

Newsletter

OF THE PALO ALTO/PENINSULA CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS

<http://www.geocities.com/agopeninsula>

May/June 2006

Notes from the Dean

HAPPY EASTER! I HOPE ALL OF YOU WERE ABLE to experience moving and inspirational moments during the past month.

I had the great pleasure of hearing two exciting and very different concerts given by Board member Brian Swager. The first concert, given at Grace Cathedral, was very inspiring. I admired the way that he had challenged himself to memorize the entire program. He played the music with clarity, imagination, musicality, and passion. What a combination!



The very next Sunday he gave a most informative lecture about playing the carillon and shared his experiences in Europe. He then followed the lecture with an astounding concert on the carillon at Stanford University, playing with speed, dexterity, and sensitivity. I was impressed with his musicianship, his dedication to the art of music, and his generosity to our chapter.

He has inspired me to challenge myself not only to learn new music, but also to be more lyrical and colorful in my performances. This would not have happened if I had not set aside time to support a fellow member. I encourage each one of us to set aside time to communicate as well as support each other in our musical endeavors.

Let us know about your wonderful musical experiences by sharing with us in our newsletter.

And remember “Each One” of you can “Reach One” new person who is interested in the organ. It is up to all of us to bring new friends into our Chapter and into our field of interest. ☞

T. PAUL ROSAS, DEAN ☞

New Members on the Peninsula AGO Board

THE PALO ALTO/PENINSULA CHAPTER OF THE American Guild of Organists is pleased to welcome the following new Board members for next season: Phil Winters, Dean; Angela Kraft Cross, Subdean; and three new At-large Board members, Alison Luedecke, Jay Martin, and Rani Fischer. All intend to be active and involved as Board and Chapter members, so we can look forward to having a strong and vital Chapter next term.

Phil Winters was born in San Francisco and grew up in Millbrae. He graduated U.C. Berkeley and UCSF, and from the San Francisco School of Dentistry 1976. He has had a private dentistry practice in San Mateo since 1976. Phil studied piano with Robert Vetlesen in San Francisco and used to enjoy Laurence Moe’s recitals while at U.C. Berkeley, wishing he could play the organ. The

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► TIME TO RENEW YOUR AGO DUES!

Our Registrar informs us that it is once again time for members to renew their annual dues for membership in the Palo Alto/ Peninsula Chapter of the AGO. If you’ve received an electronic version of this newsletter, you will have also been e-mailed a PDF version of the renewal form. Those who receive the newsletter by post will have gotten a copy of the renewal form along with their newsletter. Please note that the completed form and dues payment must be returned to the Registrar by May 31. Please do NOT wait until summer to take care of it as that will cause a delay in all of our dues being turned in to National Headquarters. Please do not put it off—return the form and dues payment NOW! Thank you!

Carillons Carry On Despite Rain

BY DOUGLAS FRANKS 

CONTINUING UNSEASONAL RAIN HERE IN THE SAN Francisco Bay Area did not dampen the spirits of the dozen and a half people who gathered on April 9 in Stanford University's Braun Music Center to attend Brian Swager's presentation on carillons. Thanks to Peninsula AGO Board member Andrew Nelson who secured a lecture hall for us in Braun, we were able to enjoy Brian's slideshow in comfort and in close enough quarters so that we could conveniently produce our own shower of questions for Brian during his talk. The end result was a fascinating crash course on the history, sociology, technology, and art of the carillon and carillon playing.

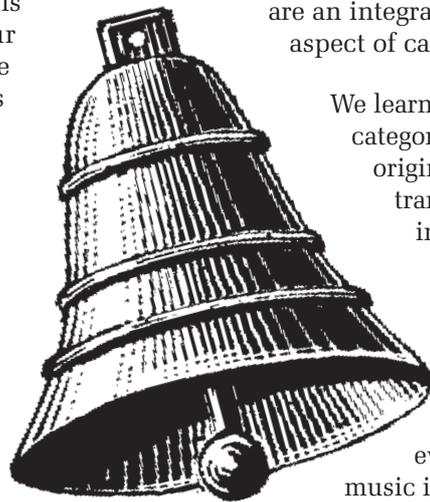
Through Brian's collection of slides, his commentary, and his answers to our questions, we learned something of the origins of carillons whose history goes back to the 12th century. The term "carillon" comes from "quadrillon," originally a set of four bells. Rudimentary playing consoles appeared in the low countries of northern Europe by the 16th century. Bells were an important feature in medieval society. Centuries before the ever proliferating means of communication we take for granted existed and long before ubiquitous "noise pollution," bells called people to prayer, signaled time, and sent out messages of other import for great distances. Some of the slides showed paintings depicting this "civic" function of bells. We were treated to images of magnificent carillon towers in Belgium and The Netherlands. Larger cities, of course, possessed more and larger sets of bells, a sign of wealth and prestige.

We viewed slides of carillon keyboards and the complex systems of cables and levers that make up the machinery of the carillon. Keyboard consoles are usually situated just below the bell chamber, or belfry, much like the console of a mechanical-action organ that sits just below pipework in a vertical case. In some installations, larger bells are housed in a chamber underneath the console. The size of bells ranges from something you could hold in your hands to massive low-pitched bells weighing many tons. A typical modern carillon spans four octaves, beginning an octave below middle C. The lowest bell is called a bourdon. Although individual bells are not meant to

be seen close up (unless you're a bat or a mouse!), they often have intricate

designs and inscriptions on them, not unlike other treasures of hidden detail found in inaccessible nooks and crannies of cathedral and other architectural fabrics from the Middle Ages.

Brian shared slides he took during a visit to a foundry in France showing the "fire-and-brimstone" process artisans laboriously go through to cast a single bell. Several molds are created for each bell. A molten mixture of tin and copper is used to produce a finished bronze bell. Again, one is struck by how analogous this is to the fabrication of individual pipes for an organ. Part of the finishing process for a bell is the tuning of it by shaving off precisely identified bits of the inner surface until just the right series of "tuned" overtones are achieved. Overtones are an integral part of bell tone and a fascinating aspect of carillons.



We learned that there are three major categories of published carillon music: original carillon compositions, transcriptions of works for other instruments or ensembles, and arrangements of familiar melodies such as hymns or folk tunes. Much literature about the carillon is published in Dutch, owing to the importance of The Netherlands in the history and evolution of carillons. Most carillon music is published in The Netherlands, Belgium, and the United States.

Following the slideshow, we gave up our plush seats in the Braun Music Center and hiked over to Stanford's Hoover Tower where Brian, a master carillonneur, would favor us with a carillon recital. Timothy Zerlang, Stanford's Carillonneur, escorted us and planted us in a good (outdoor) spot for listening to the carillon.

His recital began with transcriptions of three tuneful studies for guitar by Mauro Giuliani, followed by twelve country dances by Anton Diabelli, an almost non-stop chain of cheerful triple-meter pieces in the same vein as Beethoven or Schubert *Ländler*. These demonstrated Brian's expertise with arpeggiated textures on the carillon and fleetness of technique. We then marveled at the three-movement harpsichord suite by Joseph-Hector Fiocco, transcribed for carillon, featuring a lovely

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(Carillons . . . continued from page 5)

display of bell lyricism in the *Andante* and in the third movement, a thriller entitled “Les Promenades,” an extended show of “perpetual-motion” virtuosity. Brian’s ability to execute delicate and precise ornamentation on the carillon of the sort we usually associate with Classic-period French organ or harpsichord music was impressively demonstrated in the *Fiocco*.

Next on the program was “El Noi de la Mare,” a fairly unadorned arrangement of a Catalonian folksong, quite fetching in its simplicity. This piece is familiar to anyone who has performed or heard Bay Area composer Conrad Susa’s *Carols and Lullabies, Music of the Southwest* for chorus and instruments. Thomas Tallis’ *Canon* followed, another piece originating from choral traditions. The hymntune was played first in unison and spun out into four variations, each one increasingly complex. Excellent specimens of carillon counterpoint, canonic or otherwise.

His final three works on the program were arrangements by Brian Swager himself. Notes that Brian handed out before his lecture explained that “carillonneurs typically write or arrange much of their own music.” He successfully preserves that tradition! His *Allegro “La Chasse”* raced along in a basically two-voice texture, higher-pitched bells in running figuration complemented and anchored by lower, slower bell activity—another virtuosic showpiece. *Chant du soir (in the Flemish style)* featured rapidly repeating upper notes, a technique used to create the audio illusion of sustained high pitches. Old bells in higher registers did not continue ringing sufficiently when struck so were quickly restruck over and over to give the effect of a held note. What a pity some noisy children

happened by just as this piece came to its very hushed conclusion!

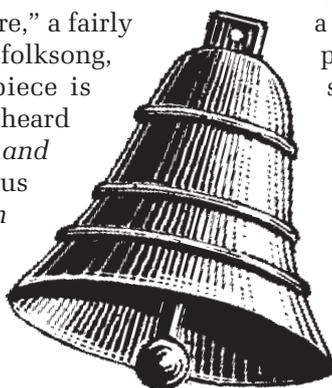
Brian’s own “Variations on ‘Ode to Joy’” concluded the program. Beethoven’s familiar theme was elaborated on in five variations and in the course of the partita wended its way from the very top bells to the lowest. We heard the melody arpeggiated in variation one, a standard carillon compositional technique for clarifying the sound while implying chordal texture and harmony.

Variation three seemed almost mournful with a low bell repeating in a “tolling” or pedal-point fashion while the “Ode” melody sounded in the treble. More contrapuntal inventiveness in variation four as the melody shifted to the “bass” register while a countermelody rang out on top.

Variation five with the melody up in the treble again while low bells chimed in for the duration and inner-voice figuration thickened the texture left the full range of carillon sound in our ears, a peal-like flourish finishing it off. Passers-by must have been mildly bemused and

amused by this handful of people—us!—applauding some unseen phantom celebrity!

Timothy Zerlang herded us into the Hoover Tower building and up an elevator so that we could get a close-up view of the carillon console Brian had just brilliantly played and the breathtaking tiers of bells and cables, easily viewable in the cavernous belfry above our heads. Timothy gave us a bit of history about the Stanford carillon and answered our numerous questions. Many thanks to him for giving us a privileged inside look at this phenomenal outdoor musical instrument. And many, many thanks to Brian Swager for his insightful presentation and superb and unique musical offering that afternoon, probably the first time some of us had ever heard a *bona fide* carillon recital in our lives. Our musical horizons are richer for it. ☞



► Soli Deo Gloria Spring Concerts

For a resounding finale to their 30th season, Soli Deo Gloria and the Russian Chamber Orchestra collaborate in presenting “Joy and Devotion,” a concert featuring two perennial favorites—Bach’s motet *Jesu meine Freude* and Schubert’s *Mass in G* under the direction of guest conductor Alexander Vereshagin. **Friday, May 19, 7:30 p.m., Christ Episcopal Church**, 1700 Santa Clara, Alameda; **Saturday, May 20, 5:00 p.m., Mt. Tamalpais United Methodist Church**, 410 Sycamore Avenue (Camino Alto at Sycamore), Mill Valley; **Sunday, May 21, 3:30 p.m., St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church**, 500 De Haro St. (between 17th and Mariposa), San Francisco. Tickets are \$25 (general) and \$20 (student/senior) at the door; discount for advance purchase. Call 888-SDG-SONG or order online at <www.sdgloria.org>.