

Cleveland Composers Guild teams up with McGaffin Carillon for new music

by Daniel Hathaway



It's good for composers to try writing outside their comfort zone, but some members of the Cleveland Composers Guild are challenging themselves to scale new heights by learning to write for the carillon.

Ubiquitous in the Low Countries of Belgium and the Netherlands, carillons are collections of tuned bells played with the fingers, fists, feet, and occasionally by a performer's outstretched hand or

forearm. The instruments vary in size depending on the number of bells their creators could afford, and on the size of the towers where they're housed.

Northeast Ohio is home to several carillons, among which the McGaffin Carillon in University Circle is the largest, with its four-octave range of 47 bells. Its 50th anniversary celebrations in 2018 included *McGaffin Flourish*, a new work by Guild member Jennifer Conner, who teaches at the Cleveland Institute of Music — well within earshot of the McGaffin Tower. Although attached to The Church of the Covenant, the structure has been incorporated as a separate entity for the sake of the preservation and promotion of the bells.



Carillonneur George Leggiero has been the liaison between the Friends of the McGaffin Carillon and the Composers Guild in planning a series of new works to be debuted from the tower this fall during the Friday lunchtime concerts, which run between 12:15 and 12:45 pm.

Leggiero will premiere Matthew Saunders' *Pilaster*, the first work to be completed, on the lunchtime concert this Friday, November 5, followed on November 12 by Jeffrey Quick's *Music for an Involuntary Audience*, and on November 19 with Larry Baker's *Within the Rain*.



In a recent Zoom conversation, Leggiero said he was amused by the aptness of the title Quick chose. "He used to work at the Case Music Library just behind the Covenant, and very close to the bell tower." Composers Guild president Margi Griebing-Haigh added, "We'll have our biggest audiences yet, whether the listeners are willing or not!"

As Leggiero notes on the McGaffin website, "The carillon can be heard from the grounds around the tower including the Case Western Reserve Campus behind the tower away from the Euclid Avenue traffic noise. Concerts are rain or shine and your car is also a place to hear the concert. Horn honking is an accepted form of applause at the end of the program." The carillonneurs also invite [requests](#).

So as not to leave its members clueless, Griebing-Haigh arranged an information session in August with Leggiero and his assistant, Kieran Cantilina, who gave a number of tips about the care and feeding of carillons.



Griebeling-Haigh also created what she calls a “cheat sheet” for composers brave enough to undertake writing music for bells. A few salient points which may interest listeners as well as composers:

- Each carillon is different! Before writing for any specific instrument, check with the individual church about its carillon's range, transposition, missing notes, and other characteristics.
- A carillon (usually) consists of hand levers and foot pedals, some of which are overlapping.
- It is not possible to play the same note using both the foot pedal and hand lever at the same time.
- This carillon sounds in the key of E-flat, but there are no C#3 or D#3 bells on this instrument!
- There is NO mechanism for damping bells; i.e. staccato is not possible.
- The lower the bell, the more it will sustain. The lowest bells may sustain for as much as 10-15 seconds, whereas the highest bells might only sustain for 1-2 seconds.
- The higher the church tower, the larger the bells can be. Small churches might only be able to house high bells, and therefore have a more “music box” like sound.
- Dynamics are possible, and are controlled by the force with which the hands or feet strike the levers or pedals. The larger bells have a greater dynamic range.
- Each bell possesses a “hum tone” one octave below the main pitch, plus a prominent harmonic tone a minor third above, plus a less prominent harmonic at a perfect fifth above the main pitch. Therefore, striking two notes a major third apart will result in an audible “major-minor” dissonance.
- The lower the bell, the more pronounced these harmonics and hum tones will be.
- Cluster chords can be very impactful because of these harmonics.



Those hearing a carillon up close and personal for the first time can find the noise level daunting. Griebeling-Haigh counsels patience. “Whereas there is an awful lot of mechanical noise in the actual carillon chamber, this is inaudible outside the bell tower. The sound becomes much more balanced for listeners down below, outside the church.”

The Friends of the McGaffin Carillon have also thoughtfully provided a live stream of each performance for listeners who prefer to enjoy their outdoor music indoors.

George Leggiero invites composers who would like to try their hand at writing for the instrument to submit sketches of their work for comments and suggestions by [email](#).

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