THE CARILLON

An Orchestra unto Itself

The carillon was second only to the organ as the earliest modern keyboard. But unlike the instruments related to it, the carillon has been all but ignored by the serious music world.

BY HAL WADSWORTH

GORDON SLATER remembers the first day he saw his father's hobby. The 7-year-old boy straddled his dad's back as they climbed the stairs of the Metropolitan United Church tower in Toronto. When they reached the top, James "Bud" Slater showed his son the very first North American carillon—installed in 1922—with the Baroque keyboard that had replaced teams of European bell ringers of 500 years ago.

"He allowed me to sit on the bench beside him and watch him play," recalls Gordon. Soon he was accompanying his father in duets.

"He would play the treble and I would play bass," says James, who this year celebrates his 30th anniversary as the carillonneur at Metropolitan United.

Then one day James told his son, "Well, Gord, I can't make it today. Can you play the recital?"

Gordon was 12 at the time. There was no practice keyboard available, and he was nervous about playing alone on the set of 35 piercing bells that hung in the tower.

And he should have been. The carillon is a tricky instrument. It looks like a piano, but the keys are short, tapered sticks that carillonneurs strike with the edges of their hands. Cables pull the clappers to the bells, and the thumping and scraping of wood and wires are almost as intimidating as the deafening peals above the playing cabin.

"I sat at the kitchen table with the music in front of me," Gordon remembers. "I moved my hands along the edge of the table and my feet along the floor."

Now, at 41, Gordon Slater is Canada's dominion carillonneur, a position he has held for 15 years. He plays every weekday on the Peace Tower

PRICE SLATER FAIR LLOP
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carillon atop Parliament Hill in Ottawa. And he's no longer shy about performing. "Just being able to produce all that volume of music to all that many potential listeners is most exciting."

The carillon originated in the lowland towers of Flanders and Holland, or what are now Belgium and the Netherlands. It was second only to the organ as the earliest modern keyboard. It predates the harpsichord. But unlike the instruments related to it, the carillon has been all but ignored by the serious music world; the outdoor instrument doesn't lend itself to performances in concert halls.

Carillon music was once regarded as a folk art—a steady repertoire of simple festive tunes that were charming but unworthy of serious praise. But since the first carillon was installed in Toronto, the "medieval alarm clock" is making a comeback that is attracting thousands of fans and students not only from Canada and the United States, but also from places as distant as New Zealand and Japan.

In the Middle Ages, Europeans used bells for civic communication. Chimes could signal an approaching storm, a fire, the hours of the day or a death. When the English invented weight-driven clocks at the end of the 13th century, it wasn't long before bells were connected to them.

Bells became status symbols in the low cities during the 14th-century textile boom, and new tower clocks soon dominated the flat marshlands.

In 1371, the town of Middelburg, Holland, got the first automatic player for tower bells. It was a rotating drum, like a big music box, that played a preset combination of bells before the strokes of each hour. It was called the "voorslag," a Dutch word that means "before strike." The voorslag replaced the teams of bell ringers previously needed to tap out melodies.

The Flemish had another word for the drum mechanism: "rammel" or racket. It's obvious the sound wasn't always pleasing. And because the clocks weren't very accurate, you could walk down a Dutch street and go mad from the torturous, Poe-like clangor of randomly pealing bells.

But the Dutch and Flemish loved the automatic players. Then Oudenaarde, Belgium, added a console to its tower bells in 1510. Every city worth its cobblestones had to have this early version of the carillon, which allowed an individual musician to ring an entire array of bells.

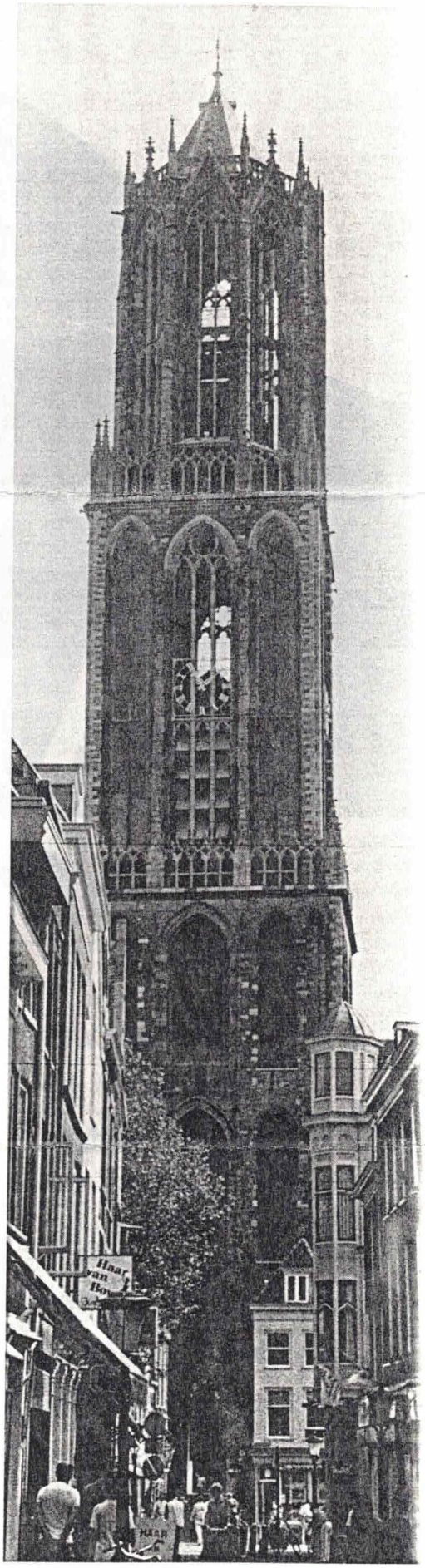
But there were still serious problems with the way the bells sounded. In Germany, swinging bells were more popular than carillons, but the desire in the low countries to play melodies and chords on bells called for a new understanding of harmonics.

Bell founders had no such knowledge. Intellectuals debated fiercely about campanology, or bell physics. Even the great philosopher René Descartes offered a discourse on bell tuning.

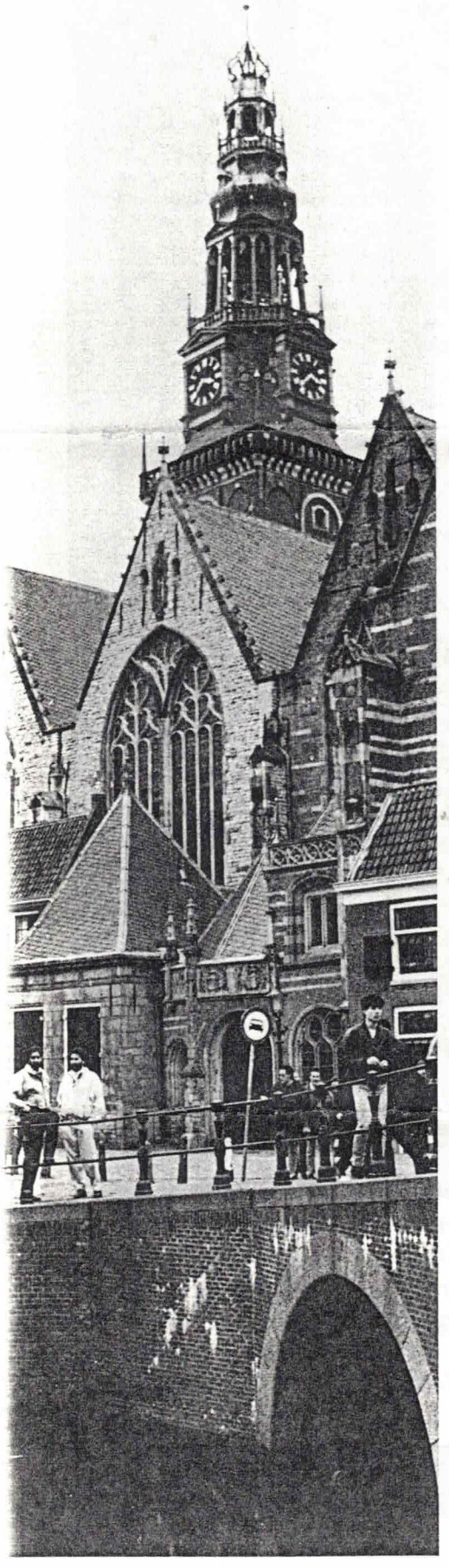
No one came up with the answer until François and Pieter Hemony, a pair of bell-casting brothers from Lévecourt, joined a blind carillonneur with an extraordinary sense of hearing. Jacob van Eyck, who played in Utrecht's Dom Tower in the early 1600s, analyzed the relationships of partials —a fundamental note and its overtones—by whistling resonance out of wine glasses. Then he tried the same thing with bells.

"The carillon is an orchestra unto itself," James Slater says, "because each bell emits five significant tones."

Van Eyck and the Hemonys found that by turning a bell on a lathe and



Utrecht's Dom Tower (right) has a 50-bell carillon, including 33 original Hemony bells. The date on the Hemony bell (previous page), reading 1664, is visible on the far left of the inscription.



Amsterdam's Old Church, built in 1306. The tower was erected in 1556.

scraping out metal from certain zones along its inner wall, each of the five dominant partials could be changed separately.

The Hemonys instantly became famous, and their carillons became the most prized in the low countries. The brothers sold their bells to cities as distant as Hamburg, Stockholm and St. Petersburg. But they died in the late 17th century without revealing their tuning secret.

For two centuries, Dutch foundries struggled to recreate the beautiful Hemony sound. Then the Industrial Revolution smothered the art. Iron stole the markets for weaponry and housewares, which bronze casters had always dominated. Even worse, the 19th- century *nouveaux riches* shunned public music and began attending concerts in sparkling new halls. By the end of the 1800s, only two Dutch bell foundries remained.

Carillon music, which once rang so proudly from towers across the low countries, was dead.

The carillon bore the unfortunate image of a musical folly. All those wires and hinges and springs and screws gave it about as much elegance as a Tom Thumb piano. And it was difficult to play. The carillon couldn't compete with the organ or the piano when it came to the musical complexity required by 19th- century romantic compositions. It took a strong person just to pull the heavy clappers tied to the lower notes—especially with any kind of rhythm.

But on a recent Saturday afternoon in Amsterdam, five young Japanese women giggled with delight as they squirmed one after another onto the bench in the tiny playing cabin of the Oudekerk, or Old Church. Yuko's dainty feet barely dangled to the pedals when it was her turn to play. She frowned as she struggled through a Bach arrangement.

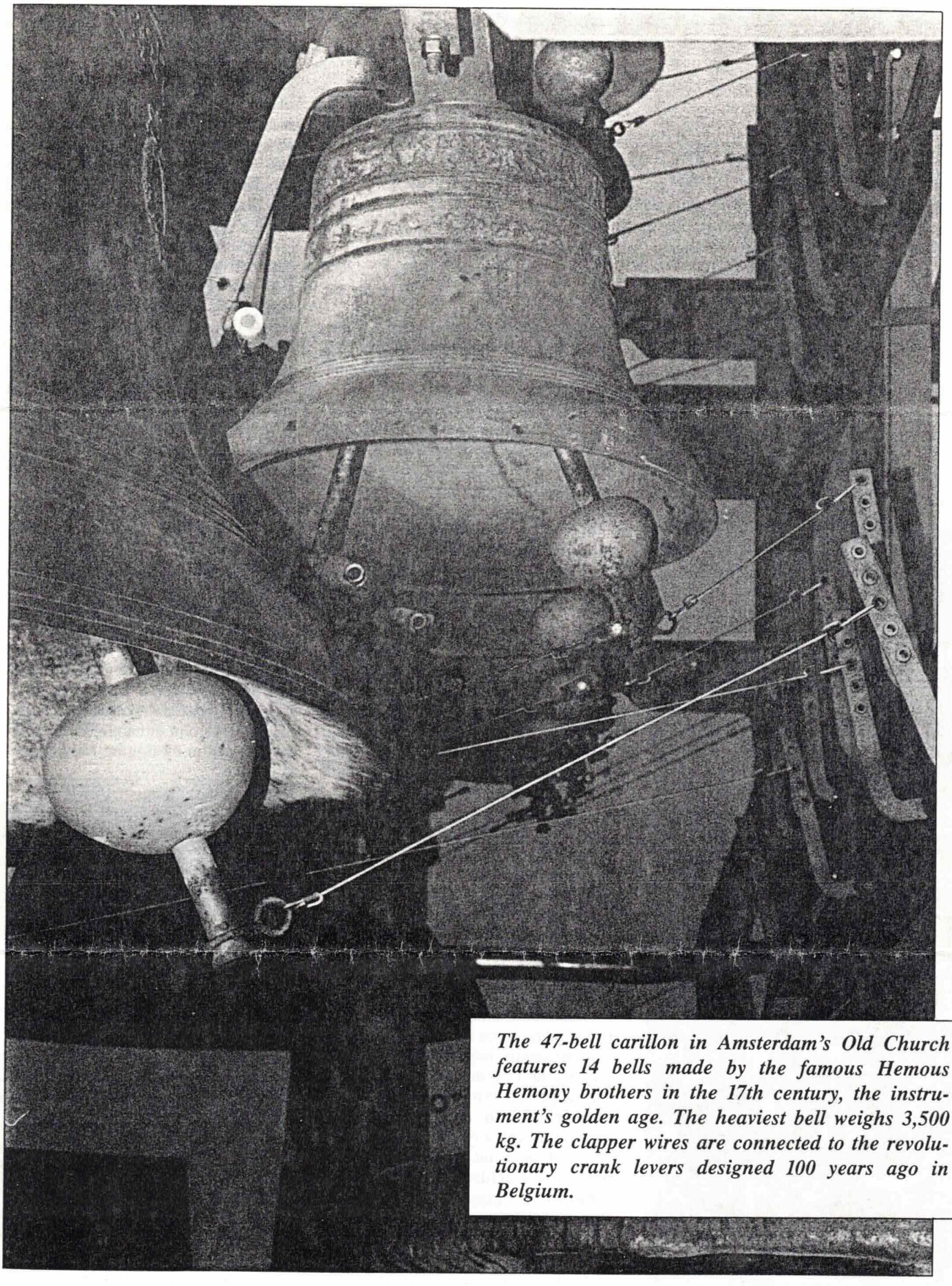
Her instructor, Todd Fair, consoled her, "That piece of music doesn't really work on this instrument." The Oudekerk carillon, like so many others in the low countries, was cast in mean-tone temperament, the standard before Bach came along and rebelliously tuned his instruments to equal temperament.

"Most of the modern things you can't do on the Oudekerk," explains Fair, whose weekly recitals haunt the wind over the red-tiled rooftops and across the spider web of Amsterdam's canals. Fair, a U.S. citizen who moved to Amsterdam 18 years ago, has played the carillon in the city's oldest church since 1979. He also teaches at the Netherlands Carillon School, a conservatory where about 30 students study everything from composition to campanology.

Fair says the carillon's reputation as a lemon is now mythical. Although he's a big man, his body seems completely at ease when he performs. His loose fists flow over the keys. There's even that timid musician's grip in his handshake.

Today's carillons are easier to play because of an invention 100 years ago by Jef Denijn, a Belgian carillonneur who sparked the instrument's renaissance. Denijn streamlined the keyboard's action by rigging crank levers

Todd Fair performs one of his weekly recitals in the tower of Amsterdam's Old Church.



The 47-bell carillon in Amsterdam's Old Church features 14 bells made by the famous Hemous Hemony brothers in the 17th century, the instrument's golden age. The heaviest bell weighs 3,500 kg. The clapper wires are connected to the revolutionary crank levers designed 100 years ago in Belgium.

and coiled leaf springs in Mechelen's St. Rombout's tower. Gone was the stiff friction that limited the instrument to those strong enough to overpower it.

Denijn was able to transcribe and compose more freely for the carillon, which suddenly offered the dynamics necessary for the music of his day. He began playing summer evening recitals in Mechelen in 1892. They were so popular that special trains began carrying fans from Antwerp and Brussels every Monday night. "The tower area had turned into an ants' nest," wrote contemporary Mechelen alderman Henry de Coster.

Interest in carillons increased when English clergyman Arthur B. Simpson rediscovered the secret of bell tuning in 1895. Denijn raised enough money to open the Royal Carillon School in Mechelen in 1922, the same fateful year that a well-tuned carillon made its New World debut.

The school's first North American student, Canadian-born musician Frank Percival Price, graduated in 1926. It was Price who became Canada's first dominion carillonneur when the Peace Tower got its bells in 1927. In Ottawa in 1936, he helped found the Guild of Carillonneurs of North America, which now has 500 members. And from 1945 until 1947, the U.S. Army hired him to drive around Europe compiling a catalogue of Dutch and Flemish bells stolen by the Nazis for their war industry.

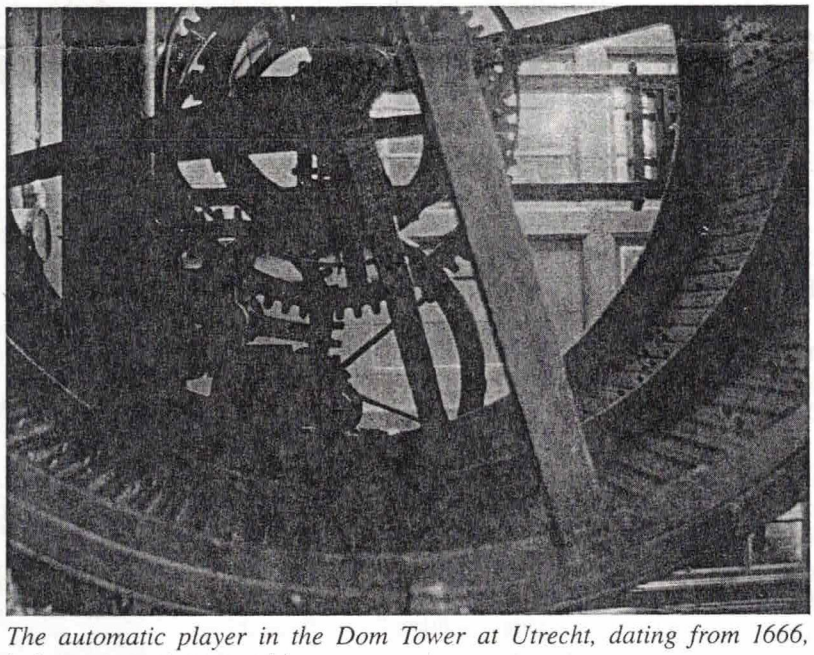
"He must have had a blast," muses Fair as he remembers the Canadian master, who died in 1985. When Fair moved to Europe in 1974 to study at the Netherlands Carillon School, Price took him on a trip through East Germany.

Fair has done a lot of travelling since then. Last year, he performed and taught carillon workshops at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tenn., and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. He even flew to Shiga, near Tokyo, to check on the progress of his Japanese students.

But will the carillon ever draw as many fans as it did 100 years ago? "There are a lot of silent enthusiasts," Fair says. "There are more and more people slowly but surely becoming interested." He says the carillon suffers from a lack of publicity because "it's a very anonymous art. You're always up in a tower so no one sees you."

In fact, most people who walk the crooked alleys around the Oudekerk don't even look up. The church is centered in Amsterdam's red-light district, where prostitutes and sex shops steal all the attention.

Three times a week, Fair drives 30 minutes to Alkmaar, which, like Amsterdam, pays him to play carillon recitals.



The automatic player in the Dom Tower at Utrecht, dating from 1666, is large enough to stand in.

The old weighing house under the Waag tower now houses a cheese museum and a tourist information bureau, but the women behind the counter aren't exactly sure if tonight is carillon night. Fair arrives with a leather music case under his arm, unlocks a side door and disappears inside. No one notices. A few minutes later, as twilight deepens, each bell chirps a timid note, one after another from smallest to largest. It's Fair checking the tension of the clapper wires. The canals turn glassy as the evening air settles and the ducks cease their squabbling. Then a jackpot of metallic melody spills out of the tower and ricochets along the narrow streets and mossy walls of the old quarter. Suddenly, a motorcycle exhaust rattles through the harmony. Meanwhile, clothing stores with piped-in rap music are attracting crowds of young people. Now the bells are chiming a familiar tune, one of Fair's whims. It's "Yesterday" by the Beatles, but still no one notices. Bell music isn't cool.

And then there's the misconception that the instrument is strictly for religious music.

"Many associate it with what they've rejected," Fair says of the locals. "They don't want to know about it." But like most Dutch carillonneurs, Fair is a city employee. Towers physically connected to churches are almost always the separate property of municipalities. "We don't play on Sunday," he adds. Enthusiasm for carillon music is lukewarm in Holland, but it's hot right now in Japan. The Joy of Angels tower in Shiga went up in December 1990. Its Dutch-made bells comprise the first large carillon ever in Japan. Fifteen thousand showed up at its dedicatory recital. And there's even a new carillon museum this spring in Huis ten Bosch, a replica of a Dutch tower near Nagasaki.

Fair says his Japanese students are grasping the instrument at a remarkable pace. "They are so ambitious. They achieve results at a faster rate than most Western students."

European ears are also warming to bell music. Two summers ago, Swiss carillon hobbyist Andreas Friedrich travelled to the Dutch town of Zutphen for a congress of the World Carillon Federation, which meets every two years at different locations. At the event, Friedrich met Swiss campanologist Claude Graber. "We had never met," Friedrich says. "We thought we should do something about that." The result is the new Guild of Carillonneurs and Campanologists of Switzerland, which so far has 40 members. These include a previously isolated group of bell chimers—who ring bells with ropes—from the Valais region.

Meanwhile, a similar tradition in Spain would have died unnoticed if anthropologist Francesc Llop I Bayo

hadn't recorded the last of the bell chimers before they quit for the lack of money a few years ago. "People said I was mad," says Llop I Bayo, who has made some 250 audio and video recordings of Spanish chimers since 1968. He was fascinated by the hundreds of traditional chiming styles and codes in cathedrals across the country. Llop I Bayo says locals considered the loss of the tradition "the price of progress."

But people don't think he's crazy anymore.

"Now people are interested," he says. His recordings for the Spanish Ministry of Culture convinced authorities to scrap the computer-driven chimes at the Valencia Cathedral. Members of the new Valencia Bell-Ringers' Guild chime the bells by hand once again, and the Spanish government is beginning to restore some of the country's 300,000 bells.

More are being discovered all the time. Six medieval Spanish bells were on display at Seville's Expo '92 until October.

The carillon is gaining popularity south of the equator, too. There are carillons in Capetown, Sao Paulo and Sydney.

This year, New Zealand marks the 60th anniversary of its carillon, which stands at the National War Memorial in Wellington. In 1990, the country hosted its first International Carillon Festival, and in February 1991, National Carillonist Timothy Hurd stretched the carillon's horizons to new art forms when his musical tower became the setting of a modern dance performance. The work, *Peace Movements*, features Hurd on carillon and ten dancers led by choreographer Susan Jordan.

"Carillon technique has made incredible strides in this century," says Hurd, "but not enough has yet been done with the ensemble possibilities. There needs to be more and better jobs for carillon players." Carillon music is peculiar, adds Hurd, "Because it's out there—you can't charge admission to concerts."

University of Toronto carillonneur Sydney J. Shep, who has played on Toronto's Exhibition Place carillon for the past two summers, says the instrument's public nature makes it special. "One cannot divorce the folk element from the concert element," she says. "You're only going to insure the future of the instrument if you have good performers. Today, carillon music is in a transitional stage, because there are many bell towers but not enough carillonneurs."

In North America, the level of compositional difficulty is only very slowly increasing, and Shep thinks that "Only when the instrument gains more serious musical recognition will it attract the students it needs." But her observation makes one wonder which will come first, the recognition or the students. Or will the instrument always remain a bit wacky—the overgrown music box of times long since past?

Gordon Slater finds hope in the carillon's longevity and individuality. Like Hurd, he has tested the instrument's flexibility. In a 1980 recording now out of circulation, the Canadian Brass accompanies Slater at the Peace Tower carillon.

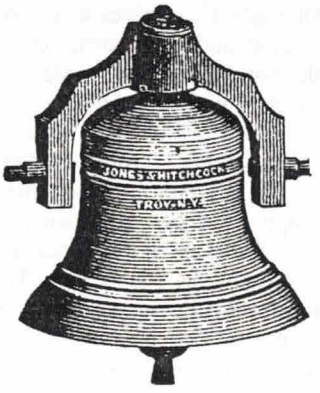
Slater says the carillon is unique because of "the number of people who may listen to it without amplification." He calls it a "democratic instrument. The sound falls from the sky as rain—unbidden."

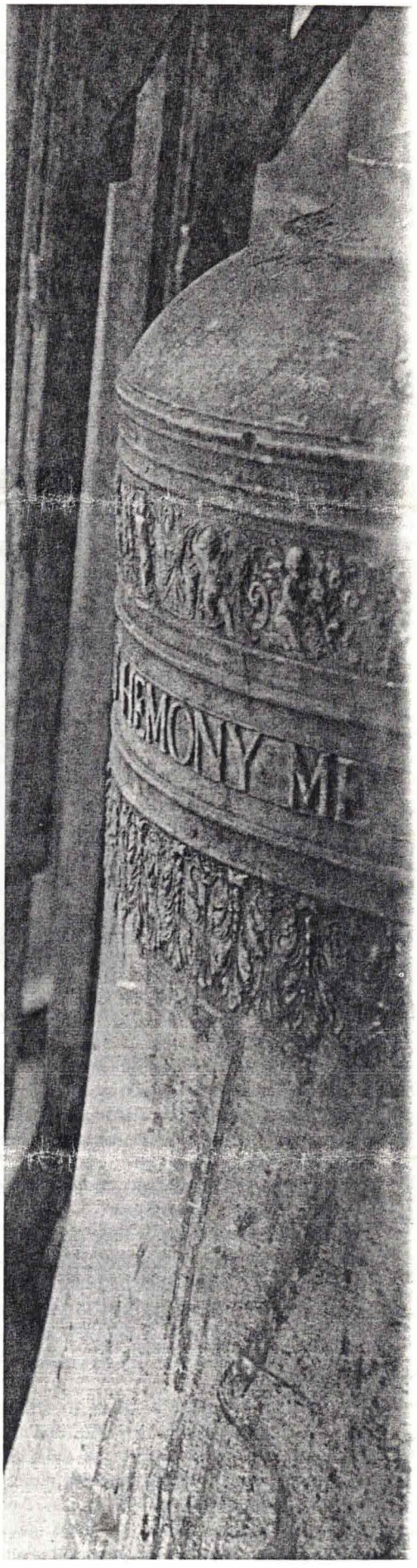
Unbidden, but not necessarily unwanted.

"The hope that I see is that with economies in the miserable condition that they are—with the planet in the miserable condition it is—these things that cost less are going to be highly prized.

He even has a catchy new term for the possible trend: "Low-tech."

Hal Wadsworth is an Amsterdam-based freelance writer originally from Chicago.





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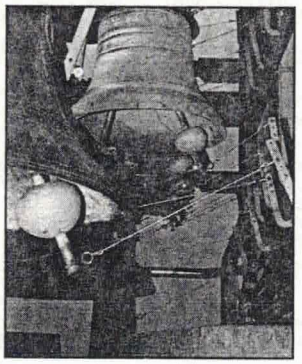

The Carillon

Arturo Toscanini

Cover: Angel of the Annunciation. French – School of Picardy. Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Inside front cover: Handel the performer, from a portrait by Sir James Thornhill (1676-1734).

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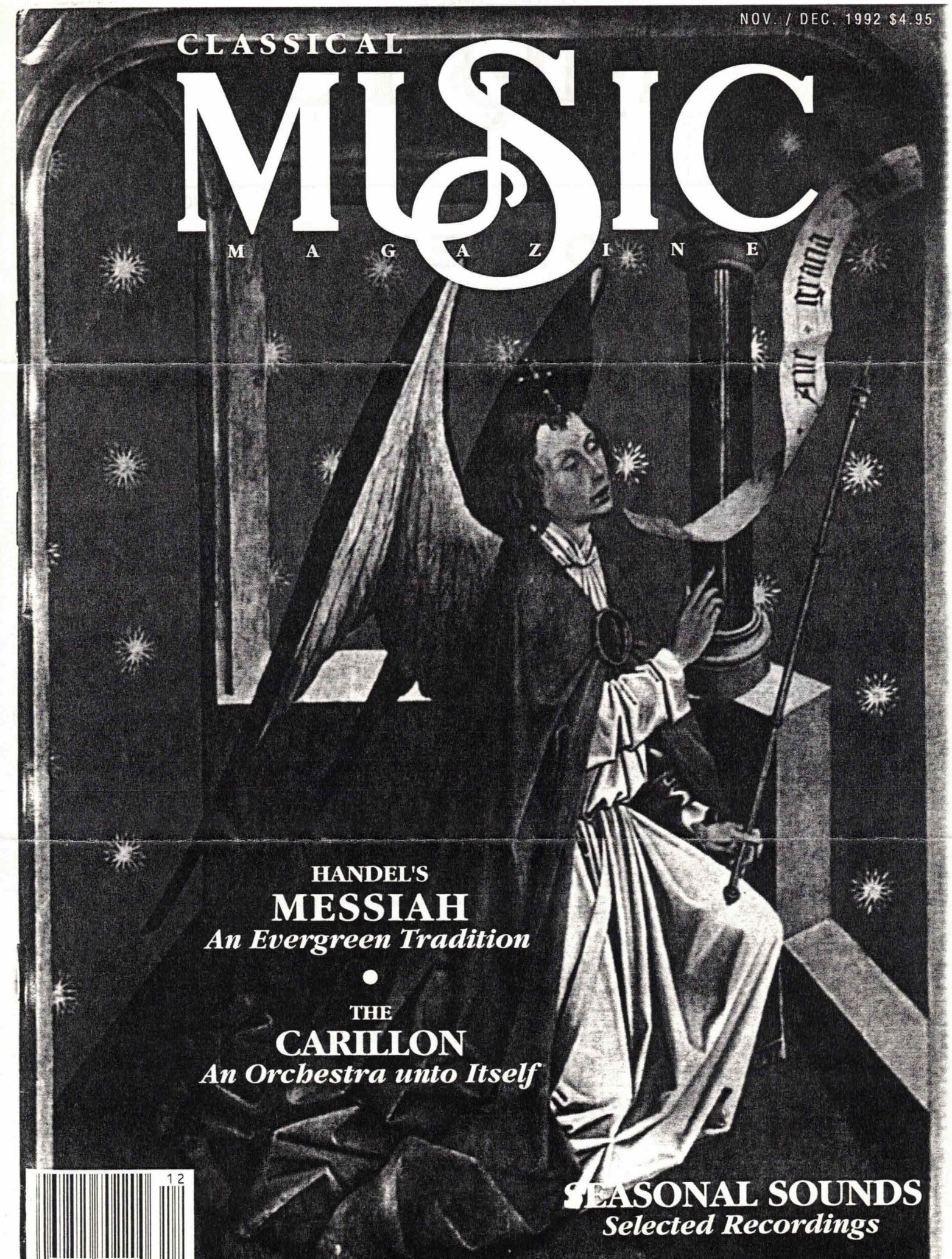

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