

Jennifer Gee

Professor Yvonne Elet

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The Vassar Carillon: A History

Striking every hour, on the hour with two longer displays at 12:30 and 5:00 pm, the Vassar carillon is an essential part of college life that often fades from notice with time and familiarity. However, for all that the chimes may seem like an unchanging part of the soundscape, the instrument has undergone several changes over the past one hundred and four years. Like many aspects of college life which seem untouchable, the music of the Vassar carillon has been frequently changed, and will perhaps change again soon.

The first Vassar carillon was installed and first used in the spring of 1905 in the brand new chapel.¹ Donated on behalf of Mrs. Lydia Pratt Babbott '80, the carillon likely had eight tubular bells which rang to call the women to the then daily chapel services.² With the American college campus's strong ties to monastic and Oxbridge architecture, the presence of bells seems like a given, although the carillon consisting of tubular bells, the instrument more commonly used on American campuses, is a relatively recent invention. A carillon is an instrument traditionally consisting of twenty three bells arranged chromatically which can be played by

¹ "Gifts," *Miscellany* (Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY), June 1, 1905.
<https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=literary19050601-01.2.15&srpos=1&e=-----190-en-20--1--txt-txIN-chimes----->

² "Chimes Forgo Well Known Hymn Tunes," *Miscellany* (Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY), March 14, 1928.
<https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=miscellany19280314-01.2.11&srpos=4&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-chimes----->

ropes or a keyboard.³ In fact, a carillon with fewer than twenty three bells is technically called a chime, but for the sake of simplicity, I will be calling all the instruments in this essay carillons.⁴ While the version of this instrument using wide-mouthed bells has existed for hundreds of years, the tubular bells commonly used in carillons today did not come into use until around the 1850s in France, and 1884 in England when John Harrington patented the first tubular bell.⁵ In order to bring the invention to the United States Harrington partnered with Walter H. Durfee who went on to found the United States Tubular Bell Company. They installed the first tubular tower chime in the US in the General Theological Seminary in New York City in 1888 where it remains today.⁶ Vassar's own carillon was installed seventeen years later, at the forefront of campus carillons in the United States. The mechanism still bears the plaque, "Manufactured by Walter H. Durfee & Co. Providence, R.I. Harrington Patents."



Photo Taken by Yvonne Elet on September 27, 2019

³ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Carillon," Encyclopaedia Britannica, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. October 27, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/art/carillon>

⁴ "About," The Guild of Carillonneurs in North Carolina, October 27, 2019, <https://www.gcna.org/about-carillons>

⁵ "Tubular Tower Bells," TowerBells.org, December 13, 2014. <http://www.towerbells.org/TubularBells.html#DUR>

⁶ Ibid.

In support of the reports that the carillon originally had eight bells, Durfee sold carillons in eight, thirteen, and fifteen note versions.⁷ According to the archives of the *Miscellany News*, the college upgraded the carillon to fifteen bells between 1928 and 1935. Aside from that change, the structure of the carillon has remained the same since its installation. An elegantly designed wooden framework supports the tubular bells that are suspended from it. While some carillons are played through their connection to a keyboard, the Vassar chimes are played by rope pulls. In this way the carillon has two main components. The tubular bells which rest on the top floor of the chapel tower, arranged in chromatic order, are connected to ropes which run down through the floor to a frame below where a musician can pull them and ring the chimes.



Durfee Carillon. Photo Taken by Yvonne Elet on September 27, 2019

⁷ Ibid.



Durfee Carillon: tubular bells (top) and rope pulleys from the attic to the floor below (bottom). Photos Taken by Yvonne Elet on September 27, 2019

There are regular mentions in the *Miscellany* of hearing the chapel chimes throughout the first half of the century, so it is confirmed that the chimes have rung in some capacity since they were installed. However, a 1928 article mentions that “On account of the poor condition of the chimes, it has been decided that familiar hymn tunes will no longer be played on them. The music which will be used from now on will be true chime music.”⁸ This quote marks a fascinating change in repertoire in the chapel’s history, and sets the tone for the college’s treatment of the carillon going forward.



Photo taken by Yvonne Elet on September 26, 2019

⁸“Chimes Forgo Well Known Hymn Tunes,” *Miscellany* (Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY), March 14, 1928. <https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=miscellany19280314-01.2.11&srpos=4&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-chimes----->

Setting the repertoire question aside for the moment, the condition of the Durfee carillon continued to deteriorate until the college purchased a new mechanical carillon in 1955. The replacement was paid for in part by a donation from Paul E. Van Horn and Louise Lanctot in honor of Mrs. Lanctot's daughters, Eleanor Lanctot Van Horn '30, Sarah Lanctot Rigg '36, and Katherine Potter Lanctot '39 who were, in fact, Matthew Vassar's grand-nieces, the granddaughters of his sister, Selkirk.⁹ Because of that dedication it was called the Three Sisters Carillon. This purchase marked a dramatic change from the physical chimes which were used for the previous fifty years. The college purchased the Three Sisters Carillon from a company called Schulmerich Carillons Inc. Based in Sellersville, PA, Schulmerich Carillons was founded by George Schulmerich in the early 1940s in order to sell his invention, the carillonic bell system. Instead of the large tubular bells of Durfee carillons, the carillonic bell system works something like an electrified xylophone. Metal rods of increasing length are lined up with strikers underneath. An electromagnetic pickup then runs the sound to an amplifier and speakers, creating a remarkably realistic bell sound.¹⁰ It was possible to program the system to strike automatically on the hour, and to play certain pre-programmed pieces. In order to play the bells manually, the system was hooked up to a keyboard which was placed in the chapel tower's atrium.¹¹

Because the system was small enough to fit into a small 67" cabinet as opposed to a structure easily over ten feet tall, it was possible for the college to acquire a full twenty five notes which would not go out of tune with time, and which would prove much easier to play both because of the automatic function, and because the keyboard interface is accessible to pianists as

⁹ Louise D. Lanctot, in a letter to President Sarah Gibson Blanding, August 10, 1955.

¹⁰ Grantbob, "Inside the Carillon," Principles Unknown, blogspot, June 5, 2007.
<http://www.grantbob.com/2007/05/inside-carillon.html>

¹¹ Walter A. Nyce, in a letter to Sydnor Walker, May 4, 1955.

well as trained carillonneurs. In fact, a 1973 Miscellany article proves that this new mechanical carillon brought the campus soundscape back to life with student involvement. The article discusses work study jobs on campus, a program which had just been instituted the year before in 1971-'72. On the carillon the article says,

“Olga Peters ’73 rings the chimes for Chapel. People who envision her pulling ropes in the tower frequently comment on how romantic her campus job must be. Those of us who have gathered our information from such sources as “The Nine Tailors” are sometimes disillusioned to learn that bell ringing in the electrical age consists of playing tunes on a console keyboard.”¹²

This quote proves that, in addition to the preprogrammed chimes the college hired student musicians to play additional music throughout the year. The article further states that “The only difficulties occur when keys stick or when one chooses the wrong tune like the Sunday in March when Olga decided to play a hymn set to the tune of “O Come All Ye Faithful.”¹³ It seems likely, then, that the program consisted mostly of hymns, but that there was, nonetheless, much more variation in the college soundscape than we find today.

¹² “Student Jobs,” *Vassar Quarterly*, (Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY), March 1, 1973.
<https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=vq19730301-01.2.10&srpos=122&e=-----en-20--121--txt-txIN-chimes----->

¹³ Ibid.



Photo taken by Yvonne Elet on September 26, 2019

The last time the Miscellany covered the carillon in any substantial way was in 1978 when two students, Tom Lifschutz and Tenli Yavneh, one of whom also worked for IBM, “cleaned and repaired the chimes in the tower of the Chapel,”¹⁴ meaning the original 1905 carillon. The article goes on to mention that “the electric chimes can be heard, for the first time in six years, every Sunday at 10:40 a.m.”¹⁵ While this date is slightly incorrect--the work study article from March, 1973 clearly indicates that the electric carillon was being played more recently than five years ago--it does indicate that the carillon went through an extended period of inactivity.

After this restoration the carillon basically vanishes from the college narrative. This does not mean, however, that Vassar stopped being concerned with it altogether. In 1996 the trustees installed a new digital carillon, also from Schulmerich, called the Novabell. There was no student reporting this time, and the purchase records remain sealed for the time being, but the college updated the plaque in the atrium of the chapel tower, and the Religious and Spiritual Life office retained some files on the operation of the new system. The plaque now states,

“The carillon in the Vassar Chapel, presented to the College by the Board of Trustees in 1996, honors President Frances Daly Fergusson as an expression of gratitude on the occasion of the successful end of The Campaign for Vassar College and to mark her ten years of dedicated service to the College. The Fergusson Carillon succeeds the Three Sisters Carillon, which was given to Vassar in 1955 in honor of Eleanor Lanctot Van Horn ‘30, Sarah Lanctot Rigg ‘36, and Katherine Potter Lanctot ‘39, great-great-grand-nieces of Matthew Vassar.¹⁶

¹⁴ “1880-1980,” *Vassar Quarterly*, (Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY), September 1, 1978. <https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=vq19780901-01.2.33&srpos=37&e=-----en-20--21--txt-txIN-chimes----->

¹⁵Ibid

¹⁶ Photo by author, September 27, 2019.

Unlike the mechanical carillon which still required a system of metal plates and strikers to play, the digital system is composed simply of a computer unit with a database of sounds. The difference between the 1955 unit and the 1996 unit was not always readily apparent as the computer unit is positioned in the multipurpose room at the top of the chapel tower right next to the Durfee carillon rope pulls, and it has no obvious connections to an outside system which actually plays the bell sounds across campus. An investigation of the dark attic revealed not only that the Durfee carillon is still in place, but also that the Fergusson carillon's speakers appear to be on the roof. Drone photography proved this to be true.



Photo taken by Chad Fust on September 27, 2019

The set up appears to be much simpler than expected. The two sets of speakers are not visible on the ground from any angle, but they project well enough to be heard anywhere on campus, even the Town Houses. Currently, the Novabell system chimes the hours of the day, and plays longer pieces at 12:30 and 5:00 pm. These pieces seem to have been selected around the time the system was installed, and, though it was originally possible to upload new music using a “Uniplay” card

which came with the system, the cards were lost some time ago. However, it is still possible to play new music by connecting the computer to a keyboard directly.¹⁷

This presents interesting possibilities for the future soundscape of the college. The absorption of the bell into the campus landscape by no means erased its religious functions. As I mentioned earlier, when the 1905 carillon was first installed chapel attendance was still mandatory, and the chimes served their original Protestant function, to call people to church. Even the current 1996 digital carillon has a user's manual mostly dedicated to settings for mass and regular prayer. The system is clearly intended for sale to both secular and religious institutions. The majority of the music which plays on the system today is composed of hymns, and mentions of choosing the right hymn in the 1973 Miscellany article support the idea that this was the case for the previous mechanical carillon as well.

Although the school has not retained any records of carillon sheet music, there do remain a few programs of performances on the 1905 carillon. The first notable performance is the inaugural performance on the Three Sisters Carillon in 1955 by a Princeton bellmaster, Arthur Lynd Bigelow. He played thirteen pieces, of which nine are explicitly religious, and the remaining four draw from folk tunes and music written for carillon, including a piece written by Bigelow himself.¹⁸ The program for a January 18, 1961 performance by Janet Kiehl comprised twenty seven pieces, out of which seventeen are overtly religious, eight patriotic, and two in honor of college life.¹⁹ This makes perfect sense. As the instrument was invented for a religious

¹⁷ Sam Spears, conversation with the author, September 27, 2019.

¹⁸ "Princeton Bellmaster Performs on Carillon," *Miscellany*, (Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY), November 16, 1955. <https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=miscellany19551116-01.2.9&srpos=1&e=-----195-en-20--1--txt-txIN-carillon----->

¹⁹ "Charter Day at Vassar," *Vassar Quarterly*, (Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY), May 1, 1961. <https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=vq19610501-01.2.15&srpos=5&e=-----en-20--1-byDA.rev-txt-txIN-carillon----->

use, the majority of music written for it serves that purpose. However, in a college where the students come from a much wider variety of religious backgrounds, a selection of almost exclusively Protestant hymns is perhaps a bit outdated.

The digital carillon significantly widens the possible repertoire given that the bells have been mapped directly onto an easily accessible piano keyboard. There is even precedent of student musicians taking the reins in Vassar's carillon music. The major issue there seems to be that the sound bytes included in the current carillon system have some folksy intonation issues. While this makes the bell sounds much more believable from a distance it also presents potential difficulties in simply attempting to play piano music with no alterations. There are, however, plenty of other options. Other college carillon guilds have taken the leap and have already begun to pave the way for a more modern soundscape. The Yale Carillon Guild has even published a collection of seven arrangements of secular compositions arranged for carillon including Guaraldie's Waltz, The Quest, and We'd Better Not Boogie.²⁰ Wellesley and Princeton also have lively carillon guilds which continue adapt to bring more diverse repertoire to their campuses. It would be a worthwhile endeavor to get Vassar students involved in making music for the college again. There could be regular time slots for which music students, or any pianists really, could apply to play a certain piece, and then add to that a few scheduled practice times leading up to it, to fine tune a student's arrangement or simply get a feel for playing with bells. (There is a practice setting, that allows the sounds to play inside the Chapel tower but not outside.) This would provide an interesting opportunity for students to practice their skills with arrangement, and significantly diversify the soundscape of the college. Why not a Halloween themed piece! The possibilities are endless.

²⁰ "Sheet Music," Yale University Guild of Carillonners, Yale University Guild of Carillonners, 2017. <http://yalecarillon.org/publications>



The author sounding the A bell. Photo Taken by Yvonne Elet on September 27, 2019

As for the future of the carillon at Vassar, there is also the original 1905 carillon to consider. An assessment was done in 2017 by Verdin, the company that acquired Schulmerich in 2014.²¹ The company put together a proposal for refurbishing the chimes, which would involve replacing the wooden frame, the striking hammers, pulleys, and springs. The structure has not been tended to since 1978, so the wood, and many of the less hardy connecting materials have suffered damage, but the tubular bells themselves are in good condition. A few can still be sounded using the rope pulls; the quality of the sound is vastly superior to the electronic

²¹ “About,” Schulmerichcarillons.com, Schulmerich Carillons, 2019. <http://schulmerichcarillons.com/about/>

Novabell. Verdin estimated the price of the refurbishment at [cost redacted] with the option to choose from several additional functions such as the “Carillon Master Control System” which combines digital sound sampling and preprogrammed pieces, a pneumatic striking system which automates the manual striking of the bells, and, according to notes by the director of Religious and Spiritual Life, Sam Spears, from a meeting with the company representatives, a number of additional warranty options, all of which would come to a price of around [cost redacted].²² Having a functioning historic carillon would include Vassar with Princeton, Yale, Wesleyan, and more in the small group of colleges that still engage their students in creating a campus wide soundscape on a historic instrument.

The carillon is an instrument with a long and proud history that has developed alongside the growth of American universities. Having a working historic carillon would be yet another mark of Vassar’s place among the country’s leading educational institutions, and reflect its long term commitment to stewardship of its historic campus. Encouraging student involvement in the campus soundscape would be one more step in connecting Vassar’s history with its present and its plans for the future.

²² Jeff Lewis, *Proposal For: Manual Renovation of the Existing Tubular Chime of Bells (with option for full automation)*, Verdin, October 3, 2017; Sam Spears, notes on carillon renovation, 2017.

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