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STATESMEN

by ELAINE GODFREY

FOLLOW ALONG WITH THE MEN'S CHORUS AT IOWA STATE.

They are 132-strong, tuxedo-clad for their concert, and swaying in unison. Some of them sing deep, cavernous notes, booming each word with thunderous enthusiasm. And others sing higher, enriching the song with sweet, sweet harmonies.

Together, they might even make men weep. They are the Statesmen, the men's chorus at Iowa State.

Dr. James Rodde started the choir when he came to Iowa State in 2000 to give young men on campus a chance to be a part of something all their own. Even today, the choir is just for guys; any male songbird is free to join, regardless of age or major. All they have to do is audition.

Sam Sparland was in choir throughout high school, and he knew college choir was something he wanted to do. His major? Chemical engineering. But "it doesn't matter what major you're in," Sparland says. "It's just a chance to forget about math and science for a while — and just sing."

The choir usually has between 130 and

150 members, and very few are actually music majors—there are generally only five or six in the entire choir. For most of the guys, it's their sole musical outlet and their one place to escape from the overload of college. "There's a mentality in Statesmen," says senior in music Jonathan Brugioni. "We take a lot of pride in the fact that we're not all music majors. We come together and sing beautiful stuff, from all corners of campus."

Brugioni was in Statesmen for seven semesters, and his participation gave him an experience he could not have gotten anywhere else. Calling it "fraternal," Brugioni explained that he had never been part of a group where the bond was so strong.

His favorite memory of his time in Statesmen? Performing with men's choirs from all over the Midwest at Bethel University. Combined, the choirs had over 1,000 men, and the beauty of their music was overpowering. "The Statesmen Choir is such a high caliber choir," Brugioni



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says. “We sang exceptionally well that day ... we take pride in being a top ensemble in the Midwest—even in the nation.”

Part of this is because of Dr. Rodde, who has a knack for helping the larger-than-average men’s choir understand exactly what he wants, making them stronger singers. “He’s got a way of motivating and inspiring people from all walks of life,” says Quinn Tipping, a senior in music education. “In choir, I’m always reminded that music can be really fun—and not to take myself too seriously.”

Dr. Rodde also makes sure to assign a variety of music, so there is something for every audience member as well as every singer. The men in Statesmen sing everything from Renaissance and Baroque pieces to barbershop-style music and traditional ethnic songs. But they have fun with the music, no matter how difficult it is. “Coming in, I was really amazed at how quickly we pick up stuff,” Sparland says. “We usually work on around six or seven songs every class period.”

And for the members, it’s not the concerts or trips that are the most fun—it’s the rehearsal time, the inside jokes, the coordinated dance moves and the freedom to let loose and sing with others who are just as passionate. And it seems that the more fun Dr. Rodde is having up at the podium, the more fun the choir has.

Rodde often suggests that they think of dance moves, encouraging them to come up with whatever dancing they want to do during the song, and although he comes off as fairly serious, he makes jokes that take choir members by surprise. “Rodde just says these little one-liners all the time, and we all just chuckle together.” Brugioni says with a laugh. “It’s that fraternal bond, just a bunch of guys crackin’ jokes and making music.”

“Choir has always been my favorite part of the day,” Tipping says. “I just love to do it.

It doesn’t feel like work to me, and I would always jump at the opportunity to spend 50 more minutes in the choir room.”

This is Tipping’s fourth semester in Statesmen, but he says that this year’s group is better than any he’s ever been a part of; never has he been in a choir that is so focused on making quality music but also so eager to have fun. “Statesmen just keeps getting better,” he says.

Tipping plans on student teaching in the spring, which means this will be his last semester in Statesmen. Earlier in the semester, while the group was sight-reading a new piece of music, this realization finally hit him.

“It wasn’t a perfect run-through or anything,” Tipping says, laughing. “But there was just some energy in the room that really affected me. I just realized this was the last time I’d ever be rehearsing with Statesmen. It was one of the most emotional rehearsals ever.”

During the singers’ time in Statesmen, all Dr. Rodde wants is for them to feel emotional and intellectual fulfillment from their music. He often points out when a member’s voice sounds more mature than it did at the beginning and really enjoys observing the changes singers make over the course of a semester.

“If I can offer them an outlet and they can be a part of something they could not achieve on their own, then I feel fortunate to be a part of that process,” Rodde says.

Statesmen can be found rehearsing in the afternoons, three days a week. And when the clock strikes 2 p.m., the choir is dismissed. But sometimes, the members can still be heard singing the Iowa State fight song at the top of their lungs, down the halls and out the doors—a song of “fraternal bond, just a bunch of guys crackin’ jokes and making music.”