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Female barbershoppers descend on Fox Cities Performing Arts Center in Appleton

BY MAUREEN WALLENFANG • POST-CRESCENT STAFF WRITER • NOVEMBER 17, 2008

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APPLETON — Groups of women wearing matching dressy outfits or rhinestone tiaras on Friday and Saturday nights downtown are typically attending bachelorette parties or weddings.

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This weekend, however, some of those turning heads with their fancy apparel were female barbershop singers, many in their 50s and 60s.

Harmony Inc.'s 49th annual International Contest and Convention came here for the first time, and 700 of its members took over the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel. The singing organization promotes four-part a cappella harmony in the barbershop style, either in quartets or choruses. It's like men's barbershop music, just in a different key.

"When you get four voices that blend, it's really a beautiful sound. Like angels singing in four different levels,"



Members of the Rochester Rhapsody of Rochester, N.Y., rehearse at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel before performing Saturday in the Harmony Incorporated International Competition and Convention at the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center in Appleton. Post-Crescent photo by Kirk Wagner

ABOUT THE GROUP

Harmony Inc. was formed in 1959 when about 150 women broke away from Sweet Adelines International to form a new women



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said Corrine Bissonette, a founding member from Burlington, Vt. This sisterhood of traveling voices booked so far in advance of the National Football League schedule that it unknowingly shut out the Chicago Bears from the hotel. Visiting NFL teams typically stay at the Radisson.

In the rarified world of women's barbershop, this event was a big deal.

Though none of the singers was from the Fox Cities, chorus members elsewhere in Wisconsin lobbied for the annual event to be held in Appleton, where the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center was deemed ideal.

Most participants came from the East Coast and Canada.

Over the years, many of the singers have become friends, bound together by the mutual love of barbershop singing.

"People come for the music, but they find more than that," said quartet singer Diane Zanetti of Walpole, Mass.

"We have close friends that we see just once a year," said incoming president Jan DeVecchio of Egmondville, Ontario. "We share a bond."

Their singing competitions at the PAC drew a few local observers.

"It brought back memories from 60 years ago," said Janet Wullner-Faiss Cloak of Appleton, who came to hear a childhood friend, now living in New Hampshire, in a chorus Saturday afternoon. She marveled at the harmony.

The music tended to be vintage — mostly from the 1900s through WWII, with a little Elvis sprinkled in — making its appeal seem perfect for baby boomers on up.

Winners of this year's competition were the U4X quartet, which includes Taylor and three singers from Chicago; and the A Cappella Showcase, a chorus from Milton, Ontario.

barbershop organization. They wanted to give all members a vote in organizational decisions and to extend membership to women of all religions and races. Today, it has about 2,000 members, about one-tenth of the size of Sweet Adelines.

On the Web: www.harmonyinc.org

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