

Singing Bronze: A History of Carillon Music. By LUC ROMBOUTS. Pp. 368. Leuven: Lipsius Leuven. 2014. ISBN 9789058679567

When the then Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands visited the University of California, Berkeley in the 1980s, the Dutch Studies' program director Johan Snapper had prepared a special welcoming ceremony: as soon as her royal highness approached the campanile at the centre of the campus, the tower's carillon began to play the song *In naam van Oranje, doe open de poort!* ['In the name of Orange, open the gate!'].

That the Dutch queen was welcomed with carillon music was very appropriate. As Luc Rombouts, carillonneur of the city of Tienen and of the Catholic University of Leuven, explains in his eloquent and well-researched book *Singing Bronze*, the roots of this musical instrument are to be found in the Low Countries. The carillon, which he identifies as 'the first musical mass medium in history', is the example par excellence of a Dutch *lieu de mémoire*, a generator and repository of popular national symbols and myths. That the music was played to honour a visitor of royal blood was also appropriate. Rombouts shows that it was the rivalry

among medieval cities in the Low Countries to impress noble visitors that had made the instrument flourish. It is not by accident, thus, that the main source of wealth of these cities — the production of cloth from wool — is reflected in the shape of the instrument: the form of the primitive carillon keyboard corresponds to that of a loom. He also explains that the most impressive medieval welcoming ceremonies occurred in the context of *blijde inkomsten* (joyous entries) when members of foreign aristocratic families who ruled over (parts of) the Netherlands came to pledge adherence to local customary liberties. The bells, then, served both to welcome a new ruler and to remind that ruler that local liberties were to be respected. It was precisely out of disrespect for traditional liberties that a violent uprising under William of Orange had erupted against the Spanish King Philip II. It should, as such, not be surprising that the gates to which the carillon song in Berkeley alluded were the ones of Den Briel, the city where William had achieved his first military victory against the Spanish in 1572.

Rombouts highlights how the carillon is much more than just a musical instrument; it is also a symbol of local pride and identity, of liberty and freedom, of war and peace that needs to be studied not only from a musicological but also a social-historical perspective. He shows how the fate of bells corresponds in many ways to the dramatic history of the Low Countries and how foreigners — either as violent invaders or as sympathetic admirers — played a key role in the evolution of carillon music. He also demonstrates how the tragedy of the First World War, when Belgium resisted the German invaders at an extremely high cost, triggered the interest in the instrument on the other side of the Atlantic and made the United States into one of the world's leading nations in carillon art. Rombouts's decision to further expand those sections of the English translation dealing with the role of patrons such as John D. Rockefeller Jr and Herbert Hoover in the development of American carillon culture should be applauded. His detailed analysis of this transatlantic connection and the singular development of carillon music in the United States makes his book particularly interesting for an American audience and a must for every comprehensive university library. It should, however, not be forgotten that Dutch history is partly also American history. The remarkable success of carillon music in the United States corresponded to a much broader, though short-lived, wave of interest in the Netherlands — aptly called *Holland Mania* by Annette Stott — when Dutch tulip gardens and windmills popped up everywhere in the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All this occurred at a time when the Dutch had been 'reinvented' as New York's 'visionary' forefathers who on the island of Manhattan had allegedly built the foundations of what later made America the 'world's greatest nation'. American values such as the love of liberty, religious tolerance, and freedom of conscience were suddenly claimed to have Dutch roots and even the American Declaration of Independence was credited to have been inspired by the Netherlands' sixteenth-century Act of Abjuration.

The chapters on World War I and II are among the most fascinating parts of this compelling book. Not only does Rombouts show how strong the emotional attachment to the bells grew under German occupation, he also demonstrates how the Nazis shamefully appropriated this ancient symbol of liberty for their brutal policies. Equally impressive are some of the illustrations, with a remarkable picture of one of the Nazi 'bell cemeteries' as the absolute highlight. One omission in the chapter dealing with the Second World War is the fierce discussion that erupted in the Netherlands after Anton Mussert, leader of the Dutch National-Socialist Movement (NSB), decided to offer a Dutch bell to Hermann Goering at a mass meeting in Lunteren in 1940. In fact, the strong focus on carillons in Dutch resistance literature was not only a form of protest against the confiscation of bells by the Nazis but also part of a strategy to portray NSB-members as traitors of the Dutch nation.

The author's brave decision to take a personal stand on the future of carillon music in the book's final chapter is admirable. Rombouts, who is known for occasionally playing pop songs on his Leuven carillon, makes a strong stand to keep reinventing the carillon repertoire as a 'musical reflection of society'. For good reasons, he also warns that it would be dangerous to

preserve carillon music as an essentially 'white phenomenon' and makes an appeal to reach out to minority groups in the Low Countries in order to increase the instrument's cultural diversity. One would, therefore, wish to see in a few years from now an expansion of Rombouts' groundbreaking study with an additional chapter on carillon music as world music, which would not only include a focus on carillon history in Asian countries such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Japan but also a reflection on what it would mean to adapt carillon music to Indonesian motifs or African rhythms. One could, in this respect, remind the author of the fact that Portuguese explorers already introduced bell music in Central Africa in the late fifteenth century and that the ancient Kingdom of Kongo was known as Kongo di Ngunga, meaning 'Kongo of the (church) bell'. The word ngunga has later been found in slave songs from Jamaica and Trinidad. Thus it may well be that upon further investigation, the history of jazz and pop turns out to have a closer connection to bell music than one would be inclined to assume. Rombouts is, in any case, more than right with his conclusion that 'the carillon has always been a musical reflection of society, and it will only survive if it is able to continue to bring people together in the future'.

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