

# ULTIMATE Heights

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R. Clayton McKee photos / For the Chronicle

**Houston Choral Showcase members practice in an early rehearsal for the group's Christmas concert.**

# Choral group finds joy in song

By Flori Meeks

Diane Benson tells people if they like watching "Glee," they'll probably enjoy the Houston Choral Showcase.

"We say we're the adult version of 'Glee,' but we probably can't do the same kinds of moves they do on the TV show," said Benson, the group's music director.

The showcase, now in its 80th year, presents a lively blend of pop, jazz, swing, Broadway, movie, rock, patriotic and country songs at its concerts.

"We try to make it really energetic and as upbeat as possible," choir member John Harp said. "The audience seems to like it."

Performances use staging, choreography and props to further enhance the experience.

"The songs are memorized," executive director Belinda Rossiter said. "You can get your head up, look at the audience and per-

*Chorale continues on 6*

## Holiday show

Houston Choral Showcase will present its 2012 Holiday Show at 3 p.m. Dec. 16, at Christ Evangelical Presbyterian Church, 8300 Katy Freeway near Wirt. Ticket information will be posted on the choral group's Website later this fall. Details: [www.houstonchoralshowcase.org](http://www.houstonchoralshowcase.org)



**Sopranos Misty Hammett, Carol Dallred and LuAnn Firth rehearse for their Christmas concert.**

## FROM THE FRONT

# Membership is through audition

*Chorale from page 1*

form directly to them.”

The group got its start as a city of Houston Parks and Recreation program in 1932.

Today, the showcase is an independent nonprofit organization that rehearses at Zion Lutheran Church, 3606 Beauchamp in the Heights, and performs throughout greater Houston.

Its next big public performance will be the annual holiday show, set for Dec. 16 at Christ Evangelical Presbyterian Church in the Memorial/Spring Branch area.

The group also is a regular at the Houston Ballet's Nutcracker Market and the Uptown Tree Lighting Ceremony, and it sings at corporate events, private parties and for senior communities.

## Group has 34 members

Membership is by audition and varies from season to season. It totals 34 this season. While many live within the 610 Loop, members come from throughout greater Houston, including Fort Bend, Brazoria and Montgomery counties.

“People come a long way to sing with us because they haven't found anything else that does what we do,” Rossiter said.

“Basically, it's a group of people who put in a lot of work and are very committed because they enjoy what they do.”

Harp, a Rosharon resident, joined the choir six years ago. He could play piano and tuba and read music, but the singing and choreography elements were out of his comfort zone.

“It was a great environment to learn,” said Harp, a technology professional who also performs with the Venue on 34th St., formerly the Third Coast Comedy Group.

Not only has Houston

Choral Showcase been a source of friendship and support, Harp said, he met the woman he would marry through the group.

“From what I understand that is not uncommon,” he said. “I am not the first.”

Stephanie Harp joined the group about 1½ years after he did, and they started dating about one year later.

“The others in the group, they actually performed at our wedding,” John Harp said.

## Once a city program

The choral group's first name, when it was a Houston parks program, was Houston Community Chorus.

The group's Webpage honors part-time parks department employee Cora Lee Gregory, who “adopted” the group during its early years and served as a liaison between the chorus and the parks department until she retired in 1980.

After the city was no longer able to support the program, the group went independent and changed its name to Greater Houston Chorus.

The group obtained nonprofit status and incorporated in 1988.

It changed its name a final time in 1997.

Benson, who lives in Fulshear and works in the Texas Medical Center, got involved with the group about 26 years ago.

“When I started, the group had left the parks and recreation department about three or four years earlier,” she said.

## No more ‘penguin’ garb

“It was very different then. There were no auditions and probably more than 100 people.”

Benson, who has a background in music, started as an accompanist.

In her second year, the group's music director stepped down, and she was asked to fill the posi-



R. Clayton McKee / For the Chronicle

**Anne Jackson practices movements during early rehearsals for the Houston Choral Showcase's Christmas Concert. In the early years of the group, members held music sheets during performances, but they later memorized songs, which enabled them to add choreography.**

tion.

Gradually, she helped shape the choir to the group it is today.

“They started out looking like penguins in black-and-white outfits and holding their music. It just kept evolving, and I kept pushing.”

Benson had members start memorizing their songs, which allowed for choreography.

The group also added its current audition requirement, but grandfathered in existing members.

These days, all of the

members have gone through the audition process.

Benson said she takes pride in the group, and in its performers.

“Some of my closest friends are in the chorus. The chorus sung at my wedding 15 years ago,” Benson said.

“It's like a family.”

For more information about the group, visit [www.houstonchoralshowcase.org](http://www.houstonchoralshowcase.org)

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