

ENGLISH HAND BELLS

HISTORY:

Hand bells have been traced as far back as the 5th Century B.C. in China. The oldest existing bells with handles found in China dated from 1600 B.C., although bells of various kinds and shapes have been found all over the world.

Hand bells as they are known in Europe and the United States are descendants from the tower bells in England. Around the 16th Century, the art of tower bell ringing was becoming established in England. A set of five to twelve bells was rung in a numerical sequence as opposed to a melodic pattern. This was called "change ringing". It took hours of practice of pulling on the ropes that caused the bells to ring in different orders creating the intricate patterns of melody. This much ringing of the tower bells was disturbing to the surrounding villagers, so small bells were developed so the ringers could practice indoors, out of the cold bell towers and, therefore, also not disturbing the neighbors.

Eventually, this type of bell ringing became an art in itself. As the art became more sophisticated in the 18th Century, larger sets of hand bells were cast. "Tune ringing" (ringing melodies and simple harmonies set to music for festive occasions such as Christmas) peaked around the middle of the 19th Century. By the 20th Century, the popularity of tune ringing began to wane. Then at the end of World War II, tune ringing began to resurface.

English hand bells are thought to have been introduced to America by the Peake Family Ringers in the 1830's and in 1840 by P.T. Barnum. In 1923, Mrs. Margaret Shurcliff of Boston organized the Beacon Hill Ringers with groups forming in the Northeast United States. The New England Guild of Hand bell Ringers was formed in 1937 and then in the 1950's and '60's, hundreds of groups began to spring up throughout the United States in churches, schools and other organizations. In 1954 the American Guild of English Hand bell Ringers (AGEHR) was founded with Mrs. Shurcliff as its first President. The Guild publishes a newsletter which is credited for the advancement of bell ringing nationwide and serves as a conduit to further the advancement of bell ringing and to pass on information about national and regional festivals and new knowledge gained about the art of English Hand bell ringing.

OTHER INFORMATION:

Pan got her original music background from piano and started playing English hand bells in the 1960's as a teenager in her church (First Methodist) in El Dorado, KS. She gave it up for a few years but began actively "ringing" again 13 years ago as a member of the Eastminster Presbyterian Church Bell Choir. The all—women 8-12 member choir practices once a week for 2 hours and performs four to six times a year under the direction of Leora Osborn. The practices are

very important as few “ringers” have their own bells and they are quite expensive. The group practice is the only “ringing” time they get.

The choir members divide the bells for ringing. It is very important each person (or their substitute) be at practices and performances since if a person is not there, a whole tonal section would be missing.

The English hand bells come in various sizes, the smaller ones having the higher pitch tones and the larger bells having the lower base tones. The base bell also has a longer drawn—out tone. The bells are made of copper and tin, cast and pitched in a factory so that heat and cold will not affect the tone. The handles are made of hard leather and the clappers (tongue of the bell) have a leather covering. The clappers will only move up and down and have screws fastening them in the bell so as not to hit the top. Each bell is marked with the musical note on it telling the “ringer” which bell to pick up.

Pam demonstrated several bell ringing techniques and their musical markings which give different tonal qualities to the music:

- Tower swing -- the up and down arm motion to sustain the tone
- Shake -- Wrist shaking of the bell to give a tremulous effect
- Thumb ~ damp table damp, shoulder dam, brush damp - Where to touch the bell to stop the Sound.
- 4—in-hand — holding two bells in each hand in a position where one bell at a time can be rung.
- Pluck - using finger to “pluck” the clapper making a sharper tone.
- (vib.) — Vibrato — a slightly tremulous effect giving added warmth and loudness to the sound.
- Mallet — a cotton or leather covered hammer device to strike the bell and make a sharp ring.

White gloves are worn when ringing the English hand bells to keep both the leather clean and the bells themselves from tarnishing. The bells are cleaned after each use and are stored in suitcase—like carrying cases lined with a soft fabric.

Pam used the 4-in-hand technique to play a Christmas song, The Drummer Boy. She then invited the other 12 members in attendance to put on the white gloves she brought and experience “ringing”. Each member was responsible for certain bells and she led us in a few simple chords that vaguely resembled the song America the Beautiful when we played it. We’re not quite as good as Pam nor are we ready to form the Chi Omega Bell Choir, but we did have a good time during our “performance”!