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Craterian, Chorale dazzle opening crowd

By **BILL VARBLE**
of the Mail Tribune

It was, simply, showtime.

After all the waiting and all the work and all the hype, the Craterian Ginger Rogers Theater debuted Saturday night and scored a knock-out.

Lynn Sjolund and The Rogue Valley Chorale mounted a rousing version of Johann Sebastian Bach's "The Passion According to St. John" to inaugurate the Craterian as the spiffiest new performing arts center between Eugene and the Bay area.

A dressed-to-the-nines crowd seemed unsure which was the bigger star — the sparkling new theater or the evening's program, with 85 singers, a 17-piece chamber orchestra and six solo vocalists.

Call it a draw.

"You can feel the excitement in the crowd," said Marilyn Hartzell of Tigard.

Eleventh-hour work on the theater went late Friday, with city inspectors signing off on the job about 24 hours before its grand opening. But the festive crowd Saturday night saw no sign of the cliff-hanger ending to the yearlong transformation of the 70-plus-year-old theater.

"It's beautiful," said Jerry Gilmer of Eagle Point, who used to usher at the old Craterian Theater. "I'm just amazed. It's hard to imagine what they're talking about until you come in and see it."

"I love the interior," said Hartzell, who said she's a frequent concert-goer in the Portland area.

"It's really well-done. And it's crystal clear. I can hear all the musicians and all the soloists."

Sjolund said the Chorale had long planned to perform the difficult Bach work, and the timing just happened to coincide with the completion of the new theater.

Bach wrote "The Passion of St. see **CRATERIAN**, Page 2A



CRATERIAN CROWD — Jerry Gilmer of Eagle Point attends the opening of the Craterian Ginger Rogers Theater, which he described as "one of the seven wonders of Medford."

Mail Tribune / Bob Pennell

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John" during the most productive period of his life, between 1723 and 1727 when he was cantor and music director of St. Thomas Church of Leipzig, Germany.

The complex piece tells the familiar biblical story of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus.

Sjolund assembled performers from as far as the Bay area for the production. Tenor James Brown sang the demanding role of the Evangelist. Bass Clayton Brainerd was Pilate. Janet Campbell sang the alto arias. The Rogue

Valley's Susan Olson sang soprano. Craig Kingsbury was a dignified Jesus.

The orchestra of Southern Oregon musicians under concertmaster Nanci Linn Shaw was seated on the theater's moveable platform that for the evening extended the stage forward. The large and spirited Chorale filled the main part of the stage.

The Chorale sometimes filled the auditorium with a joyous noise and sometimes acted almost as the chorus in a Greek tragedy, commenting on the drama unfold-

ing. And there were quiet moments, as when Luna Bitzer's flute would engage Susan Olsen's voice in delicate counterpoint.

"I thought they sounded wonderful," said Lovella Moore of Central Point. "I grew up coming here. It looks like they wanted to keep the ambience of the old Craterian."

One who agreed was Ron McUne, director of the Britt Festivals.

"It's quite a transformation since I got my first kiss here in the '50s," he said. "It's a great thing

for downtown Medford."

Over the next two months, the Craterian will showcase southern Oregon performers before turning to bigger touring acts. Director Stephen McCandless says the Craterian wants to present a diverse program of all arts, as well as offer the facility for civic and business functions. Another Craterian goal is to offer some affordable ticket prices.

In the meantime, Gilmer may have summed it up best.

"It's one of the seven wonders of Medford," he said.