

MUSIC

A song of good cheer

Portland Gay Men's Chorus gets into the holiday spirit

BY GLENN WILLIAMS

The Portland Gay Men's Chorus has a special surprise for us as it opens its 21st season. Its popular and talented artistic director, Bob Mensel, is on sabbatical and temporarily has passed the baton to an extraordinary local talent, Ray Elliott.

"When I was looking to replace myself for my sabbatical, Ray was really the only choice that came to mind," he muses. "This is because there are so many different things a guest conductor needs to do to be successful. Ray completely fit the bill."

Elliott—a tall, handsome man from Portland with an impressive list of credentials, a resonant baritone voice and an infectious enthusiasm for music—seems more than able to handle the task. An active arranger of choral music, his past work has resonated with singers and audiences alike. Although he is a busy man these days, the upcoming holiday concert remains center stage in his thoughts.

"My schedule's pretty crazy," Elliott admits, shuffling files of music sheets and notes in a thin briefcase. "I'm directing four different choruses at the same time."

In addition to serving as guest director for Portland Gay Men's Chorus, Elliott directs of the noted Satori Men's Chorus and the Portland State University Community Chorus. He also recently formed and directs Confluence, a new gay and lesbian chorus out of Salem. He has a degree in music from Portland State University and has sung with many local groups including the David York Ensemble and the Portland Gay Men's Chorus.

But beyond his academic and musical credentials lies a lifetime's affirmation that music is a saving influence.

"After I graduated from high school, I became very depressed," Elliott recalls. "Then a friend invited me into the chorus, and the chorus brought music back into my life."

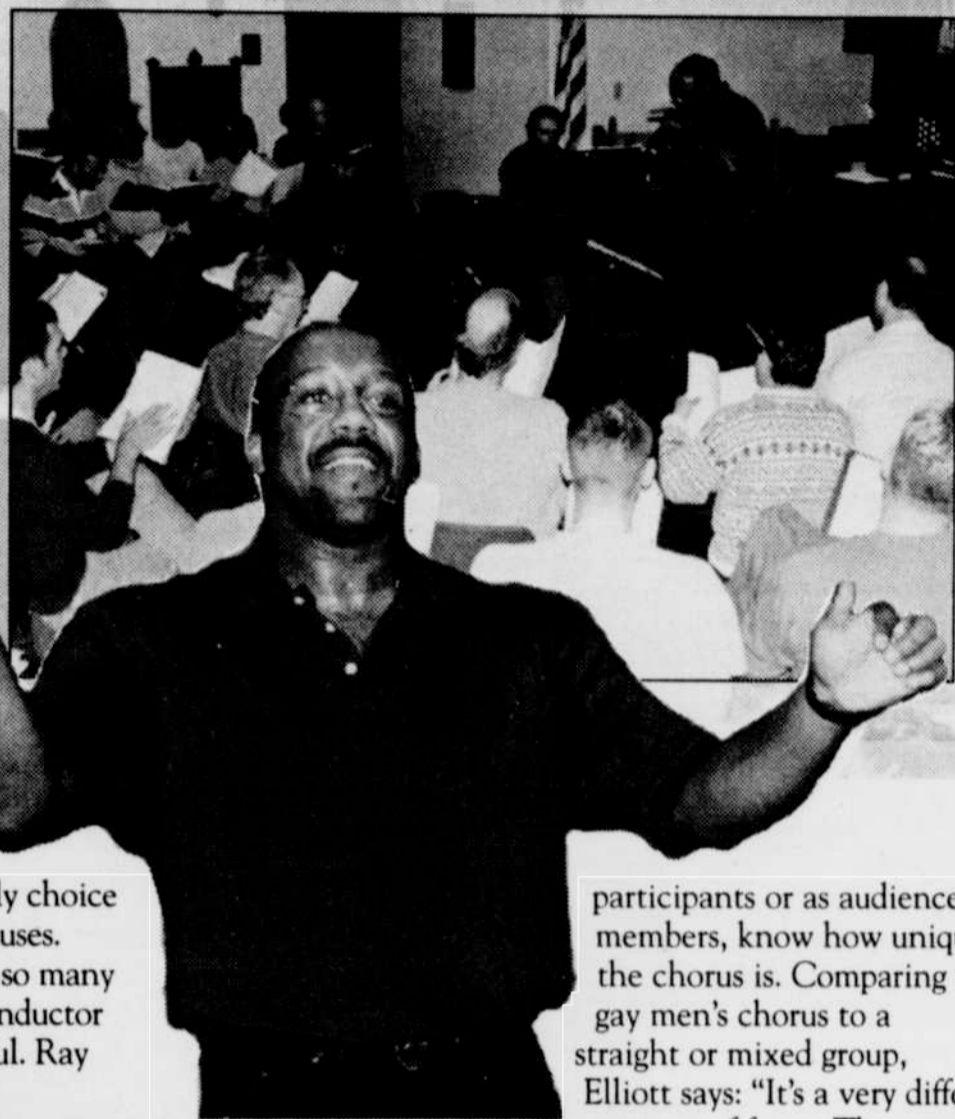
Elliott's eyes burn with a hazel fire as he speaks of the power music holds over him. "Now, music is a big part of my life. Without it, I'd go postal."

When approached by Mensel about filling in for him while on sabbatical, Elliott leapt at the chance. "It's always been one of my dreams to direct a gay chorus," he smiles. "It is just pure joy to be conducting a group of such fine men."

The chorus is the fourth-oldest gay-identified chorus in the United States and now boasts about 100 voices—quite a distinction for Portland music, gay or straight. It performs four major concerts during its season and many outreach performances.

"Lately, we've been doing more outreach programs because of Measure 9," Elliott points out. The chorus worked overtime making appearances at rallies and fund-raisers across the state to help defeat the anti-gay measure.

Many who know PGMC's music, either as



PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

participants or as audience members, know how unique the chorus is. Comparing a gay men's chorus to a straight or mixed group, Elliott says: "It's a very different type of focus. The mem-

bers have a common bond. That makes it easier to make music together."

Locally, PGMC has sung alongside other groups such as the Portland Lesbian Choir, Bridges and Satori. But as a member of the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, it also has worked with gay and lesbian music groups from around the world. Next year's pride concert in June, "Men with Attitude," will feature the Denver Gay Men's Chorus, and PGMC will go to Colorado to sing with that group in a kind of exchange program.

Elliott began working on the "Holiday Spirit!" concert in early August, collaborating with Mensel to choose a selection of music both within PGMC tradition and uniquely flavored with Elliott's directorial style. "Ray has designed a wonderful holiday concert that will be a real treat for everyone," Mensel says.


Elliott adds: "This year's concert is a mix of different types of holiday music. The chorus has a tradition of singing from the heart, and this concert will be no exception."

The concert will feature music reflecting the traditions of Thanksgiving, Winter Solstice, Hanukkah, Christmas, Kwanzaa and the new year. It includes traditional songs and contemporary renditions, including the PGMC classic "Winter for Awhile" by local composer Kate Campbell.

The concert is a great place to take a date or your family. Kids particularly enjoy the always-popular singalong.

"Anyone will be able to come to the concert and find something they like," Elliott says. When asked what his favorite piece of the concert is, he grimaces the way most artists do.

"It's so hard to choose one over the others," he resists. "There is a piece called 'Yuletide Fires.' It's one of those lush, heart-tugging, mellow a cappella songs.

"But I also like the 'Hallelujah Chorus' from Soulful Messiah. It's a lot of fun." 

HOLIDAY SPIRIT! plays 8 p.m. Dec. 16 and 2 p.m. Dec. 17 at Reed College's Kaul Auditorium, 3203 S.E. Woodstock Blvd. Tickets are \$12-\$20 from Fastixx.


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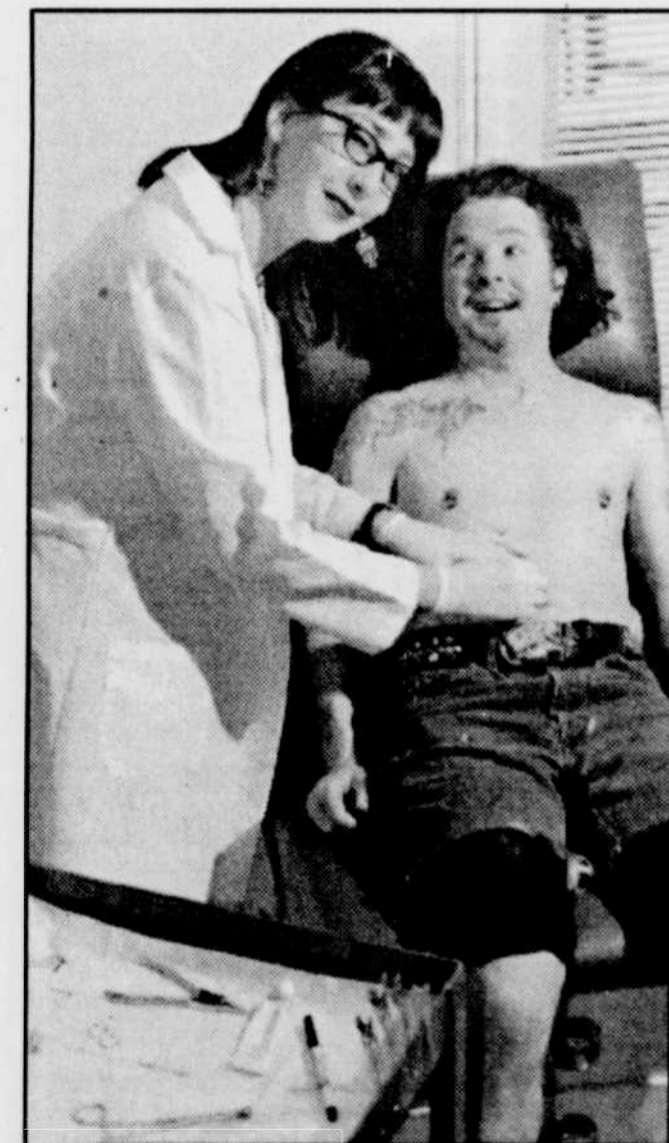
Celebrate Christmas Eve

10:30 a.m. Morning Worship
A service for the young at heart.
All children are invited to be actors in the retelling of the Christmas Story.

10:00 p.m. Concert

10:30 p.m. Candlelight Service
A traditional evening service of carols, anthems, scripture and sermon.
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