

Bells in Spain: restoration, research and new ensembles of bellringers

Dr. Francesc LLOP BAYO

Summary

There are in Spain many traditional ways of ringing bells: in València they are all full circle rung, in Andalusia only small ones are rung in full circle and the biggest are fixed, in Aragón only the biggest bell turns while the rest are fixed. The full circle ringing is not as universal as it was thought in Spain: in many places of Castile, in Catalunya or in the Balears bells oscillate but this way of ringing is associated to the tolling chimes almost everywhere in Spain.

The many academic researchs, in association with those made by the Government to inventory bells, are being good to know this sound instrument that has remained forgotten and in hands of the repair companies, without the smallest control.

In the last years a new concept of bells restoration has arisen, enlarging the instrument concept: not only the bells, but the accessories, the own tower and the chimes are an inseparable part of an unique musical concept, different in each place.

Now we want that bells conserve the traditional installation, that the motors and other mechanisms, computer driven, reproduce the traditional chimes and don't impede manual ringing. The most recent example has been the tower of the Giralda of Seville, with eighteen full circle ringing bells and six fixed.

A growing movement of voluntary bellringers exists in Spain that recovers the old chimes for the feast days. These ensembles of bellringers that arose in the cathedrals and now extend for cities and towns, are the best guarantees for the conservation of the instrument.

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He has directed numerous works of restoration of bells, among those that highlight the Tower of the Micalet of the Cathedral of València (1992) and the tower of the Giralda of the Cathedral of Seville (1998). He has also participated in the creation or restoration of the carillons of El Escorial (1988) and Sant Pasqual of Vila-real (72 bells - 1998).

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Before discussing the processes of study, restoration and of new ensembles of bellringers in Spain, it is important to know three fundamental concepts regarding the traditional bells, the ringings and the property of those bells.

1. Traditional bells.

Traditional bells reflect the diversity of cultures that form the current Spain. As it is known, the current Spanish State is the third country for its size in the European Union. Seventeen autonomous communities that have their own parliament, their government and their budget, with a quite similar degree of autonomy to a Federal State form Spain.

Some of those regions, as Andalusia or Castile and León, are bigger than Benelux, while others as Aragón or València have a similar surface to Belgium, although the mountains are much higher and the communications have been difficult along the centuries.

Let us remember finally that the current Spain is the fruit of the union, more or less recent and real, of two big states, like Aragón and Castile, with big differences when thinking and of living. Let us also remember that there are three official languages at least in Spain, apart from Spanish, and that these languages are both officials in the corresponding autonomous communities.

All these historical, linguistic and space differences are expressed in the traditional Ringing bells.

As a consequence of the Old Spanish historical division (Aragón and Castile) there are two big ways to play the bells that largely coincide with these old federations of Kingdoms. Indeed Aragón contributes, largely, the full circle ringing of bells, that is to say the completely circular ringing of them, repeated more than once (not like change ringing).

Castile, on the other hand, impacts more in the chiming of bells, that is to say the movement of the clappers inside the fixed bells. Those Castilian rhythms use another of the Spanish original contributions to the culture of the bells, that is to say the “Roman bells.”

Those “Roman bells” that are only used in Castile, in León, in the Basque and Navarrese Country, are practically unknown in Aragón, Balears, Catalunya and València, that is to say the Old Crown of Aragón. Those are bells of big dimensions, wide and not very slender, of very fine walls, and with very scarce resonance in their main harmonic, except in the “Hum” or Lower Octave that

has a great duration in those bells. The bellringers that play those Roman bells use a double contradictory technique and of great sound wealth. On one hand the bells are played at great speed, but at the same time the clappers are maintained hit upon the hit bell. On one hand numerous harmonic are produced and on the other hand those sounds are limited as the clapper is maintained close to the brass.

There is an interesting spatial characteristic in these Roman bells: in general the lowest that is usually the biggest, is located at the bellringer's right, thing that doesn't happen in the Crown of Aragón, where the smallest and sharper bell is usually here to the right hand of the percussionist.

In the Crown of Aragón the bells resemble more the European bells, that is to say to those that we listen mainly in the Benelux, and that are part of the carillons. But there is a great difference: in any place of Spain you think in melody, but in rhythm, and people don't know the note of their bells. Neither do they care.

2. The ways of ringing bells in Spain

2.1. Ringing bells in Catalunya

But even inside those two big types of ringings, there are big differences. For example, in what concerns to the possible full circle ringing of bells, in Catalunya they only oscillate, without ending up giving the turn: they call the full circle ringing "to play as Castilian people." However in some areas around Lleida this circular form of playing is usual.

2.2. Ringing bells in Aragón

In Aragón some bells can turn completely. The pattern of ringings is (or it was, to be more exact) the Seo of Zaragoza or Cathedral of El Salvador. There are seven bells installed in the octagonal tower so that the biggest, "the Valera", is in the centre, in a structure of wooden beams, while the six others occupy different windows. The greatest feast is the "repique de primera" (chime of first class). At the beginning the smallest bell turns alone, later the external bigger bell oscillates and in the third part they peal the six bells at to the compass of the full circle ringing of the biggest bell.

2.3. Ringing bells in València

In València there are diverse ringings according to the feasts. The bells turn all although they can combine, like in Aragón, ringings in those that turns the biggest bell, while they peal all the other ones. In the Cathedral of València, with eleven bells, usually the five largest turn alone for all the feasts, while the eleven are reserved for really extraordinary occasions or for the feast of the Corpus Christi.

However, in the parishes of the city and in the towns, the normal thing is that they turn the smallest bells and the biggest alone is played for five annual feasts: Christmas, Easter, Corpus Christi, the Immaculate and the feast of the town.

There is a curious opposition: while in the city of València the full circle ringing finishes and then the bells oscillate until returning to their original position (down mouth), in the towns both ringings are linked, since the oscillation of the bells associates to dead tolling.

2.4. Ringing bells in Castile and León

The traditional ringings are based on Roman, generally immobile bells, and pealing. They sometimes turn some and others peal, and the biggest even oscillates only, although there are not common rules, apart from the quick chiming, hitting the clappers to the bells.

2.5. Ringing bells in Andalusia and in Murcia

In both communities they follow a similar model: big bells are fixed, while “esquilas” or small bells turn, some to compass of the other ones. The most characteristic pattern can be the Giralda or tower of the bells of the Cathedral of Seville, where there are four fixed bells, in the angles of the tower, and four bells of full circle ringing associated to each one of them. There are also other bigger two bells in the centre of two sides and two other big bells of full circle ringing in the other two sides.

In Murcia it happens something similar in the Cathedral, with three enormous fixed bells and some sixteen bells of full circle ringing. However in the towns, as Caravaca, they turn all the bells, although not always jointly, because the three minor sometimes turn while the biggest sounds immobile.

3. The property of Spanish bells

In Spain most of bells belong to the Catholic Church. In fact, a normal bell being blessed by a priest becomes automatically by law an ecclesiastic property. It occurs the same with the bell towers. If they are associated to the Church (and most of them are) they belong to it. The problem increases if this building is a National Monument: in that case the civil laws have some kind of rights over it to assure the protection. It is difficult to solve: usually the priests “allow” the Government to restore and to protect a building or a bell, but they make many problems if the Administration wants to ring those bells or to make the tower open to public visitors.

There is another interesting element to remember. In the XIV and XV centuries in Europe, the municipal towers had their own bells and carillons to mark the civil time of the Community. In the same moment, in Spain, bigger ecclesiastical towers were made to locate, in different level, civil clock bells, and church bells that marked different ways to conceive the time still conserved until our days.

And however, in spite of the clocks almost always municipal that already begun to work at the end of the XIV century, until this XX century, there were liturgical ringings, adapted to the natural cycle of the day and of the year. Those liturgical chimes marked the community rhythms, in a mixture where “the religious thing” and “the civil thing” are difficult to separate.

4. Bell tower like musical instrument

We propose, therefore that bell towers are authentic musical instruments, formed by several elements. The bells, of course, but also their accessories that determine the sonority of bell and yokes, clappers.... The own tower is also an important part of the instrument: we don't forget that in Spain almost the entirety of bells is in the external windows of the bell chamber. There should be vaults and other architectural elements that increase (or diminish) the sonority of the ensemble.

Bells, accessories and towers are not the only part of the instrument; we also have the traditional ringings that always allow less possibility of those offered by the physical elements. The ringing adapts and creates the instrument: it is the sum and the cause of the ensemble. On the other hand, ringings don't only have formal, musical and aesthetic elements; they are mainly communication objects: it is impossible to understand in Spain a ringing empty of meaning as can be a carillon song whose interest is the own melody. A ringing, always, means something. And it is hardly ever based on the melody, but in the rhythm.

In consequence there are not bells “out of tune”, either good or bad towers - there are ensembles that communicate (or that communicated) vital information for the social organisation of the community.

Ringings did not only call to mass. They marked, with the Angelus, the beginning of the day, noon and the beginning of the night; they announced the class of the following day (since they transmitted a Latin notion of time, beginning the day at noon of previous day and not at twelve in the night like now). They also indicated, with the diverse tolling ringings, the age, the sex, the space location, the social class of the deceased. And other ringings marked sacred or profane spaces, places of tragedies and fires or of feasts and processions. Without forgetting the magic protective function of the bells and their sound, even used in Castile to assure that the storms don't fall in our town... but in the town of to the side.

5. Traditional bellringers

We have spoken of traditional instruments, formed by bells, installations and ringings. This ensemble was only possible with the professional bellringers that we have known until the last nineteen seventies.

Bellringers were professional paid by the community that transmitted messages according to some very strict codes, generally written, and that were paid for their work, sometimes in species (the house, for example) or in money.

In big churches (cathedrals, city parishes) bellringers were professional that lived only playing bells, although some had other occupations like tailors or shoemakers. However, in small towns, bellringers were also sextons, equally paid and that often had a main occupation to be able to live.

Traditional bellringers, as journalists today, had in their hand the possibility to control the community. However they didn't use that power, and the last ones that we knew had a great self-control not "to play bad", nor "to play out of time".

They tried to look for a harmony, not always easy, between the communication and the artistic creation. They could not vary their ringings a lot, for not confusing the neighbors, but they tried to make variations for not to bore neither to get bored.

6. The electrification of the sixties

In the sixties occurred several facts against the bellringers in many of the countries of Spain, as the Comunitat Valenciana.

The Ecumenical Council II supposed the simplification of the liturgy of the Catholic Church. Until then, in many cathedrals and parishes the prayer of the choir was made (sixth, none, eve, complete, matins), four or five times a day, and each prayer had a different ringing according to the "class" of the day. After the Council, the classes were reduced to three or four, and the prayer in community disappeared in many places. In Cathedrals they passed from praying four or five daily times to only one... or none. In consequence every time the ringings were less necessary.

It was also the time of the development: they make us believe that to be European it was necessary to forget the traditions that didn't suppose more than a loss of time and of effort. In Europe, they said, they are modern because they have put an end to the history. And continuous motors appeared ("the wash machine motors") that were associated to progress: "it is no longer necessary to ascend to play the bells, these play alone."

At the same time cost of life ascended and bellringers requested more salary. But their work, more and more useless, was discredited. A bellringer was always "expensive" while a motor was "cheap" (although it cost a hundred times more), because they say "it was forever." However they forget to say that the motors should be conserved, and with the bellringer's disappearance grows cost of maintenance and bad conservation of the installations.

Motors supposed, mainly, and from the perspective of the progress, the death penalty for differences of traditional ringings. Companies of bells, from a situation of prestige and of self-sufficiency, never asked which was the tradition neither of what way was it played in some place.

On the other hand their mechanisms, already old in that moment, could not adapt to necessities of clients. Bells turned to constant speed, always in the same sense, and without differentiating feasts neither tolling chimes.

The “repiques”, played very quick on several bells, and the tolling ringing, almost always rapids disappeared; it was the price of the progress.

And also disappeared manual bellringers: motors, new installations, bells, could only work in an automatic way, substituting the poor ignorant, useless and little artists bellringers forever,

In front of creation and difference, motors announced repetition, monotony and the end of all traditions.

There was another even worse consequence. New installations, not well calculated, broke clappers, bells and towers. It was the price of progress and the disappearance, until the first nineties, of important bells and historical installations.

7. New ensembles of bellringers

At the end of the eighty years a movement grows bigger: the new ensembles of bellringers. Those are not paid professionals, but other kind of people: historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, friends of the traditions, or simply people that discovers the pleasure so intense to be able to play large and dangerous bells.

New bellringers meditate on their work, investigate, publish postcards, books and disks, and make small congresses.

There are two big movements in Spain: in Catalunya and in Castile, where there are still traditional bellringers, the encounters are good to share knowledge, to make small competitions where the old men teach to the youths.

In València, however, with almost 80% of the bells electrified, bellringers want to play the bells again, restoring installations, removing motors and replacing wooden yokes.

As it is natural, the phenomenon developed starting from the cathedrals. Segorbe and València, with bellringers' ensembles formed an association in 1989, the “GREMI DE CAMPANERS VALENCIANS”, of which are part today near two hundred bellringers, and that not only investigate, play and restore bells, but rather have a constant information in Internet (<http://www.cult.gva.es/gcv/default.htm>)

The important thing is that this urban phenomenon, little by little, extends to the towns, and there are already near twenty ensembles in the whole Comunitat Valenciana that play the bells manually.

8. Last restorations

From 1988 phenomenon of new bellringers had important administrative repercussions. First the Spanish Ministry of Culture and then some Regional Governments, as the Generalitat Valenciana take charge the inventories of bells that not gather single epigraphy or decorations but, mainly, conservation state, installations and even ringings.

Surprisingly inventories don't pick up the note of bells - it is also certain that still today the bells are sold, in Spain, to weight and not for the musical note.

Starting from the inventories and of some congress the necessity of a new concept of restoration is born.

If the instrument is the ensemble (bells, installations and ringings) it is necessary to make a restoration project that includes the conservation or the reinstatement of the traditional installations, the possibility of reproduction of the old ringings without the mechanisms impede the manual ringings. Naturally this conservation idea is limited to the historical towers, since there are new bell towers where they are introduced another type of bells.

The congress of Cheste 1989 is a good example. There is a round table where Spanish bell casters say that it is impossible to put new wooden yokes, to weld bells, to make tuned bells, to introduce motors that reproduce the old ringings and don't impede the manual ringings, to control all by computer. The same day a restoration is inaugurated, starting from four historical bells, welding one of them by Lachenmeyer of Germany, making two new harmonised with the other ones by Eijsbouts of Holland with wooden yokes made by a Catalan artisan and motors and computer manufactured and installed by FRANCE CARILLONS. At the beginning Cheste, the Cathedral of València later, then appeared new bellringers, and new motors. The mechanisms don't substitute the bellringers but rather they are bellringers' assistants.

The case of the Cathedral of València is significant. There are eleven bells, from 1305 up to 1735, with medieval and baroque scores to play them. In 1968 they substitute the last bellringer for motors for six bells: two big, two medium and two small (although traditionally they sound or the five big or the six small, but not mixed).

Starting from 1988 the motors are disconnected, and with the new mechanisation there is only an electric bell for the daily ringings; the hundred fifty feast ringings that request from five to eighteen bellringers are played by hand, for an ensemble of volunteers. But, also, they recover lost ringings as the Angelus three times to the day or the ringing of closing the walls. "Useless" chimes, but full with cultural meaning.

In 1992 six Gothic bells were taken to the Expo of Seville, with the idea of transmitting music already alive in the XV century. Starting from that moment, bellringers are no longer considerate workers that throw of the rope, but artists that make concerts.

The phenomenon repeats, in each place in a different manner. For example, in Massanassa, a small town near València, they put wooden yokes and new motors of impulses again, but they leave the biggest bell without motor, to play it exclusively by hand, and never more with a motor.

As consequence of these changes an important market has been developed in Spain. Ten years ago nobody looked for a wooden yoke, the alone bells were made by weight and the motors didn't reproduce the traditional ringings.

Starting from those demands of the market there are new motors, of which the most complete is the Movotron of Clock-O-Matic, new computers, and an important demand of traditional, but expensive installations with better sound and historical quality.

Few months ago we have directed the restoration of the bells of the Giralda of Seville: twenty-four, of those that six are fixed and eighteen of full circle ringing. For the first time in a Spanish cathedral a musical project has been made, studying the stranger sonority of the bells and restoring them for Clock-O-Matic that made the wooden yokes and the motors, while Eijsbouts welded the bells and made six new.

It is of highlighting that in the project we have recovered the old ringings (some lost more than sixty years ago like the prayer ringing for the deceased, every night), and mainly, the bells can be played manually again. Of the whole restoration process it has not cared that bells were recast, neither that returns the old ringings, neither that has to almost be the sevillan people one year without bells. The most important thing, for the press, has been that the bells of the Giralda can be played manually again, and that motors are an assistant, but not the bellringer's substitute.

In summary, the new processes of restoration of bells are based on the respect to the tradition, and in the possibility of reproducing those traditional ringings that were manually mechanically so different from a town to another.

If restorations were an impossible phenomenon ten years ago, now they are becoming Spain an important process that goes accompanied by inventories and a bigger respect toward bells, installations and historical ringings, as well as of possibility of those "concerts" or manual ringings.

Of course, those are not "well tuned bells" - or maybe they are. We should remember that "perfect tuned bells", like those of carillons, just installed in Spain, seem to many of us, "weak bells", "not serious bells", "foreigner bells".

In any case, we try to preserve our traditions, which are also an important part of the culture of bells in the whole world.