

Draft translation of "[Over een klokkengieter die klokken vervalste en over een universiteit die haar kritische zin verloor](#)," by Andre Lehr, *Berichten uit het Nationaal Beiaardmuseum*, 36:6-19 (November 2003)

“About a bell founder who forged bells and about a university that lost its critical sense,” by Andre Lehr, *Reports from the National Carillon Museum*, 36:6-19 (November 2003)

Summary

In 1937, the Alfred University in Alfred in the state of New York bought a chime from the former bell-founder Omer Michaux in Brussels, which supposedly features eighteen bells from 1674 by the famous Dutch bell-founder Pieter Hemony. Michaux had acquired this carillon from bell founder Marcel Michiels in Tournai. What probably no one suspected at the time, let alone knew, was that Hemony's bells were forged. Its history is a tale of deceit and lust. Prominent figures from the carillon world at the time, including none other than Jef Denyn, the world-famous city carillonneur of Mechelen, were involved, whether or not against their will. But that wasn't all, because after the successful sale to Alfred, Michiels suddenly had several Hemony carillons available for sale! Yet there was finally some doubt, albeit behind closed doors, because the Consul General of the United States very discreetly interfered in this affair. The war was then about to break out.

The history

Dr. Lloyd Watson, a chemistry professor at Alfred University in Alfred, New York, was a famous man in the 1930s, albeit in beekeeping. But that's not what our story is about. It is about the fact that he was the driving force behind the establishment of a carillon on the Alfred University campus. In the early thirties of the last century, he had already requested a price from the English bellfounder Taylor, but no purchase was made. Nevertheless, the bellfounder faithfully sent a calendar every year showing all kinds of photos of beautiful bells and carillons. But the idea survived. In 1935 it even led to the establishment of a Carillon Committee in which not only Lloyd Watson and his wife had a seat, but also his fellow professor Dr. Norman Whitney along with his wife and finally Mrs. Edna Saunders. Their first task was to raise money to realize the chimes.

One day a lady from Boston came to visit the Watsons. Not without reason, because Olive, the wife of Lloyd Watson, was famous for her candy cake. During a visit to her husband's laboratory, the lady from Boston, whose name turned out to be Charlotte Greene, noticed the English calendar. It was for Prof. Watson to tell his story about a carillon he would love to hear on campus. Charlotte Greene, however, knew what to do, because she was aware that valuable old bells were available in Belgium. She would be informed on her next visit to Europe. She had good contacts, friends as she was with Jef Denyn, the world-famous city carillonneur of Mechelen who retired in 1932 and was still director of the first carillon school in the world at the time. Denyn was also a very authoritative advisor in bell matters. In short, a man everyone looked up to. It should be noted that Denyn was already well into his seventies at the time of our story and suffered from rheumatoid arthritis that tormented him with pains and swelling. He often complained about that. Thus began the most curious history of the carillon world, a story of desire and deceit.

An old chime for sale!

We first make a trip to the Flemish Harelbeke, close to Kortrijk. There, around that time, a small carillon by Joris Dumery from Bruges hung in the tower of the Sint Salvatorkerk, largely cast in 1737, but also with bells by him from 1776 and 1786. Although this was the first work of this foundry, there were no reasons why it would not be a good carillon. Dumery later became world famous with the carillon on the Halletoren in Bruges. So a competent bell founder. However, Harelbeke was not satisfied with its carillon almost two centuries later. They wanted a new one. Or had Marcel Michiels, bell founder in Tournai, persuaded the city to do so? But be that as it may, the Dumery carillon moved to Tournai in 1932 and a Michiels carillon replaced it. Incidentally, it was destroyed during World War II when the tower was blown up in 1940.

A few years later, in 1935, the Dumery carillon would be set up for play by Michiels at the World Exhibition in Brussels. Incidentally, one may wonder whether all those bells were really made by Dumery. There is a photo in Michiels' archive

that shows two Dumery bells. But the caption speaks volumes. On the right bell: *real Dumery bell (1776)*, on the left it is written: *counterfeit bell according to Dumery cast in 1934 by M. Michiels in Tournai*. It would be one of the largest bells of the said carillon. It was cracked and had to be repainted. We will not pay any further attention to this, assuming that this was done in all openness.

The Dumery carillon was very successful in Brussels, although Denyn had his reservations. Because he didn't like small bells in general and more specifically those bells from the former set of Harelbeke. About all this and more, Charlotte Greene wrote to the Watsons on July 30, 1935. After consultation with Denyn, she suggested replacing the bad Dumery bells with new ones, although the former bell founder Omer Michaux from Brussels didn't think it would be difficult to replace them with bells from François and Pieter Hemony as well as from Andreas Jozef van den Gheyn, great masters in the making of carillons during the seventeenth and eighteenth Centuries. Thus a perfect carillon would be obtained. She therefore urged the Watsons to accept the proposal, all the more so because everyone in Europe expected war to break out in November, and then the opportunity was lost forever. We also learn the exchange rate of the franc: 29 francs bought one dollar.

Meanwhile, the American Henry S. Wesson from Nashville in Texas had graduated from the Carillon School in Mechelen, where in 1932 he received his diploma as an accomplished carillonneur from Jef Denyn. The aforementioned Wesson would become the carillonneur of the Michiels carillon in the Belgian Village of the World Exhibition in Chicago in the following year, 1933. He therefore knew Jef Denyn and Marcel Michiels; he additionally became the American representative of Omer Michux. That also explains why Denyn wrote him a letter on May 29, 1936 about those historic bells that Charlotte Greene referred to.

Jef Denyn also spoke about the possibility of buying an old carillon, in particular a carillon by Joris Dumery. And that is a godsend, because something like this never really happens, he wrote! The instrument would consist of 28 bells. The tuning was according to eighteenth-century beliefs, but that was no problem, while the sound of the bells was plump. Michiels had to follow the guidelines of the Carillon School, otherwise Denyn could not guarantee the result. But Michiels also knew what he had to meet for his part. Thus he wrote on May 21, 1936, and we quote him verbatim because no bell-founder had shown such insight until then, that all new bells *will be molded following the Dumery profile with the same timbre and harmonics, so that one cannot notice the slightest difference in any tuning*.

On August 17, 1936, a second letter from Denyn follows on this matter, this time to Charlotte Greene, the lady from Boston as we got to know her. Denyn is then very specific, because he talks about 14 Dumery bells (g^2 and d^3 -chromatic- d^4) to which 21 new bells should be added. This would create a carillon of 35 bells with the notes Bb^1 - c^2 - d^2 -chromatic- b^4 . It would certainly have made an excellent carillon. But something completely different happened!

On August 20, 1936 Henry Wesson wrote to his former teacher Norman J. Whitney, enthusiastic promoter of a carillon on Alfred, that Charlotte Greene not only envisioned a carillon with bells by Joris Dumery, but also with bells by Pieter Hemony and Andreas Joseph van den Gheyn. Bells by Hemony, the most famous bell founder of all time, that was a godsend. At least it seemed that way, because those bells from Hemony and Van den Gheyn were outright forgeries. But Wesson knew nothing about that and never would. He concludes his letter with the remark: *You would have the satisfaction [upon purchase] of knowing you rescued a great work of art from the hands of European War Lords*. That remark was not strange, in troubled times that seemed to find a temporary end in the agreement that Chamberlain concluded with Hitler on September 29, 1938 in Munich.

The involved bell founders

At this point in our story, we must first tell something about the involved bell founders Marcel Michiels in Tournai and Omer Michaux in Brussels. Bell founder Marcel Michiels, born in 1898, succeeded his father in 1924. In 1929 he proved to be the first mainland founder to be able to make a tone-pure carillon again. It would lead to countless successes. Michiels was therefore an indispensable bell founder, especially after 1945. However, his company ended in a financial debacle, partly due to strong competition from the Dutch and French founders. In 1962 he committed suicide. It was very different with Omer Michaux, born in 1877. Originally an architect, he took over the bell foundry of Alphons Beullens in Leuven in 1903. He cast several carillons, without any success. In 1929 he ceased to cast bells and the production of related matters. From then on he obtained his bells from Michiels. In 1930 he moved to Brussels where he died in 1954. We will be hearing more from these two!

A carillon for sale with real Hemony bells!

Michaux had commercial contacts with Alfred. Therefore, on 19 October 1936, Michiels offered the carillon with bells by Hemony, Van den Gheyn and Dumery to Michaux for sale. The bells had to cost 90,000 francs, which amounted to 40 francs per kg. And that was a very hefty price, because new bells were sold for less than half. But, Michiels must have thought, antique bells have their own value. In all this, it should also be remembered that Michaux once again had to put his markup on it. Usually it was 5%. Alfred snapped and bought those bells with the money that college graduates and friends had managed to raise. Their university would get a historic carillon from old Europe!

In the meantime Denyn had heard a few things. After all, it was no longer a carillon with only Dumery bells, supplemented with new ones as he had proposed, but an instrument that also included Hemony's and Van den Gheyns. On December 10, 1936, the then 74-year-old Denyn wrote to Michiels: Is that true? Can you bring them [the old bells] together and make them sound? Michiels' answer on the sixteenth was crystal clear: Yes, I can collect such a carillon, I have a difficult occasion at the moment, which will never be encountered again. And a little further: They [the bells] come from four different places.

But the bells in question could not be seen and admired for the time being. Michiels urged everyone to be patient because he still had a lot of problems to face to get the bells to Tournai. But he had seen them in the meantime. They were in perfect condition having stayed a long time in cement and lime. In cement and lime? And that at the four sites? Didn't anyone think that was strange? And so the time went by with everyone getting more and more impatient. And when they finally arrive in Tournai, Denyn expresses concern about the delivery time. Can his best Marcel live up to it? On May 18, 1937, Michiels answers, a strange answer, because he writes to dear Master Denyn that he needs time. It is of course not a new carillon..... It can tune two bells a day, after all, Hemony and Dumery have to be tuned to each other. Especially that I don't know those old bells..... What on earth did Michiels mean by those thoughts? It is true that he used them more often, but here they evoke a curious association. In the spirit of the fact that he and Denyn knew better. Was Denyn still in the conspiracy? Probably not, as will become clear later.

It is also certain that Michaux was completely out of it, because not only does the preserved correspondence show that Michiels did not have much in common with Michaux, but moreover one does not initially find the slightest indication in their letters that Michaux was aware of the forgeries. Only in 1939, when the American consul got involved in the matter, did he prove that he was indeed aware. Only then? In any case, it is certain that he embellished the stories about origin according to good commercial practice to his heart's content. But we're still talking about that.

The inspection report

But finally, on May 22, 1937, at the request of Omer Michaux, Denyn was able to draw up an inspection report on the carillon, consisting of eighteen bells by Pieter Hemony from 1674, one bell by Andreas Josef van den Ghein from 1781 and sixteen bells by Joris Dumery, mainly from 1737. In it he notes on the one hand that bells of three bell founders do not fit well together, but on the other hand that the carillon is distinguished (the bells of Hemony in the first place) by the mellow sound. And to think that the Hemony's are forgeries. Apparently it is not so much important that they are Hemony bells, but that people believe that they are Hemony bells. He would later state that he was convinced at that time that they were authentic bells.

The mood was also fine, at least in light of the fact that three bell founders were involved. All in all, he comes to the conclusion that this carillon will give just as much satisfaction as the carillon of the Sint Romboutstoren in Mechelen. That was no small statement! Denyn also asked for the carillon to be temporarily set up in the workshops of François Somers, carillonneur in Mechelen, so that the school's teachers could examine the carillon's qualities. But they too did not get suspicious, although Victor van Geyseghem, then one of those teachers, managed to tell the author in the 1950s that at least one bell had recently become patinated, i.e. had been artificially aged. At that time he had drawn no further conclusions. It all seemed quite normal to him.

And so a few months later Alfred had a carillon with so-called Hemony bells and supplemented with authentic Dumery bells. Incidentally, there is also reasonable doubt about a number of those Dumerys, as we wrote earlier. Details about this cannot be given, except for that one photo with two bells, one of which is a real Dumery and the other one copied by Michiels. But that's pretty much all. In this article we therefore limit ourselves to those of Hemony.

Henry S. Wesson gave the first concert on September 11, 1937. The official inauguration followed the following year, on June 12, 1938 by Kamiel Lefèvere. Nice detail, on June 9, 1940, Lefèvere received an honorary doctorate from Alfred University.

Where did those Hemony bells come from?

Were there indeed four sites that Michiels spoke of? Soon all kinds of variants were doing the rounds. Michiels and Michaux had spent many years searching for old bells in northern France, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands. And really, during that search they managed to acquire eighteen bells by Pieter Hemony from 1674 and one by Andreas Josef van den Gheyn from 1781, neatly ascending in semitones. A lottery ticket, so to speak. They had found them in churches and castles, in cellars and attics. Yes, one had even been buried at the foot of a tower somewhere in Luxembourg. Why no one knew. But it is not the only story, as we shall see. Variants were abundantly available.

A historical argument that it is a forgery.

Eighteen bells from the same year 1674 and from the same foundry Pieter Hemony and then ascending with semitones cannot possibly have been collected from here and there. The number of bells is also much too large if one considers that, for example, two individual bells by Pieter are known from 1674, so not counting a carillon, from 1673 only one, from 1672 four, from 1675 five. It can then easily be established that eighteen bells according to the characteristics mentioned have never been found. And then apart from the question of whether those churches and monasteries wanted to sell their bells. In short, a story that only a scammer can come up with. Or did he know all too well that desire overrides critical sense?

So no collection of separate bells. Was that why the idea already took hold that those Hemony bells must come from an unknown carillon? That was why Olive Watson, in a letter dated May 30, 1948, addressed Dr. Wijnandus van der Elst in Utrecht. Van der Elst was a prominent bell expert who possessed a great deal of historical knowledge. Olive Watson wrote that her husband died suddenly that year. He had planned to travel to Europe for complete historical facts. There were still no doubts, because Olive Watson also wrote: *We are well aware how extremely precious these bells are and we regard them as of the highest art of the world.*

The new theory was as follows. In 1674 Pieter Hemony is said to have cast three carillons. Those on the Sint Romboutstoren in Mechelen, in Gouda on the Sint Janskerk and in Leiden on the Saaihal. But that information was wrong, because in reality Hemony had only made two carillons in that year, namely that of Mechelen and the one on the Drommedaris in Enkhuizen, whereby it should be noted that the last carillon also contains bells of 1671, 1675 and 1677. In fact, only that of Mechelen was eligible. But people didn't know that at the time, so Olive Watson concentrated on Leiden, where the Saaihal no longer had a carillon. Van der Elst will undoubtedly have helped Olive Watson out of the dream. Because he was familiar with the list of carillons that Pieter Hemony had drawn up in 1678 at the request of mayor Cornelis Booth of Utrecht. And there was no Saaihal in Leiden, but the Town Hall there was. But it dated from 1677 and 1678. In short, if Alfred's bells came from a carillon, then from a completely unknown one! And Messrs Michiels and Michaux also had a wonderful story to tell about that. But we'll save that for later.

Which Hemony bells were the model for Alfred's?

But which Hemony bells did Michiels choose as an example? The answer will not surprise you: the carillon of Mechelen. That is also why he betrayed himself. Among his correspondence with Omer Michaux is a copy of a letter he had written to the Mayor and Aldermen of Mechelen on 24 October 1936. In it he kindly asks if he may borrow the plaster casts of the Hemony bells for three months. These lay on top of the vaults of Saint Rumbold's Cathedral. This would enable him to continue his study of Hemony, which he began in 1932

In reality, he must have used those casts for his copies. Because not only did he use the Hemony decorations from Mechelen, but also the inscriptions. The table with the inscriptions of Mechelen and Alfred next to each other may make this clear. The most striking thing is that the es^2 bell in both Mechelen and Alfred is a Van den Gheyn and not a Hemony. There is also something strange going on with the d^2 . Mechelen has no example for this, which is why a new text was devised. It is Psalm 149 from the Vulgate, but in full, because the Mechelen bell with tone f^2 has the same text, albeit with the omission of the SANCTORUM. It is not clear, incidentally, what that silly apostrophe in Alfred is for. A mistake?

A damaged letter? But be that as it may, it has simply been copied, with the inscription slightly changed here and there. The psalm text has also been omitted in part.

Did the counterfeits succeed?

Of course one has to wonder whether the bells show that they are counterfeit. The answer is yes, although in 1937 no one noticed. Not so in Alfred. First of all, the post-war bell founders knew better. For example, after a visit to the carillon in 1953, Guus Fritsen of Bell Foundry Petit & Fritsen in Aarle-Rixtel told the author that they were ordinary Michiels bells in a Hemony jacket. But for bell-founders it was inappropriate to tell the board of Alfred University. They would have been thrown out the door and never come in again.

One comes to the conclusion that these are forgeries when one sees how carelessly the bells are made and how precisely Hemony did it. This can be seen very well, for example, in the decorative rings that are cast on the bells, rings between which the decorations and inscriptions are placed or just rings to embellish the bell. The Hemony's had developed a clear system in applying the rings, which they applied to every bell with iron consistency. But not Michaels. In fact, he was just messing around. For example, Hemony placed the inscriptions between two very fine rings. But with the Alfred bells they are a lot coarser.

The bells also reveal themselves to the mood. Apart from the fact that they are tuned in the modern tuning, the overtone octave is consistently too high, indeed much too high. Hemony never did that, Michiels always did. Michaels couldn't have done it better, as well as the fact that its minor third overtones are consistently much lower than in Hemony bells. Basically, fakes and not even good ones.

The question is, of course, whether a bell founder is not able to make good replicas. They can, although the founder in question must take great care. No, that is by no means impossible, as witnessed by the many carillon restorations with replicas. It should therefore come as no surprise that the author was once approached by an antiques dealer with the request to make replicas. No, of course, was the answer, unless it was allowed to decide who made the replica. Because that's the usual procedure. But of course that was not the intention of the antique dealer involved!

There are even more Hemony bells for sale!

Did Michiels get a taste for an apparently lucrative cheating business? It really stood for nothing, because on August 14, 1937 Michaux wrote to Norman Whitney, whom we met earlier as an enthusiastic advocate of a carillon for Alfred University, not only about a carillon study keyboard, but also in a post scriptum about a very curious offer. Under the heading Very Urgent, he says he discovered nine Hemony bells during a trip abroad. They formed a neat musical sequence that could be added to the existing carillon as a bass octave. In fact, they once formed a carillon together with the eighteen Hemony's already purchased. Those nine newly discovered bells are therefore made by Pieter Hemony from 1674. If one bought this additional series, the university would acquire a unique pièce au monde! But a decision had to be made quickly.

The two of them spread all kinds of stories about the origin of those bells. Like, once upon a time there was a Jew from Poland who lived in Belgium during the First World War. After the war he went back to Poland. There he had buried a Hemony carillon which his two sons inherited: one the heaviest nine, the other the lightest eighteen, who had meanwhile found their way to Alfred. The son with the nine heavy bells went to Sweden, buried the bells again to prevent progress. But shortly before, Marcel Michiels would have been in Poland and actually saw and measured the bells. That had been in 1937.

But there was also a more romantic variant. The eighteen plus nine bells once hung on an estate in Lithuania. They were owned by a brother and sister. However, the brother fled to South America for political reasons. Then the carillon was divided. The eighteen small bells were given to the sister who buried them under a goat stable but later sold them to Michiels. The nine assigned to the brother were buried in a forest. Incidentally, the nice thing about this story is that Michiels did visit Lithuania at the time, because in 1937 he delivered a carillon for the capital Kaunas. Returning from this distant land, any report, however fantastic, was virtually unverifiable.

Wonderful stories, but then it never occurred to anyone to point out to the gentlemen that their story about those eighteen bells was now very different from when they were sold, when they talked about collecting those bells in Northern France, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands ? Didn't anyone light up? Was Alfred so keen on historical

bells that they lost all sense of reality? Admittedly, even Jef Denyn did not mention the possibility of a forgery. What then did the lesser gods want?

On April 28, 1938, Michaux reported that the sale would go through. A rich lady would provide the necessary funds. In addition, a fee of 5,000 francs was included for Jef Denyn as adviser, a considerable amount by the way. However, the sale eventually fell through. Because when push came to shove, there were suddenly all sorts of problems.

First of all, Michiels started arguing about the 5% commission for Michaux. In his opinion, that was never agreed upon. He also started to complain about increased import duties. In addition, he had to pay in advance. Then there was Denyn who would of course demand a test set-up. But those costs had not been taken into account at all. And finally, to top it all off, he writes in a post scriptum that he has just received a telegram from the seller in Germany who now demands four Reichsmarks per kilo. To then conclude with the sigh: *Me voila dans de beaux draps*. [Here I am in beautiful sheets] Either way, I'm in quite a bit of trouble. Did he want to get rid of the sale, unable to make those counterfeits? It was, after all, about heavy bells. We do not know, although with all these objections he had appearances against him. In any case, Jef Denyn did not seem to believe this financial lament so easily, because on May 4, 1938 he wrote to Michiels: *I see the business of old bells Hemony progressing soon - (among us) you should not want too much and not be rich too quickly – That has no good fortress. It was an amusement that was certainly not unjustified in the light of a price of 60 francs per kilo.*

But the buyer also had his problems. Because he said that he now had the requested sum of 150,000 francs, albeit that payment was only possible under strict conditions. These included, among other things, that the bells had to be in Belgium, that an expert came to the notary to declare that they were in accordance with the specifications and that they were in good condition. And finally that Jef Denyn wanted to endorse the musical value. In short, conditions that Michiels could not possibly meet. It was not until after the war that the issue would come up again.

After the war, another search for the missing nine.

After the war, in 1948, Kamiel Lefèvere visited his native Belgium. He then also had the assignment to negotiate with Michaux on behalf of Alfred about those nine Hemony bass bells. But before Michaux wanted to give further details about those bells, he demanded half of the purchase price. Several times Lefèvere spoke to Michaux, but he did not budge. First half the price and only then could we talk further. Was that another tactic to get rid of the affair? But why didn't he say the bells were no longer for sale?

The conclusion of the song was that although Lefèvere believed in the authenticity of the nine bells and, moreover, that they belonged to the eighteen already purchased, Michaux made such unbusinesslike demands that a transaction had to be abandoned. Lefèvere also believed that the Polish family had bought that chime of eighteen plus nine bells as an investment, as, according to him, other Jews would have done with diamonds and gold during the war. In short, at Lefèvere there was no doubt whatsoever about the authenticity.

A few years later, in 1952, Edna Saunders, member of the carillon committee, visited the two gentlemen. On that occasion, Michiels in particular complained about the amount of money he had invested in this matter, on telegrams, telephones, letters, etc. Only to return with that Polish Jew who had disappeared from Belgium after the First World War never to be seen again. to say something. Well the sons! But we already know the story that was attributed to them. We add that during the 1950s our investigations in Poland and Sweden produced nothing but surprise and no revelation.

Not nine Hemony bells, real or counterfeit. That is why new bells were purchased in 1953 from Petit & Fritsen. A nice detail is that this foundry initially tried to buy the heavy Hemony bell from Uitgeest for Alfred, cast in 1650 by François and Pieter Hemony. In Uitgeest they needed money to restore the presbytery. But the sale was met with opposition, and that opposition led to a fundraising effort that allowed the Hemony bell to stay and the parsonage to be restored anyway. Thus, the expansion consisted exclusively of new bells. In 1977 another expansion took place and again by the same foundry. This created a series of 47 bells over four octaves, the usual size of a concert carillon.

Did Michiels get the hang of it?

Did Michiels get so little contradiction that he came up with an even bolder story? The reason was an urgent letter dated March 4, 1938 from Michaux to Michiels with the subject *Nouvelle affaire importante: carillon pour l'Etranger*. In other

words, a potential customer abroad had come forward who wanted to buy a carillon of 47 bells, albeit on the condition that the set would consist of historic bells. Michiels once again sensed an opportunity, because his answer the day after surpassed the wildest fantasies. Was Michiels completely mad?

He was aware that in a suburb of Gdansk there were three heavy bells that had once been part of a carillon. The heaviest of the three weighed no less than 3000 kg. And they were cast by Pieter Hemony in 1674. The pastor was willing to donate those bells, provided he got new ones in their place, including electrification, so equipped with electric sounding devices, among other things. However, Hemony's bells have never hung in Gdansk.

But there were more Hemony bells! Two months earlier he had supplied three bells for a church in Luxembourg. Shortly afterwards, the pastor wrote to Michiels that he knew a colleague who had an old carillon consisting of bells by François and Pieter Hemony from 1664. Under certain conditions, he could buy those bells. In his opinion, the *une affaire excessivement* was interesting. Moreover, he reasoned, if they offered a carillon containing bells by Hemony, the sale could not really go wrong. But, he wrote Michaux, moderate your prices because Gillett & Johnston and Taylor offer at very low prices. However, in Luxembourg there has never been a carillon of the Hemony's.

Not much later he announced that there were ten potential customers in the United States, including three very serious ones. But again, the man was completely mad, because on April 16, 1938 he wrote that he had been in Paris and negotiated there about two Hemony carillons that were in Spain. They were carillons of approximately 35 bells based on a bell of 3000 kg resp. one of 1050 kg. The price was 45-50 francs per kilo. He also had two old carillons of 24 and 27 bells and stock. It all came to naught, although in 1939 and 1940 Michiels still managed to deliver two new carillons in America. Were they those so-called serious customers? We do not know. What is certain is that the building with all those Hemony bells slowly started to show cracks.

The pitcher goes into water until it bursts.

Jef Denyn must have been quite shocked when in the spring of 1939 he met the Consul General of the United States who, on behalf of Alfred, inquired about the origin and authenticity of the nine so-called Hemony bells. Denyn had rightly referred the consul to Michaux. After all, he still hadn't seen those bells, and besides, Michaux was the salesman. Thus it seemed to end well, but a very long letter dated July 14, 1939 from Michaux to Michiels makes it clear that there was a lot more going on. The affair threatened to take on enormous proportions.

Jef Denyn and Omer Michaux were then invited by the consul-general to his office in Antwerp to discuss not only the origin and authenticity of those nine bells, but also the instrument of 35 bells that had already been delivered. Alfred University had asked the consul to investigate this. What particularly bothered the university was the fact that even after the delivery of the carillon, the original whereabouts of the bells remained silent. That raised questions about its authenticity. In addition, the consul had a few more questions on behalf of Alfred, such as why, contrary to custom, not all Dumery bells bear his name or a year, why a certain Hemony bell sounded dull against the others? And which bell was actually buried in Luxembourg? Clearly, there was doubt, which is why Michaux insists on a quick answer. He also gave some advice, because for the bell buried in Luxembourg it was best to choose the Van den Gheyn bell! Apparently Michaux was indeed aware of the forgeries at the time. Said advice was also followed because in Alfred the story still goes that precisely that Van den Gheyn bell was buried somewhere in Luxembourg.

Because both Michiels and Denyn had vouched for authenticity in writing, Michaux advises to keep this up. He literally writes to Michiels: *Pour sauver la situation et en même temps Jef Denyn, engagé dans l'affaire par la signature qu'il a donné, nous sommes obligés que les 35 cloches [...] et les 9 cloches [...] sont authentiques.* But Denyn would prefer that the consul would hear the truth. That point of view was apparently not shared by Michaux because he had a different plan. Central to this is the remark that les 9 cloches Hemony sont dans la bagarre allemande. But what did he mean by that German riot or stampeï? Did he mean that in Germany there was a quarrel over those bells? Or did he place this in a larger, international context? Because Germany had meanwhile not only annexed Austria, but also the former Czechoslovakia. Moreover, war was about to break out. Did he want to frighten the American consul into avoiding irritating German authorities? It would by no means be unlikely. In any case, it is certain that with this argument the so-called original whereabouts could not be told!

On that basis, they promised each other on their honor to keep the question of authenticity and provenance out of the public eye. That is why it seemed wise to deal with Alfred's question behind closed doors as quickly as possible. And this

all the more because, Michaux claimed, all that fuss would be based on slander. Someone in Belgium would have spread the rumor that the bells were forged. But once the bells were in Belgium, Denyn and other experts could still determine their authenticity. Then the opposite would turn out, Michaux claimed, not without boasting.

Michaux's plan succeeded, so that it all ended with a fizzle, although all those wild statements about more Hemony carillons died a silent death and only the story about the nine survived the war. Apparently the Consul General decided to accept as authentic the eighteen Hemony bells and the nine that were to be added to them. With full conviction? Were Denyn's eyes opened only then? It also seems that he had not spoken to anyone about this incident, entirely in accordance with the agreement. Jef Denyn died on October 2, 1941. A year before that, he and his successor Staf Nees had had a conversation with Lloyd Watson in Mechelen. The war had just broken out.

Of course it is obvious to look for tangible evidence in the archives of the then consul-general in Antwerp. That archive is now housed in the National Archives in Washington. Checking the archives of the State Department (RG 59) and of the Foreign Service Posts (RG 84) present there yielded nothing. But the archive of the said consul-general still contains so-called Classified Records, which can only be viewed with permission. One must have a Freedom of Information Act for this, which has now been applied for, but that permit may take some time. That is why we can now only say that the Alfred affair does not appear in the public documents, but perhaps it does in the hitherto secret archive. It seems to confirm the suspicion that this matter was kept out of the public eye at the time.

Still one real Pieter Hemony from 1674 in the United States!

We end with a positive note. America once had a real bell by Pieter Hemony and even one from 1674! It hung in New York in the former Dutch Sint Nicolaaskerk, also known as Church in the Fort. But unfortunately, in 1835 this bell was lost by fire.

Wasn't Marcel Michiels the only one who copied?

The answer must be affirmative, because it was in the years 1929-1931 that Lodewijk Meire, born in 1899, watchmaker in Ghent, delivered a series of imitation bells for the carillons at the Belfry and the Beaudeloo Abbey there. He was by no means secretive about this, because it is openly discussed in his correspondence with the then city carillonneur. Meire could hardly have hidden it either, those imitations were so bad. Among other things, thick vertical casting seams run over the bell body, unambiguous proof that these bells have been copied from the original. Since the restoration of the carillon in 1982, they can be admired, if this word is appropriate, in the Belfry Museum. The question remains who cast those bells. Meire himself pretended to be the founder. It is not impossible, although very unlikely for a watchmaker. Was it then Michiels, as a prelude to his later forgeries, that were more successful? The surviving correspondence of Michiels does not matter.

An afterthought

The author has already done in-depth research into the Alfred bells in the fifties of the last century and then also corresponded and spoke with people who experienced the purchase and everything related to it from close by. These included the Belgian Kamiel Lefèvere, carillonneur of the Riverside Church in New York, and Victor van Geysseghem in Liège, who was a teacher at the Carillon School at the time. Thus doubts gradually grew about the originality of the Alfred bells. The author also reported on this in his 1959 book about the Hemony family. What were suspicions at the time has now become a certainty, although Alfred prefers not to hear that of course. But there is no escaping it, the Hemony's and also that one Van den Gheyn have been forged, while the Dumery's have been tampered with. What was actually most surprising was that no one seemed to notice anything. Especially those wild stories about the origin should have made you think? Or were they dismissed with the presumption that Michiels did not want to say the real source and therefore just made something up? On the other hand, it must of course be borne in mind that knowledge of Hemony bells was relatively limited in the period in question. There was no question of critical research at that time. People just looked at those bells with admiration. From this limited knowledge, it will not have sounded so strange to many that Hemony carillons were still unnoticed elsewhere in Europe.

And there was also the time of crisis in which people sometimes had to make strange leaps and bounds to keep their heads above water. In addition, Michiels was confronted abroad with the dominant English founders who asked almost irresponsibly low prices due to the then crisis. So was the Hemony bell a competitive weapon? He soon showed that too. Still, the question remains what type of personality Marcel Michiels was. Was he really the counterfeiter who wanted to fool everyone, even the greatest experts? Or was he forced by necessity? But why then continue that practice disproportionately? It is certain, incidentally, that Denyn and even more so his successor Staf Nees were extremely annoyed by the fact that he did not keep any agreements. And that is surprising, because both made no small effort for his bell foundry, while Denyn had nothing to do with Michiels' competitor, the Leuven bell founder Felix van Aerschodt. Did Jef Denyn really not notice anything? Did his age play a role? After all, in 1937 he had turned 75 years old and complained bitterly about a rheumatoid arthritis with swellings and pains. Maybe his age and those constant pains made him less alert?

There is a clear parallel with the story of the forger Han van Meegeren, who, in the 1930s, passed off his Supper at Emmaus as a work by Johannes Vermeer. No one had any doubts about that, not even the greatest experts. But once the man was exposed after the war, people were surprised that the forgery had not been noticed. After all, the painting had few characteristics of a real Vermeer! Exactly the same thing happened in Alfred. Then no one saw it and now, after being made aware of it, everyone sees it.

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