

OXFORD TAKES UP BELL-RINGING ART

"Campanology" Is Enthusiastically Studied by Undergraduates—Carillons and Highly Accomplished Chime Artists of Europe

OXFORD undergraduates are practicing campanology as an art, according to recent dispatches. Not only do the students enthusiastically acclaim this bell-ringing as an art and a science, but they also look upon it as an excellent form of exercise. Under the direction of an Oxford clergyman, groups are being taught to handle with dexterity the bell ropes hanging from the historic towers of their Alma Mater.

The art of bell-ringing in Belgium and Holland, where the best carillon players are found, has been handed down from father to son through generations. Even with inherited talent, this accomplishment is attained only after long apprenticeship and close application. Possibly Oxford classicism will one day produce a notable campanologist. That the new activity has been labeled "campanology" will fortunately relieve the present enthusiasts of the responsibility of competing with expert carillonners, whose mastery of complicated keyboards entitles them to fame. Chopin's "Funeral March" and pieces of similar technical difficulty are played by carillonners on Europe's great sets of bells.

There is a difference between change ringing, as practiced in England, and carillon playing; the scope of the former is a simple tune on a few bells; the latter is capable of producing musical masterpieces. The majority of New York churches have chimes instead of carillons. An exception is the carillon imported for the new chapel now being erected at Riverside Drive and 122d Street. Temporarily, it is domiciled in the belfry of the Park Avenue Baptist Church.

English change ringing and pealing are done upon swinging bells, operated by ropes assigned to operators. This old-fashioned method still endures in most countries. The bells are rung in more or less mathematical order, or sequence, and where there are not too many to ring, one or two men can do the work. A New Yorker, on one of his travels, was so impressed by the bell-ringing in Russia that he spent

two months learning the art. The primitive method of tying a rope to the bell clapper is generally followed in that country, although the swinging bell is slowly giving way to the fixed chime.

When the bells of a chime are hung "fixed," or so as not to swing, the chime may be played by a small clavier or drum, similar to the clavier of a carillon. One bell specialist described a chime as a "slice" of about ten bells taken "approximately from the middle of the range of a carillon, but including only such bells as are necessary to form the scale upon which the chimes are based." It is the increased number of bells that gives the carillon its compass and versatility. The famous carillon in Antwerp Cathedral has forty-seven bells.

Bell Masters Are Honored.

Belgium's carillonners, or bell masters, are people of importance in their community. Their concerts are events widely advertised. Illustrated booklets and posters distributed through villages and countryside attract crowds that travel many miles to hear the music. Persons who can play the piano or organ may perform acceptably on the clavier or keyboard of a carillon, but it requires long and faithful practice to develop the fine technique of the bell masters of Holland and Belgium.

Louvain and Ypres lost their carillons (among the finest) in the World War, and those of Malines, Bruges, Antwerp and Ghent did not sound for several years. When the invading armies marched into Antwerp the carillonner locked his tower, delivered the key to the Burgomaster and exchanged the rôle of artist for that of plain citizen. He went about his business quietly and the invaders subsequently searched for the master of the bells, but he made no sign. He was officially "lost" until the war ended, when he unlocked his tower and sat down once more before the beloved keyboard.

Civic events are closely associated

with the European carillon. Its history is an interesting one. Before clocks and watches were as numerous as they are today, the village bell played an important rôle in daily life. Citizens got up in the morning, attended church and went to bed by its chimes. As towns prospered they added to their bells. The carillon became a prize in war. Acquisitive monarchs carried it off with other hostages, knowing well that during its absence civic solidarity was in jeopardy. Romantic stories are told of the capture and ransom of carillons. Every prosperous community formerly owned a belfry and a carillon. Folk songs and patriotic airs punctuated fête days. The burgher sat in the home of his fathers with his beer and his pipe listening to the music of the carillon. When it rang he knew all was well.

Tower music was born in Belgium four centuries ago. At first all the playing was automatic. Then the keyboard came into being. The automatically played carillon is manipulated by a revolving cylinder, connected usually with the town clock. But the keyboard requires skillful fingers. Pedals are employed often for the heavier bells (some of the bass bells weigh as much as 17,000 pounds). In Mechlin the bells vary in weight from 18 to over 17,000 pounds. Cornell's carillon, one of the few in America, has bells weighing from 300 to 4,000 pounds.

Modern bells are said to be better than ancient ones, despite the legendary harmonies of old chimes. According to experts, improvement in melting alloy has secured a more perfect admixture in casting. Copper and tin produces the best bells.

In olden days there were no women carillonners and there are few today. Occasionally, in Belgium, a daughter would attempt to carry on her father's work, but it was usually a son who succeeded to the municipal job. The Park Avenue Baptist Church in New York now has a woman playing its carillon of fifty-three bells. She is, however, temporarily occupying the position of the regular carillonner, at present in Europe.