

A New History of the Carillon

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Rombouts, Luc. *Singing Bronze: A History of Carillon Music*. Translated by Communicationwise. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014, 368 pp.

THE CARILLON IS HIDDEN IN plain sight: the instrument and its players cannot be found performing in concert halls, yet while carillonneurs and keyboards are invisible, their towers provide a musical soundscape and focal point for over six hundred cities, neighborhoods, campuses, and parks in Europe, North America, and beyond. The carillon, a keyboard instrument of at least two octaves of precisely tuned bronze bells, played from a mechanical-action keyboard and pedalboard, and usually concealed in a tower, has not received a comprehensive historical treatment since André Lehr's *The Art of the Carillon in the Low Countries* (1991). A Dutch bellfounder and campanologist, Lehr contributed a positivist history that was far-ranging and thorough. In 1998, Alain Corbin's important study *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (translated from the 1994 French original) approached the broader field of campanology as a history of the senses.¹ Belgian carillonneur and musicologist Luc Rombouts has now compiled his extensive knowledge of carillon history in the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United States, as well as of less visible carillon cultures from Curaçao to Japan, into *Singing Bronze: A History of Carillon Music*, the most valuable scholarly account of the instrument to date.

Rombouts's original Dutch book, *Zingend Brons* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2010), is the more comprehensive version of the two, directed at a general readership in the Low Countries familiar with carillon music, and at carillonneurs and music scholars. Engaging and at times beautifully poetic, it won the 2011 Visser-Neerlandia Prize. Rombouts contextualizes the carillon and its players within larger musical, social, cultural, economic, and geopolitical histories, within narratives of peace and conflict, and within current debates about the place of

¹ See André Lehr, Wim Truyen, and Gilbert Huybens, *The Art of the Carillon in the Low Countries* (Tielt, Belgium: Lannoo, 1991) and Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Western classical music in culturally diverse public auditory spaces. He explains apparently isolated carillon developments as products of historical and musical currents, and shows that the instrument in turn played a role in shaping historical events. This study demonstrates that the carillon can be treated productively not only on a technical, folkloric, or positivist level (all valuable approaches), but also through musicology.

Since its publication, *Zingend Brons* has done much in the Low Countries to generate widespread interest in the carillon. In maintaining its accessible tone, however, the book ends up serving scholars less as a source of critical inquiry than as a starting point. This is compounded in the English translation by the shortening of the text and the removal of many images, musical examples, and quotations from the original, which numbers 463 color pages in comparison to the translation's 368 black-and-white pages. This truncation makes some explanations difficult to grasp. Nevertheless, *Zingend Brons* and its abbreviated translation make an invaluable contribution: they enable scholars and performers to begin their inquiries into the carillon with a single rich source of information.

Bells are used worldwide, but the carillon was an innovation of the Low Countries. It developed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the product of a technologically advanced and economically prosperous society. Its dramatic growth was driven by civic and religious rivalry as well as political, religious, and military conflict. Around 1790, the southern Low Countries and northern Dutch Republic had about a hundred carillons each, with major cities boasting five or more. French Flanders and other European regions brought the total to about 250—a number that would only be surpassed after World War II. Carillons were imported to the U.S. after World War I as sounding memorials, leading to a distinctly American carillon culture. With more instruments worldwide than ever before, the carillon is largely a modern phenomenon. Accordingly, *Singing Bronze* is divided into three parts. Part one deals with bells in global antiquity to the Middle Ages, and part two traces the development of the European carillon from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Part three is the longest, devoted to the carillon in Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In antiquity, societies used bells for purposes ranging from dispelling evil to controlling slaves and animals. Rombouts's overview passes quickly over disparate traditions from China to Greece, but makes the crucial distinction that not until Charlemagne's reign did the imposition of Benedictine rule make the bell a symbol of Christian Europe. Christian bells took on anthropomorphic agency, enjoying baptism-like consecrations, naming, and even speaking in the

first person, a tradition Friedrich Schiller made famous by opening *Das Lied von der Glocke* (1799) with the campanarian inscription “I call the living, I mourn the dead, I repel lightning.” These sonic entities called for both piety and violence.

At times, Rombouts would have benefitted from acknowledging the critical discourses that support his arguments, even if this slows the pace for general readers. Bells regulated everyday life in medieval Dutch and northern French cities. The city belfry protected the city charters while its heaviest bell materialized and sonified the *bannum*, the right of the government to convene the public. Concepts such as “the voice of the bell was law” and “the bondage of time” are indebted to Michel Foucault’s theorizations of social control, but he is never mentioned (pp. 43 and 49 respectively). The term “bell” is noted to be *semantron* in Greek and *signum* in Latin, but without exploration of the semiotic implications.

In the mid-fourteenth century, tower clockworks took over ringing the time. The next hundred years saw a period of rapid technological innovation that changed ringing from functional signaling into artful music making. “Programmable” drums (brass cylinders) like those found in music boxes, eventually measuring up to six feet in diameter and ten tons in weight, added automatic Gregorian chant to the measuring of time. Meanwhile, inventors turned collections of bells into keyboard instruments, played once again by humans. The earliest examples resembled the early organ keyboards illustrated in Michael Praetorius’s *Syntagma Musicum* (1619).

In Part Two, the ubiquity of carillon music comes into sharp relief. The civic and church position of carillonneur, or in the northern Low Countries, of organist-carillonneur, became highly competitive, with northern musicians expected to play up to 170 one-hour concerts per year, while southern musicians played up to 300 half-hour concerts. Urban soundscapes were saturated with automatic carillon music, which could be heard as frequently as every 7.5 minutes. With the addition of secular music around 1540, tower music became a source of recreation, not just of obligation, and listeners danced merrily to it. Carillonneurs’ performances added a playful human element to a precise mechanical soundscape of bells, but a battle soon followed over the spiritual meaning of that soundscape. After the Council of Trent, church bells played only church music, and towers in the Reformed Calvinist north swapped polyphony for the Genevan Psalter.

Although a few carillons were built as far north as the Kremlin, Rombouts makes a convincing argument that the instrument flourished especially in the southern Low Countries thanks to a unique combination of economic, cultural, and technological factors. In 1638, Descartes wrote excitedly to Mersenne about

Jacob Van Eyck, the blind carillonneur and recorder virtuoso who had been influential in the construction of the first precisely tuned carillon in 1644 by the brothers François and Pieter Hemony. Not just skilled bellfounders, the Hemonyys were audacious, risk-taking businessmen who plunged eager city governments into debt by capitalizing on their desire to outdo other cities' carillons. Diverging from typical hagiographies, Rombouts notes that their approach was so successful that they recast nearly all older carillons, leaving few examples to be studied today. They also took their trade secrets to the grave; after them, few well-tuned carillons were cast until the twentieth century. The damaging first flowering of the carillon contained the seeds of its own destruction. Rombouts's next chapter on composer Matthias Vanden Gheyn and his bellfounding brother, Andreas Jozef, is one of the strongest, rich in facts and storytelling. The latter's fine bells bore inscriptions and opus numbers similar to those on Flemish harpsichords, suggesting that bellfounders now perceived themselves as artists.

Rombouts makes an enticing but fleeting argument that a "rich musical praxis" of improvising keyboard preludes, variations, and fantasias lay behind the simple notations of surviving manuscripts (p. 133). Fifteen Baroque carillon manuscripts survive, containing some 3,500 pieces. Most are arrangements of keyboard music, minuets, marches, and pieces also played by the city's organist and pipers. Manuscripts of automatic music provide a record of daily events, musical censorship, religious conflict, and reception.

Part Three develops a nuanced examination of the carillon's steep nineteenth-century decline and identifies important drivers of its twentieth-century revival. When the southern Low Countries became French territory in 1795, the sound and material of bells became eventfully politicized. But the rise of concert halls and domestic music making, the indoor enclosure of bourgeois cultures of listening, and the invention of consumer clocks overshadowed the carillon. Although Dutch carillonneurs programmed the latest excerpts from Mendelssohn, Donizetti, Weber, and Rossini, the hardy Baroque instruments had outlived musical fashion: their meantone temperament and deteriorating mechanical actions precluded composing and performing with Romantic expressivity. Attempts to apply innovations from other instruments, such as the "carillon piano" with its light touch but total lack of dynamic sensitivity, failed, although they showed that the male-dominated instrument was now marketed to young women.

The carillon became the alluring musical equivalent of ruins, most audible in their halting old automatic drums. Bells changed from informational signals into evocative literary symbols for Schiller, Hugo, and Baudelaire, who dreaded Flemish listening culture: "Mechanical music in the air. It represents the pleasure

of a will-less people (*un peuple automate*) who can only entertain themselves on command.”² The carillon-as-symbol also sonified the nationalism of young Belgium, which constructed itself through revisionist historiography after its establishment in 1830. Figures and events were excavated, fictionalized, and celebrated; the carillon was suddenly a Belgian invention. Novels and operas by Georges Rodenbach, Albert Grisar, Xavier Leroux, and Erich Wolfgang Korngold fixated on the Bruges carillon.

Rombouts brings new clarity to the Flemish and American revival by separating their interdependencies from their dissimilar drivers. Carillon-pianos aside, improvements to the traditional carillon created a Romantic instrument in time to join the long nineteenth century. By 1878, Mechelen’s city carillonneur Adolf Denyn had developed a powerful enough technique to fill the streets with virtuosic improvisations on pieces by Beethoven and Bellini. If the mechanical drum interrupted him, he improvised on its tune as if the machine had gone mad, earning comparisons to Liszt and Rubinstein. By 1896, the ideal tuning of partials for bells had been redeveloped and published in England by change ringer Arthur Simpson. As with Van Eyck and the Hemony brothers 250 years earlier, the resulting collaboration with English bellfounder John Taylor ushered in the first precisely tuned carillons in over a century. Chocolate manufacturer George Cadbury bought Taylor’s first carillon in 1906 for his workers. An industrialist seeking projects for social good, he foreshadowed the carillon’s American customers.

Denyn’s son Jef was key to the carillon’s modern-day success, and Rombouts’ discussion of him points to the value of including the carillon in histories of listening and concert-going. Jef Denyn perfected his father’s expressive, *tremolando*-based “grand legato style” and achieved a singing *bel canto*. His improvisatory style emphasized the vast sonic space between the gargantuan low bells and little high bells, sonifying the tower’s transcendent physical scale. He re-engineered the mechanical action and standardized keyboard design. With his belated development of a Romantic performance practice came the redefinition of the carillon as an autonomous concert instrument. An enterprising alderman switched Denyn’s market recitals to peaceful Monday evenings, and in 1892, the first “carillon concert” took place. In following years, the first programs were printed. Special trains took audiences to Mechelen, and thousands of admirers like Maurice Maeterlinck came for the spectacle of ethereal music

² Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres posthumes*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1908), 283. From Luc Rombouts’s translation into English (p. 154).

from an imposing, moonlit tower. When American politician William Gorham Rice made the pilgrimage to hear Denyn in 1913, the era of the carillon as an instrument endemic to the Low Countries was drawing to a close.

In American periodicals like *National Geographic* and *Musical Quarterly*, Rice promulgated the carillon as a means of building community, fostering patriotism, and elevating public taste. World War I fueled American interest, as the Germans requisitioned bells and organ pipes for metal. Books featuring Belgian carillons by Rice, George Wharton Edwards, and novelist Robert Chambers sold quickly to Americans sympathetic to the little nation's plight. Days after the armistice, the beginning of a mostly Anglophone memorial carillon movement was signaled by a drive in South Africa. Disappointingly, the fast pace of this section of the book neglects gender issues raised by Chambers's heroic female carillonneur, and fails to differentiate the meanings of carillon building in an African country with Dutch colonial ties and in the U.S.

Rombouts's extended alternative take on American carillon history surpasses American scholarship in its depth and scholarly insight. While American discourse posits the development of a highbrow "concert instrument," Rombouts finds another driver of the movement in Rice's "memorial idea," the instrument's power to evoke the memory of people and events for later generations.³ He traces it to "one of the deepest characteristics of the American psyche: the desire to be remembered after death" (p. 210). I myself have argued for the centrality of sonic memorialization and cenotaphic symbolism to the American carillon, but have not found this theme discussed elsewhere in the literature until now.⁴ Ambitious plans for an unprecedented seventy-seven-ton National Peace Carillon to be cast from war shrapnel for Washington D.C. embodied a swords-to-plowshares memorial fantasy, a rich source for materialism studies.

The stars aligned for a philanthropy-driven renaissance, which Rombouts implicitly qualifies with ties to Standard Oil, Dow Jones & Company, the Hearst Corporation, and other indicators, implying (never quite directly) that the carillon became an expression of power and capital. This is a welcome overture toward a study of carillons, capitalism, and inequality that would problematize clichés

³ Karel and Linda Keldermans, *Carillon: The Evolution of a Concert Instrument in North America* (Springfield, IL: Springfield Park District, 1996).

⁴ Tiffany Ng, "Conclusion: The Altitude of Dystopia," in "The Heritage of the Future: Historical Keyboards, Technology, and Modernism" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015), 170, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/74x2694n>; and "The Economy of Death and Memorialization in American Belfries" (paper presented at the conference "Nostalgia and Amnesia: Avenues of Remembering and Forgetting," Claremont Graduate University, CA, March 2011).

about public music for the Everyman.⁵ Advised by organist Frederick Mayer, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. built the world's heaviest carillons at his Riverside Church in New York City and at the University of Chicago. Near Boston, Jane W. Bancroft donated a memorial church carillon that drew up to 25,000 people per concert in 1925. Tellingly, Rice's democratic city carillon ideal took root only in his hometown of Albany, New York, where Denyn's city hall carillon inauguration drew an audience of 50,000 in 1927.

Rombouts notes astutely that the American "bigger is better" mentality paralleled the Dutch Hemony craze that drove each city to order a bigger carillon than the last. Forty American carillons were built in just a decade, mostly in tranquil religious and collegiate settings. As instruments outnumbered players, a handful of Flemish emigrés defined the repertoire. In turn, continental carillon construction fell under Anglophone influence. Belgian bellfounders struggled to equal their British competitors, Americans donated a university rather than a city carillon to Leuven, and the fledgling Royal Carillon School in Mechelen under Jef Denyn depended on Herbert Hoover and Rockefeller for its survival.

World War II reinvoked the agency of Christian bells as the Germans requisitioned their metal under the motto "Metal mobilization: Bells join the fight for a new Europe." The Dutch and Belgians found ways to resist musical censorship and confiscations, using the polysemic nature of carillon music to safely perform resistance in public space. The confiscation was halted just short of organ pipes, but Hitler dreamed to the end of the monumental memorial carillon he planned in Linz, which would play his favorite Bruckner symphony theme.

The wartime loss of 175,000 bells weighing 100 million pounds throughout Europe made space for two innovations: the foundation of the influential, research-intensive Dutch carillon foundry Eijsbouts, and the American invention of bell-free electronic carillons as affordable solutions to postwar expansion during a metal shortage. Acknowledging a history most carillonners would rather silence, Rombouts examines the divided Dutch reaction to the so-called "electronic threat." Over the roofs of Edgard Varèse's *Poème Electronique*, an American simulacrum waged war against four European carillons for the soundscape of the 1958 Brussels World's Fair.

A place-based American compositional style emerged at the University of Kansas, befitting tranquil settings and the greater sustain and resonance of modern

⁵ Kimberly Schafer questioned the assumption that carillon music is universally accessible in her talk, "The Carillon and Auditory Culture: Carillon Music in Louvain, Belgium in the late 18th century," at the June 2006 Congress of the Guild of Carillonners in North America.

bells. Seeking an antithesis to the Flemish Romantic style, Ronald Barnes explored a lyrical rather than toccata technique, while Roy Hamlin Johnson established the octatonic scale as a modernist mainstay for leveraging bells' minor third overtones. A new American keyboard standard reified the stylistic differences, and a new campanology program at the University of Michigan provided a counterbalance to Mechelen.

Today, most carillons are to be found in the Low Countries and the U.S., but they also ring out as far as Russia, Japan, and South Korea. There are about 640 worldwide—a remarkable figure, five times the historic low of 1918. While the carillon is perceived as a Baroque revival instrument, its strongest growth occurred over the last sixty years, making it an instrument of the present day.

Rombouts' final chapter is at once the most critically insightful and problematic. He argues that the carillon needs to “evolve from an ethnic instrument into a world instrument,” troubling language considering the colonial history of carillon exportation and material sourcing (p. 308). His concern that of the “great composers,” only Mauricio Kagel has written for carillon, is puzzling in light of works by composers from Elgar to Andriessen to Crumb (p. 318). Yet he trenchantly critiques typical approaches to programming, such as paternalistic efforts to cultivate public taste. Carillonneurs cannot know the heterogeneous demographics of passersby who have no choice but to listen, so he argues that programming should strive to reflect cultural diversity and avoid imposing a singular cultural identity on listeners (an attitude that I would argue has led to an overreliance on Anglo folksong arrangements in America). Yet his critique is too brief, and makes common utopian stumbles: the “carillonneur transforms multiplicity into unity” (p. 323). His message of inclusivity is further undercut by his penchant for addressing international readers as if they were residents of the Low Countries, with their specific cultural identities and knowledge, and as members of “our” Western culture.

Singing Bronze is one of the first contemporary musicological treatments of the carillon, and academic researchers will find it an essential resource, even while they encounter several problems that make the book challenging to use. The translation by Communicationwise, a translating agency, is sometimes awkward and occasionally erroneous, exacerbated by the translators' lack of disciplinary expertise. In several instances I had to consult the Dutch edition to understand Rombouts' intentions. Surprisingly, Dutch translations of sources in other languages were sometimes used for writing the English translation, in place of consulting the original texts. This should not happen in a professional translation. Translated proper names such as the “Reich Office for Iron and

Metals” that are difficult to look up in English are only occasionally also given in original form (*Reichsstelle für Eisen und Metalle*). Metric and imperial units are used inconsistently. Furthermore, in both editions, the retelling of myth is not always clearly distinguished from scholarly analysis of it, and there are a number of factual errors, for example concerning American geography: the National Peace Carillon was not designed to be “right next to the White House,” and the Netherlands Carillon is neighbors with, rather than part of, Arlington National Cemetery (p. 211).

Singing Bronze offers an engaging uptempo narrative, hence its popular acclaim in the Low Countries. But the resulting lack of scholarly infrastructure and critical depth poses a yet greater challenge for researchers. The sparse footnotes are hidden at the end and rarely contain commentary, giving only last names that must then be sought in the bibliography, which is incomplete. Readers must go to the source to understand a reference that was not thoroughly explained in the main text. Some of the more hasty, unsupported conclusions in English are actually abbreviations of arguments that, in the Dutch edition, are fully supported by primary sources. In terms of critical depth, important insights are missing from postcolonial studies, soundscape studies, gender studies, disability studies, and other relevant areas. For example, the Hemony cast bells for city governments and cannons for the Dutch Republic, but the financing of city soundscapes by the needs of colonial expansion goes unremarked. There would have been an opportunity to trouble the idea of “live” music with early playback technologies such as the automatic carillon, but no dialogue is initiated with Nick Seaver’s work in that area.⁶ In terms of repertoire, the importance of arrangement and transcription is not analyzed, nor is the current paradox of the carillon’s elevation as a highbrow tradition even as it is touted as a democratic source of music for all.

Nevertheless, the book frames historical events with ample detail to inspire further inquiry. Scholars have consistently overlooked the carillon, although it was the single most audible aspect of musical culture in the Low Countries. With *Zingend Brons* as the definitive book on carillon history in any language to date, we can hope that further scholarship involving the carillon in the musicologies, sound studies, gender studies, urban studies, religious studies, the history of technology, and other disciplines will increase in quantity and quality. *Singing Bronze* may be lighter fare than the original, but it is an achievement that belongs on the shelf of every reader interested in Western bells or the Low Countries.

⁶ Nick Seaver, “‘This Is Not a Copy’: Mechanical Fidelity and the Re-enacting Piano,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 22, nos. 2–3 (2011): 54–73.

