

HP Choir has been spreading holiday cheers through songs for the past 27 years. They sing for employees and friends at the HP Headquarter in Palo Alto on December 7, 2005. This concert is the start of their 2005 Winter Concert Series.

Old acquaintance not forgot

HARMONIES OF CURRENT, FORMER EMPLOYEES REMINISCENT OF THE 'HP WAY'

By Therese Poletti - Mercury News

For the past three months, a group of dedicated Hewlett-Packard employees has been rehearsing every week.

They are not practicing speeches for the Consumer Electronics Show in January or presentations for HP's meeting with analysts next week. They are members of the HP Choir, a 28-year-old group that is performing several holiday concerts this month for HP employees and their families and friends.

The chorus is one of the last vestiges of the company's culture -- known as the HP Way -- from an earlier era. The group includes current employees as well as retired and former HP workers, and it serves as an enduring connection among many HP alumni, who long viewed the company as a family. Choir members range from engineers to executive assistants and marketing types.

On Wednesday, the 38-member choir gave its first holiday performance at HP's Palo Alto headquarters, where about 50 people came on their lunch hour to listen to holiday songs. The choir sang pieces in three languages -- English, Latin and Spanish.



"I particularly appreciate being able to enter into the holiday spirit in a non-commercial way," said Maria Grandinette, who came to hear Richard Hawley, an HP retiree and former engineer who sings a bass part in the choir. "What better way than to hear my friend sing?" Grandinette rode her bike from Stanford University, where she works in the library.

HP's chorus is one of a few musical groups formed inside technology companies. Both IBM and Cisco Systems have company choirs.

'Cisco Singers'

The San Jose company's "'Cisco Singers," a group of about 30, will perform carols Dec. 15 at "'Christmas in the Park" in downtown San Jose at Plaza de Cesar Chavez.

"There is a real cross-pollination between the creativity that you find in music and in engineering," said Mark Nelson, a mainframe software engineer for IBM in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. Nelson is the director of the 24-member Mid-Hudson Valley IBM Club Chorus, one of many musical groups within IBM. In Silicon Valley, IBM has an 18-member "'big band" called the IBM Jazz Band.



IBM's musical tradition goes back to 1915, when Thomas Watson, general manager of the Computing Tabulating Recording Company -- the predecessor company to IBM -- suggested a company band perform at a convention. Years later, after the company had formally changed its name to IBM, it even had a song, called "'Ever Onward," which managers used to rally the troops.

HP doesn't have a company song.

But it does also have a symphony orchestra that Walter Hewlett, the eldest son of HP co-founder Bill Hewlett, was known to occasionally join.

And HP has a group of spirited current and former employees in its chorus. On Wednesday, during the first of its December holiday concerts, the HP Choir performed 14 songs and led the audience in two sing-alongs -- "O Come All Ye Faithful," and "Let It Snow."

"It's a great way for current and former employees to stay connected and share their talents with the rest of HP," said Brigida Bergkamp, an HP spokeswoman.

In typical HP fashion of managing by consensus, the choir has a committee, where sopranos, tenors, altos and basses are all represented, to select their holiday concert repertoire.



The music is eclectic. The holiday selections include heart-soaring hymns such as the Latin "O Nata Lux" to a rendition of "Jingle Bells" that goes from jazzy to Broadway show tune to operatic. Anastasia Alexander gave a stunning, and at times amusing, soprano solo performance, as she nudged choir director David Herberg with her elbow to let her arias continue climbing. In her day job, Alexander is an R&D program manager for HP-UX, HP's version of Unix.

"We have a lot of fun doing it," Alexander said.

Michael McCaffrey, a former HPer now at Agilent, got a lot of laughs with his solo, an a cappella version of "50 Kilowatt Tree," a sardonic song about a man with an over-the-top Christmas light display with lyrics like "There is a star in the east but it's just me, with my 50-kilowatt tree."

'Santa Baby'

Ana Williams, who is also an actress and a local theater producer in her spare time, camped it up in her solo performance of "Santa Baby," a song written for Eartha Kitt. Williams, an executive assistant who wore a fake chinchilla coat and a feather boa, asked Santa to give her a sable coat, a light blue Cadillac, a yacht and a deed to a platinum mine.



Ron Hickman, Tim Bock and Tom Almeida sang a capella to the 1940 song, "Scarlet Ribbons," originally sung by the Kingston Trio. Their guitar player didn't show up.

Another glitch occurred when piano accompanist Norina Sharpe's music fell down during "Mr. Santa," sung to the tune of "Mr. Sandman." But the singers carried on without her for several bars.

Sue Golden, the president of the HP Choir, no longer works at HP. She still loves being in the choir and doesn't feel at all strange coming back to the company for weekly rehearsals.

Golden, who was laid off from HP more than a year ago, is now an assistant manager at a Chico's clothing store. She was with the choir since it began 28 years ago, and sings alto.



"The HP Choir was so much a big part of my life," said Golden. "There is a lot of work to be in the choir . . . I do it because I love it."

Contact Therese Poletti at tpoletti@mercurynews.com or (415) 477-2510.

For more multimedia, visit
www.mercurynewsphoto.com

PHOTOGRAPHERS
 Joanne Ho-Young Lee

PICTURE EDITOR
 Jami C. Smith

AUDIO
 Joanne Ho-Young Lee

PRODUCER
 Joanne Ho-Young Lee