



Luc Rombouts, *Singing Bronze. A History of Carillon Music* (Leuven: Lipsius Leuven, 2014, 368 pp., ISBN 978 90 5867 956 7).

The carillon is a striking cultural marker in many towns of the Low Countries. Its sound is heard and enjoyed by hundreds of people several times a day, and it is often perceived as a part of the town's identity. As the author of the present work rightfully remarks: 'Bell music creates a collective listening experience and in this way plays a binding role in society, like monuments, parks, squares and public buildings' (322). Therefore it is a good thing that we now have an accessible book on the history of this most public of musical instruments, written by an expert author, who himself is a carillonneur.

The book sets forth the carillon's history very well. It originated in the late Middle Ages in the region that encompasses present-day Netherlands, Belgium and northern France. In the last decades of the fifteenth century bell ringers in Flanders began to play religious melodies on the church bells, which by that time had already developed into a set of smaller bells that were used to announce the tolling of the heavy hour bell. Playing mechanisms with a keyboard were developed, and soon also mechanisms to produce pre-programmed automatic music. In the sixteenth century the carillon spread rapidly over the Low Countries. The number of bells increased from about six to up to twenty, and the repertoire was expanded with secular melodies and polyphonic settings. The latter development made heavier demands on the tone quality and purity of the bells. As a result, dynasties of specialised bell founders sprung up, such as the Van den Ghein family in Mechelen. In the seventeenth century the Hemony brothers in Amsterdam made decisive progress in the founding of well-tuned bells of an exact pitch and with the right overtones. Carillons became status symbols for the towns, and also for monarchs such as the kings of Spain, Portugal and Prussia and Tsar Peter the Great, who all bought an instrument.

In the eighteenth century the appreciation of the carillon decreased and this trend continued in the nineteenth century, when the instrument became musically less adapted to the Romantic style. However, the same Romantic Movement began to harbour nostalgic feelings for the ancient sound of the bells. Moreover, in the young state of Belgium the carillon was taken up by the nationalists as a symbol of indigenous culture. This led to a carillon revival at the turn of the twentieth century, first in Belgium, then in the Netherlands and also in England, where the art of bell founding was taken up. The driving force behind this revived interest was the Mechelen

carillonneur Jef Denyn, whose pupils spread all over the world. They also went to the United States where the carillon was introduced by a few enthusiasts, including J. D. Rockefeller, and where instruments were installed in a number of cities and at universities. This led to new adaptations such as the electronic carillon, which met with strong resistance by the traditional carillonneurs of the Old World. At the turn of the twenty-first century the art of the carillon was still thriving: new repertoires were specially written for the instrument and old bells which had been affected by acid rain and air pollution have now been restored.

Rombouts wants to place the carillon into a broader historical context, but as an historian he is noticeably less well equipped than as an organologist. As a result, he often writes rather obligatory and superficial sections on the general historical background, or far-fetched anecdotes such as the one of the daughter of the carillonneur of the small town of Zaltbommel who went to Paris to study the piano and later became the wife of Edouard Manet (151). Things become more problematic when Rombouts tries to link carillon evolution directly to historical circumstances. For example, the decline of the carillon in the nineteenth century he explains by the fact that ‘the lower classes no longer actively listened to the carefree and noncommittal music of the bells. They needed to focus their energy and attention on the fight for survival, and when they wanted to escape from everyday miseries, they preferred to seek consolation in drinking and paid sexual pleasure rather than free music’ (150). This is a collection of questionable assertions and exaggerated generalisations, which no historian would want to defend. More plausible seems Rombouts’ observation that towns became too big for a collective carillon experience, especially for the working classes living in the newly-built outskirts where the sound of the carillon did not penetrate, but then one realises that, for instance in the Amsterdam Jordaan quarter the poor lived practically under the carillon of the Westerkerk.

An important question concerns the reason why the carillon originated and flourished in the Low Countries, and not anywhere else. Rombouts gives a number of reasons in an interplay of economic, cultural and technological factors (71-74). The region was densely populated and highly urbanised, with much industry and commercial activities, all of which promoted timekeeping and therefore the use of clocks. Moreover, carillons were objects of rivalry between towns and there was an advanced musical culture, culminating in the famous Flemish polyphony. There was also technological know-how, especially in relation to windmills and looms (a number of early carillon makers were also weavers), and there was local expertise in the founding of sonorous bells. Finally, carillon culture did not spread because carillons were not easy to transport, as opposed to other musical instruments. All these facts are more or less true, but it is questionable in how far they provide a satisfactory explanation of the Netherlandish carillon culture. Economic, cultural and technological conditions that are very similar to those in the

Netherlands can be found elsewhere, for instance in Northern Italy, with its urbanisation, commerce, interurban rivalry, distinguished musical culture and textile technology. Moreover, some of the most influential bell founders, such as the Hemony brothers, were immigrants in the Low Countries from outside the 'core region' of the carillon. It seems that a definitive explanation for this remarkable cultural phenomenon is yet to be found.

The book is an agreeable read: it is well-written and informative, although at the end, when the twentieth century is covered, Rombouts' story tends to become somewhat overloaded with detailed information, for instance on the contacts between various bell founders, carillon players and patrons, and on the prolonged squabbles between a few carillonneurs during the Brussels World Expo of 1958. It is also in the last part of the book that one hears more about carillon players and their repertoire; earlier the focus is chiefly on bell founders and their production. The volume contains well-chosen illustrations, but a few line drawings of the various playing mechanisms of the carillon would have been helpful. After finishing this book, the reader, whether interested in music or in cultural history in general, has gained much knowledge of the carillon, the instrument that one often enjoys without realising its rich and ancient history.

J.W.J. Burgers, Huygens Instituut voor Nederlandse geschiedenis /
Universiteit van Amsterdam