

Handbell Choir

Metropolitan United has a ten-member handbell choir that plays a wide repertoire of music, from traditional church music to arrangements of modern hymns and folk songs.

The Handbell Choir plays a three-octave set of Schulmerich handbells donated in the memory of Peter Campbell and Roy Rigg. The group rehearses Thursday nights and plays for the congregation once each month.



While handbells seem easy to play, they are difficult to play *well*. The Metropolitan Handbell Choir works to develop sophisticated dynamics and accurate ensemble playing. Recently the choir has been exploring new techniques such as “singing bell,” suggested by Tibetan Singing Bowls. As well, the groups has added soloists and additional percussion to enhance the music they perform.

Carillon Q& A

Q: Why are carillons special?

A: Because they can play a tune. Other church bells are played by pulling the whole bell assembly on ropes, but only patterns or peals can be played. A carillon can play everything from Bach chorales to the theme from *Star Wars*.

Q: What is the keyboard like?

A: It’s set up like a piano, but the batons must be struck rather than just touched.

Q: When were carillons invented?

A: In the early 17th century, but their big renaissance was from the 1920s. There are eleven tuned carillons in Canada. The carillon at the Peace Tower in Ottawa has one fewer bell than ours, the one at St. Joseph’s oratory in Montreal has two more bells.

Q: Where does the carillonner play?

A: Way up in the bell tower. There is a circular stair that goes up 36 steps to a practice room, and another 71 to the playing room. The bells are reached by climbing a short ladder from the playing room.

Q: How does a person become a carillonner?

A: Study. Most carillonners also play organ and piano. Instruction in playing the carillon can be arranged through the church office.

Metropolitan United Church

56 Queen Street East, Toronto, Ontario
416 363 0331 www.metunited.org

The Bells of Metropolitan



The 54-bell carillon at Metropolitan United has been making music since 1922

www.metunited.org

The Carillon

The 54 bells of Metropolitan's carillon are located high in the tower facing Queen Street. The instrument is played before each Sunday service and at many special events through the year. Installed in 1922, Metropolitan's carillon was the first tuned carillon anywhere in North America.

A carillon is a set of tower bells played from a keyboard. Unlike the bells of most English churches, carillon bells are tuned so they can play many kinds of music. At Metropolitan, we play hymns, classical tunes and special arrangements of modern songs for carillon.

The bells in a carillon are sounded by clappers hung from the inside while the bells themselves remain motionless in their frame. This makes it possible to play music very quickly and to play many bells at the same time for harmony.

The largest bell, or *bourdon*, in Metropolitan's carillon weighs 8,456 pounds (3,836 kg). It is 72 inches (183 cm) in diameter, and is almost the same in width. The entire group of 54 bells weighs many tonnes, but Metropolitan's bell tower, dating to 1872, was constructed with 7 foot thick walls to accommodate the weight.

At Metropolitan, Carillonneur Gerald Martindale plays a wide range of music—arrangements of Bach and church hymns, original compositions for carillon, and his own arrangements of modern classical and popular music.

Playing the Carillon

Playing the carillon demands a great deal of physical exertion by the carillonneur. The keys (called batons) are struck, not with the fingers like a piano, but with a loosely clenched fist. The carillonneur uses foot-pedals to sound the heavier bells. In 1738 a Dutch writer remarked that "for carillon playing a man requires nothing more than a thorough knowledge of music, good hands and feet ... and no gout."

Because a carillon is played with a mechanical keyboard and pedalboard, a wide range of dynamics are possible. Only a skilled carillonneur can play the high bells in rapid succession while harmonies are played simultaneously with the feet. Any misplayed note can be heard by thousands of people—and the low C rings for a full minute after it is struck!



METROPOLITAN UNITED CHURCH

56 Queen Street East, Toronto, Ontario
416 363 0331 www.metunited.org

Carillon History

1872 The great Metropolitan Methodist Church is built with a bell tower, but no bells to fill it.

1922 Chester D. Massey donates the original 23 bells of the Metropolitan Carillon in honour of his wife. On each of the 23 bells is inscribed, "May the spirit of the Lord reach the heart of every one where the sound of these bells is heard."

April 22, 1922 Dedication of the Carillon. "Thousands listened spellbound to the exquisite beauty," said the *Toronto Evening Telegram*.

1928 A devastating fire destroys the church, but the bell tower and carillon are saved.

1960 Twelve midrange bells by *Petit & Fritsen* of the Netherlands are added. A gift from Dr. Charles Drury.

1971 19 small bells by *Paccard et fils* in France are donated by the Massey Foundation, bringing the total to 54 bells and extending the range to four and one half octaves. A more modern playing console is also installed.

Carillonneurs of Metropolitan

1922-26 F. Percival Price

1926-28 John Skillicorn

1928-30 J. Leland Richardson

1930-32 Edmund Milroy

1932-36 Sidney Giles

1936-41 Edmund Milroy

1941-62 Stanley James

1962-97 James B. Slater

1997-present Gerald W. Martindale