



Eric Whitten has never been able to enjoy the sights of Christmas. The Covington resident has been completely blind since being born prematurely almost 30 years ago.

The sounds of the season, though, are another story. Whitten will join the Northlake Performing Arts Society this weekend in staging its 23rd annual Christmas concert, “Ring Out Wild Bells.”

The 50-person choral group will perform Friday night at Hosanna Lutheran Church in Mandeville and Sunday afternoon at Our Lady of Lourdes in Slidell.

“Music’s about sounds, not sight,” said Whitten, who has been with the group since 2013. “We all first learn music by listening to it like I did, not reading the words and notes. I wouldn’t know any other way.”

Still, being the only blind member of the group presents its challenges.

Whitten learns the songs by listening to the recordings artistic director Alissa Rowe prepares for all choir members. Braille sheet music is hard to come by. Whitten says he rarely uses Braille anymore anyway in the digital age.

Artistic director Alissa Rowe’s in-concert direction is vital while the chorus is rehearsing for several weeks before each of its four annual shows, and even during the performances.

In fact, she’s insistent about it.

“When Alissa says look up at her instead of at your sheet music, she means it,” said choir member David Guillot.

Since Whitten is unable to see Rowe’s visual cues, Guillot and fellow choir member Richard Polshaw stand alongside him to give a nudge or tap on the shoulder when it’s time for him to come in, especially when the men and women are doing sectionals — alternating their singing parts.

“Eric has a great musical ear and a great memory,” Polshaw said.

“By the time we get to the concerts, he knows everything a lot better than the rest of us. I think that’s because Eric sings from his heart as well as his head.”

Still, Whitten says, there are times when he holds his notes a little too long. But the audience isn’t likely to notice miscues.

There was one time they did though.

During a concert a couple of years ago, the men were required to make a quarter turn. Whitten turned the wrong way and had his back to everyone else.

“Somehow we weren’t paying attention and didn’t notice,” Polshaw said. “But here comes Eric’s mom from out of the audience and turns him back around.

“She’s hollering, ‘Why didn’t you do it yourselves?’ ”

Whitten has lived in Covington with his mother and stepfather, Jane and Mack Ledford, since returning from Austin, Texas, where he attended the state school for the blind.

He spent a short time at a vocational school in Texas, but Whitten says he didn’t have the patience to finish, although it might have given him the ability to live more independently.

He helps his stepfather repair computers but relies on family and friends for transportation and uses a cane to assist his walking.

But being blind has never held back Whitten’s singing.

“I always loved music — Elvis, Motown, Al Greene, just all kinds,” he said.

He took private lessons from Jan Gardner, one of NPAS' early members, and he was in the talented music program at William Pitcher Junior High in Covington before he moved to Texas.

Upon returning, Whitten wanted to find an outlet for his singing. Gardner recommended that he audition for NPAS, and he was easily accepted.

“Eric is an excellent singer with a beautiful voice,” Rowe, the artistic director, said. “And what he goes through to learn his parts shows how much he loves this.

“And remember, Eric isn’t just singing alone. It’s much more difficult when you’re singing with others.”

“To me, it’s all about being a member of a group with a lot of different types of people,” Whitten said. “And then we get together and really enjoy working with each other.”

Like most of the other NPAS members, the Christmas concert is Whitten’s favorite of the year.

There’s a mix of familiar songs — "Ave Maria" is one he particularly enjoys — and new selections.

This year, the chorus is performing “Bethlehemu,” a Nigerian spiritual sung in African dialect.

“We do songs in Latin, but they’re pretty easy to learn because of the root words,” Polshaw said. “Learning a song in an entirely different language is difficult, but we manage to work it out.”

Whitten says he never feels self-conscious, adding that his blindness keeps him from fully understanding the concept.

Instead, Whitten's top priority for this, and all of the NPAS concerts, is putting on a good show.

"Hopefully people won't be analyzing every little thing we do," he said. "We just want them to enjoy this."

And how does Whitten, who insists on not being considered "handicapped," want to be judged as a singer?

"Just like anybody else," he said. "I want folks to come up to me after it's over and say, 'Man, you did a good job.'"