

**U** WEEKEND  
music

# Children, gays join for Christmas concert

By Phillip Zonkel  
Staff Writer

**K**EVIN ROBISON says it's a delicate balance between music and message for concerts by the South Coast Chorale, the Long Beach-based predominantly gay and lesbian chorus that also welcomes heterosexual members.

"I don't want our concerts to become, and they won't become I don't think, political events. The focus of what we do is still music," says Robison, the South Coast Chorale's artistic director, who took over in 2004.

"But I don't think you can be a gay and lesbian chorus and be out and not be political in some capacity," he says. "It's just the climate right now."

That philosophy is reflected in this year's holiday concert, "Creatures Great and Small," which "celebrates family values, presenting music that promotes acceptance, equality and the right for all people and creatures to peacefully co-exist. It's a season packed with messages that proclaim us first-class citizens and demand a better world for all living things!" according to the South Coast Chorale's Web site.

The concert is a joint venture between the South Coast Chorale and the Baldwin Park-based Creative Planet School of the Arts, whose students range from kindergarteners to eighth graders.

"As we've been preparing for this season, the board and myself have been talking about ways in which we can effect more change in the community," Robison says. "One of the ways we feel we can further ideals of tolerance and equality is to begin programming music and items in our concerts that speak to the young people in our community."

"The gay community often hears the words 'family values' used against us in a negative way. This is an opportunity for gays and lesbians in our group and heterosexuals who sing with us to be onstage with a group of children whose families are present and

## "CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL"

**What:** Joint holiday concert by the South Coast Chorale and Creative Planet School of the Arts

**Where:** Carpenter Center for the Performing Arts, 6200 Atherton St., on the campus of Cal State Long Beach

**When:** 3 p.m. Sunday

**Tickets:** \$30

**Information:** (562) 985-7000 or www.southcoastchorale.org



Kevin Robison, artistic director of the South Coast Chorale, leads rehearsals with the chorale in preparation for the holiday concert.

supportive and open and happy to be part of the celebration that we have together as a community," he says.

The students at Creative Planet School of the Arts have performed with other Los Angeles-area gay choirs, including the Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles in 2004. Robison is that group's assistant conductor.

The South Coast Chorale also has worked with children before. In October 2003, former artistic director Bob Phibbs, who retired in 2004, presented the best-selling children's book "Stellaluna" with almost 75 third-, fourth- and fifth-graders from Minnie Gant Elementary School of Long Beach.

"Creatures Great and Small" is divided into two acts with eight numbers in each.

"Coming Out on Christmas" provides humorous advice for those people who recently have come out. It's followed by the students and choir members singing together on a traditional Nigerian Christmas carol and John Lennon's "Happy X-Mas (War Is Over)."

The students take the spotlight during "The Crocodile's Christmas Ball and Other Odd Tales." It's a series of five pieces, including "Tropical Christmas," a parody on "White Christmas" with Santa Claus and the elves living in the tropics; "Proper Cat," which tells Christmas from a cat's point of view; "Santa Claws," about a boy who thinks Santa Claus has claws and plans to hurt him, and the finale, "The Crocodile's Christmas Ball."

That number will showcase life-size and some larger-than-life puppets of various jungle animals, such as the elephant and crocodile, who has invited these animals to a holiday party. Eventually, the animals discover they're on the crocodile's menu.

"It's fun and cute, not graphic," Robison says.

During the middle of the second act, the program takes a serious tone. Santiago High School senior Charlene Nguon will appear onstage and talk about her experiences. Nguon, 17, is suing the Garden Grove Unified School District after the principal revealed Nguon's sexual orientation to her mother, who didn't know her daughter is gay.

Robison sees Nguon's participation as part of the South Coast Chorale's mission.

"I'm very confident people will walk away feeling uplifted and empowered by what we do," he says. "I never want to be preachy. I want people to feel better about themselves when they leave. If we, in the process, have called attention to the ugly side of society, it's also my hope that we've brought about ways to deal with that and change that."

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Photos by Suzanne Mapes/For the Press-Telegram  
Kids from Creative Planet School of the Arts will perform with the South Coast Chorale during the holiday concert.



From left, Mark Dunaway, Todd Sahara, David Heffron and Janis Riegler rehearse with the South Coast Chorale in preparation for the holiday concert.



Miriam Herrmann, left, and Ruth Rawlings follow the instructions of South Coast Chorale artistic director Kevin Robison during a recent rehearsal.