

PROGRAM NOTES

Quincy Symphony Chorus

The Bells of Christmas

December 7, 2019

Tonight's selections are tied together by joyous bells and ringing instruments. Three handbell choirs join the Symphony Chorus for festive works such as "Ring Those Christmas Bells" and "Bell Carol of the Kings". Other ringing instrumental accompaniments include celeste, finger cymbals, glockenspiel, tambourine and wind chimes. Many thanks to the bell choirs of Centenary Methodist Church (Louisiana, MO), First Union Congregational Church and Salem Evangelical Church of Christ.

Psallite Gloria Deo is a joyful Christmas hymn that honors the Medieval practice in which processing with bells kept evil at bay.

Rondeau de Noel continues the welcoming of Christmas in a modern setting of a Medieval song form in which the singers themselves become the bells.

White Christmas recalls the nostalgic memories of togetherness at holiday time which post-WWII movies evoked. Concert chimes suggest church bells that all the town could hear.

The Angels and the Shepherds joins an octave of handbells with other melody instruments to enhance this Bohemian carol of the Angels' glorious tidings of the Christ Child's birth.

Sing We Fa La La celebrates the age-old discovery that 2 different songs can make wonderful harmony when they are sung together as partner songs...quodlibet. The carol has ancient roots and several meanings, many of which include dancing to fa-la-las and festive processing from house to house to verse and burden (chorus). Here are carols secular and sacred, old and new.

Bell Carol of the Kings pairs a traditional Ukrainian Christmas carol with a 19th-century Epiphany carol, using a single tolling bell to evoke sounds of the East. Russian Orthodox bells of enormous size hung from towers that would have collapsed if the bells had swung. They did not. Ropes attached to their clappers pulled the strike ball to the bell, producing the loudest instrumental sound in the world until the invention of electronic devices. Orthodox traditions celebrate Christmas on Epiphany, or 12th Night, so perhaps this carol pairing is logical.

One December, Bright and Clear tells the Christmas story, emphasizing the Angels' message of Peace on Earth and giving the bells a message of hope for their peal. Keyboards play repeated patterns that reference the complex change-ringing of English cathedral bells, which do swing and require great cooperative teamwork.

I'll Be Home For Christmas features another nostalgic movie song from the 1940's, but adds a little frosty sleigh ride touch with a brief Jingle Bells reference.

Christmas in Three Quarter Time moves the movie nostalgia to the 1950's and '60's and celebrates city bustle rather than dreamy country fancies. Belgium invented the carillon, with its towers of bells ringing melodies; and every town showed its civic pride in the quality of its bells. American cities and universities adopted the practice, and this medley celebrates the joyous pandemonium of silver bells in the city at this most wonderful time of the year.

Candlelit Heart, premiered tonight, is a newly commissioned work by composer Chester Alwes in celebration of Dr. Phyllis Robertson's 30 years as conductor of the Quincy Symphony Chorus. Accompanied by oboe, percussion, piano and celeste, the text is the poem by the same title:

Candlelit Heart ~ by Mary E. Linton

Somewhere across the winter world tonight
You will be hearing chimes that fill the air;
Christmas extends its all-enfolding light
Across the distance...something we can share.

You will be singing, just the same as I,
These old familiar songs we know so well,
And you will see these same stars in your sky
And wish upon that brightest one as well.

I shall remember you and trim my tree,
One shining star upon the topmost bough;
I will hang wreaths of faith for all to see,
Tonight I glimpse beyond the here and now.

And all the time that we must be apart
I keep a candle lit in the depths of my heart.

Carol of the Bells features a traditional Ukrainian tune with its familiar 4-note bell peal ostinato as underlay for the main melody. The final note is a nod to the Slavic tolling master bell phenomenon.

Christmas is Coming is a modern Christmas anthem, or choral song, that uses handbells in an ostinato peal to imitate swinging church tower bells. The bells fall silent for the reverential Advent carol O Come, O Come, Emmanuel before returning with their joyous rhythmic peal for the finale. Both handbells and the peal bells in English church towers are swinging bells, which means that the entire bell moves and engages the clapper as it meets it. Ropes pull the peal (or change) bell, but the ringer's arm swings the handbell. Peals are complex patterns of shifting ostinatos (short, repeated note sequences) which require extensive team practice to pull. Often, change ringers practice with handbells to master their patterns yet save their strength.

O Shout And Sing! reminds us that the lowly jingles on the tambourine are also bells, and the shape of these jingles follows the acoustic principles of the shallow pan ancient Romans used for chiming when metal balls were released into them at specified time intervals in early mechanical clocks. Chime bells featured prominently in timekeeping in many parts of the world, and the chime even aided in modern innovation as the ringer on the first telephone. In this anthem, the tambourine takes its place with other percussion instruments to highlight the rhythm of praise.

All bells in paradise takes its title line from a 15th century Corpus Christi Carol and continues a long tradition of English university and cathedral choirs' welcoming of the Christmas season with a service of Lessons and Carols. Many melodies are old and many (as is this fine carol) are newly composed. The bells chime the Christ Child's birth with reverence and majesty.

Sleigh Ride and It's Beginning to Look Like Christmas return to 1950's nostalgia, but also echo traditional uses of bells in country and city. The iconic sleigh bells remind us that, like 6th century B.C. Chinese scholars who attached bells to sticks and straps to shake and elevate themselves into a transcendental joy, we are also immediately transported when we hear the merry sound. And as city shoppers pass each other on the streets, the bells they hear reflect excitement and the carols that begin in their own hearts.

Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas is another nostalgic nod to '40's movies that reminds us that Christmas is a time to cherish friends and memories and the warmth of the season...with a dash of jingle for good measure.

Ring Those Christmas Bells celebrates the glory of bells as the toll of time, the peal patterns that unite a community, and the jingling chime of this merry season. However, handbells also come forward here to show their prowess as carriers of melody while the chorus marks measures in rhythmic harmony.

Winter Wonderland of Snow combines 2 seasonal standards from the '30's and '40's to celebrate the joys of walking in the snow or staying cozy while it falls outside. The jingle of sleigh bells invites us to walk in wonder in frosty weather, and even the comfy call to let it snow reminds us that bells have always sounded out safe havens from rough weather.

Angels From the Realms of Glory joins choirs and instruments into a glorious finale that peals forth the message of the season, worship Christ, the newborn king.

Notes compiled by Dr. Carol Mathieson