

Tintinnabulum



Tintinnabulum is the Latin word for handbell. This word itself evokes a sound picture of great color and rhythm. Handbells are finely tuned bells of varying sizes, made with a bronze alloy of 76% copper and 24% tin, with the smaller bells having a higher percentage of tin and sometimes-small amounts of lead. The pitch assigned to each bell is called the strike note, which is accompanied by various overtones. A deeper tone, which continues to sound after the overtones have faded is called the hum note. This under, or hum, tone sounds an octave below the strike note, and the proper tuning of this and the various overtones is the most critical part of the bell-founder's art.

The bell is an ancient instrument which for centuries has been incorporated into religious ceremonies worldwide. The elusive and fading sound of bells has universally suggested the mystical and hence been associated with religion. Medieval Christianity made regular use of bells in the accompaniment of music for liturgical dramas where a distinct association connected bells with ideas of heaven or the divine.

Bells, along with the organ and harps, served as the basic instruments of the medieval church. In medieval art, bells appear associated with Christ and heaven. The following line from a medieval rhyme demonstrates the accepted meaning of bells in worship:

*Vox Mea, Vox Vitae, Voco Sacrae Venite,
My Voice, Voice Of Life, I Call You,
Come To Divine Worship.*

During Charlemagne's reign in the tenth century, the use of bells spread throughout Europe. The use of

single bells expended to become a veritable concert of bells in the early Gothic cathedrals. Bells were equipped with handles, enabling them to be rung in procession. Because of their pitch constancy, bells were employed to teach music theory to choristers. They were used to maintain pitch at the cadences in psalms and also to signal important breathing points.

The art of handbell ringing as we practice it here at St. John's began in 17th century England as a means of practicing the already popular tower bell change ringing. The "change ring" was a lengthy bell peal based on a mathematical formula of considerable complexity. Change ringing takes long hours of practice to achieve the precise teamwork required to literally "pull off" a successful "ring" with huge swinging tower bells, activated by ropes. Since church towers were often cold and the long practice sessions were somewhat disturbing to the surrounding villagers, the addition of handles to small bells was instantly welcomed. How much more satisfactory to practice in a choir members cozy cottage beside a cheery fire and even incorporate a spot of tea or mug of ale into the rehearsal.

Handbell ringing, as an art in its own right, was introduced to America in the 1850s by various touring groups from England. Since that time, handbell groups have been formed throughout the country and are a source of delightful musical activity for thousands of people of all ages. In 1954 the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers (AGEHR) was formed. In 1971 the governing board of the AGEHR adopted its theme which continues as its motto today: "Uniting People Through a Musical Art."