

New Beauty in Houston: Music in a Noble Form For All Souls To Heed

By HUBERT ROUSSEL

NOTHING has more keenly awakened our hearts to the real spirit and meaning of this Christmastide than a concert we heard while standing on a sidewalk last Sunday afternoon. My wife and I were among its numerous and fortunate audience. It was the program dedicating the memorial carillon just installed in the new church of St. John the Divine at 2450 River Oaks Blvd. The concert was given by Wendell Westcott, carillonneur of Michigan State College and a noted performer in this rare medium of expression. It was a beauty and a blessing on a clear, still, sunny afternoon, when the crisp atmosphere was perfectly suited to carry the timbres of these lovely bells.



ROUSSEL

You do not hear bells rung very often these days in recollection of man's duty to God. It is a custom that has largely been lost—to the obvious disadvantage of life. When some of us were young, nearly every church had its great bell at least, if not several, and almost every service that took place was announced by these elevated voices in one way or another. They were heard over the whole neighborhood, and you knew by their rhythm, without having to ask, what nature of service was being held.

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THEY reminded you at once of the dignity of human life and of its weakness; they filled you with a sense of its significance and of the thinness and vanity of all temporal things, which we greatly need to recover in this age of blind materialism and strictly sensory values. To hear a great bell tolled is the most solemn of all correctives for the petty concerns and aspirations of the human ego—as John Donne knew and enunciated so long ago in unforgettable lines.

But you do not hear church bells rung very much any more. The world is too busy and noisy with its own pitiful strivings to stop and take heed. It does not wish to be reminded these days of the brevity and deeper duties of life—of the vast, arching truth that all its bustle and stir is a business of shadows and impermanence.

The carillon, of course, is not a bell in the sense used here. It is a set of tempered bells and an instrument for the mak-

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THE carillon did not make its appearance in North America until 1922. The first set in the United States was installed a year later in Gloucester, Mass. There are now about 70 carillons in the country, of which four are in Texas, the Houston set being the first in a church in this state. The other three Texas instruments are at Southern Methodist University, Dallas; Midwestern University, Wichita Falls, and McMurray College in Abilene.

The casting of tempered bells, an exact and jealously guarded art, is confined mostly to the Low Countries of Europe, where the carillon was originated. The bells are composed of copper and tin, in a ratio of 80 to 20. The set for St. John the Divine was produced by the firm of Petit & Fritsen, Ltd., of Aarle-Rixtel, Holland, which also furnished the other Texas models. This firm has existed since 1660, and I am indebted to Henk J. G. van de Veerdonk, its Texas representative, for some of the information above.

The Houston bells, installed under Mr Van de Veerdonk's direction, have a total weight of 5074 pounds. The largest bell weighs 900 pounds, the smallest 25. There are 35 bells, which give a range of three octaves with semi-tones.

They are rung directly by wooden "stops" or levers from a manual situated in the tower; there is also an octave of pedals. As many as four notes may be easily played with the hands simultaneously, and the remarkable flexibility of this instrument was demonstrated

ing of music. It originated in Europe some five or six centuries ago, along about the beginning of the Renaissance, and although it is closely associated with religious ceremony and thought, the carillon is by no means altogether an ecclesiastical adjunct.

There are only about 300 carillons in the world. Many of the ones in Europe are installed in the towers of city halls and the like, so that they sound down over the market places or public squares. They are strictly civic in character. Others are in cathedrals and churches.

Wherever it rings, the proper carillon makes music which, though having great dignity and nobility of tone, is essentially glad and inspiring. It is nearly impossible to chime beautiful bells without producing this feeling of uplift. That is why they are so much used in the temples of the East, though the bells heard there are much lighter.

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by Mr Westcott in a concert which included not only the grand old hymns, carols and religious anthems, but the Beethoven Minuet in G, Brahms' "Cradle Song," Kreisler's "Old Refrain" and even the aria "One Fine Day" from Madama Butterfly.

Due to problems of overtones, a little involved for discussion here, the playing of a carillon is a very distinct art in itself. For example, while a minor third sounds grand on the instrument, a major third cannot be struck without producing an apparent dissonance, so that one member must come after the other. And there are many problems of dynamics, all of which Mr Westcott solved in very interesting ways.

The result was music of clear harmony and motion, whose silvery tones seemed to float down from the heavens themselves. It is a beautiful setting for the carillon out there; the surroundings are ideal for listening. Hundreds of people stood happily silent, and often the drivers of automobiles stopped to learn more of this shimmering and commanding sound from above.

The carillon, then, which will henceforth be played by G. Alex Kevan, organist of Saint John the Divine, is a joy to the spirit and senses. It is the gift of Mr and Mrs Milton R. Underwood and their son, David Milton Underwood, and is inscribed "To the Glory of God and In Loving Memory of Peter Fonden Underwood."

It is a gift of beauty to the whole city of Houston.