PGMC continues to grow at a time when many choruses are struggling. The LGBT choral movement began in the late 1970s as a reaction to the AIDS epidemic—raising money for the cause and providing a safe place for people living with HIV.

"The need for having that place and the safety of the chorus is still there, but it's not the same as it was 25 years ago," says Buches.

Glen Abrams, Buches' partner since



2006, has been a chorus member for 12 years. "What makes PGMC different for me is that it's personal," says Abrams, 41. "So much of the music we sing really speaks to who we are as individuals."

"Our mission is to educate, inspire and change lives," says Buches. "At a PGMC concert you can expect not just a performance, but an experience. There's always a message behind it." The message may be about equality, empowerment, family, love, loss. It may be about a controversial topic

you wouldn't expect from a choral group.

In 2010, PGMC presented *Through a Glass Darkly*, a rock opera about crystal meth addiction. "It's an issue that particularly touches the gay community," says Buches. "Singing about it helps people outside our community understand it."

In the upcoming season, Buches will push the creative envelope again with *Cherish the Child* featuring "Prayers for Bobby," the story of a mother torn between her faith and accepting her gay son, and

the remarkable transformation she goes through after he takes his own life.

"It's an important message to get out there," says Buches. "Hopefully, it will make some people who are narrow-minded expand their thoughts about gay people."

This week PGMC holds its last round of auditions before rehearsals start for the 2010-2011 concert season. The season includes *Showstoppers! The Diva Within*, a cabaret fundraiser in November, followed by the annual holiday concert in December, *Pa-Rum-Pa-Pum-Pum: A Boy's Holiday Tale*. In February, *Brotherly Love*, PGMC's small ensemble group, presents *Rat Pack Live*. In April, it's *Cherish the Child*, and the season wraps up in June with *Mmm-Bop! The Best of the Boy Bands*.

PGMC and *Brotherly Love* also reach out to the greater Philadelphia community with performances at special events throughout the year. "It's important to go out beyond our community so people can see that even though we're a gay chorus, we're just like everyone else," says Buches. On New Year's Day, the chorus will make history singing at the opening ceremonies of the Mummers Parade, marking the first time this event has included a gay performing arts group.

The chorus is a member of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses (GALA), an international association of LGBT choruses "changing the world with song." With more than 150 member choruses and 7,500 singers worldwide, GALA Choruses organizes an international choral festival every four years. PGMC has participated in all eight GALA festivals and will travel to Denver for the next one in 2012, the chorus 30th anniversary season.

Buches is encouraged by the accomplishments of the chorus, but he would like to see PGMC acknowledged as one of the premier arts organizations in Philadelphia—not just one of the premier gay arts organizations. "We are getting more publicity, more recognition of what we're doing and the quality of what we do," he says.

While he juggles two other music directing positions, Buches' work with PGMC stands apart. "I really have a passion for it. This is the one job I have where I can really put my stamp on it." ■

For more information about Joseph Buches and the Philadelphia Gay Men's Chorus, visit pgmc.org.