

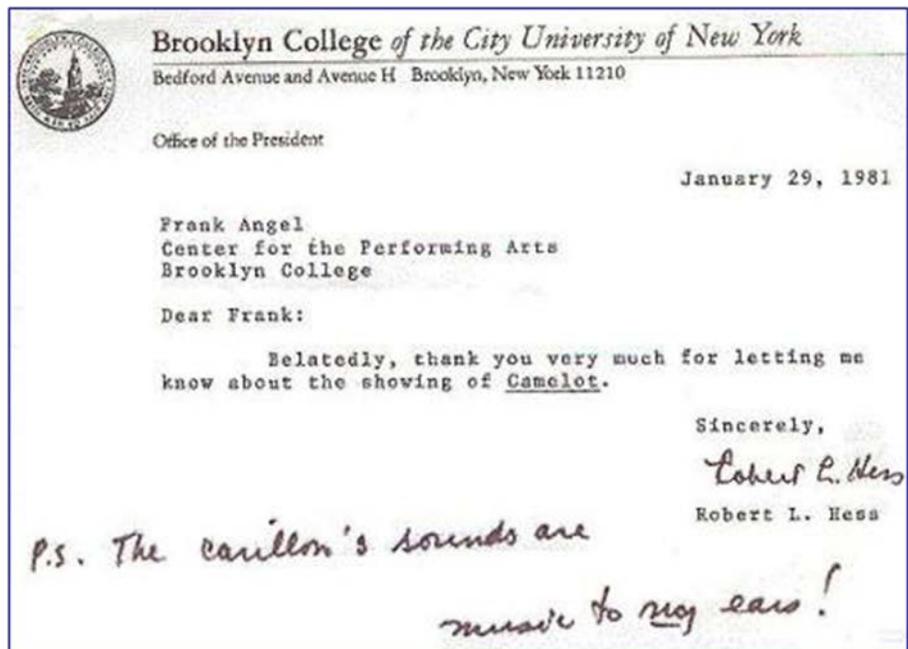


The LaGuardia Bell Tower Carillon

By Frank Angel

Although the LaGuardia Tower has housed a carillon from the very first days it opened its doors, details about the original carillon are sketchy at best. About the only thing we know is that it was a manual operation with the bells struck by hand. A carillonneur had to go up to the tower and manually strike the bells. There is no record of who manufactured it or any details of the original design or how many bells were used. Only a cork-covered "sounding" room which housed the system and a few rusted tubular bells are all that remain of that first instrument which indicate that it may only have been able to play the simple Westminster, four note melody. How it was played, how often or by whom, remains a mystery.

The first automated carillon capable of playing a double octave of notes and full melodies on campus was installed circa 1959 in the LaGuardia Tower by the Schulmerich Carillon Company of Pennsylvania. It consisted of eight tuned sounding rods which struck the familiar Westminster melody sequence on the quarter hours as well as striking the hour. The entire clockworks were driven by electro-mechanical components -- a mass of metal rods, pins, relays and motors. Except for the occasional mechanical failure, it was used on a daily basis for nearly twenty years. In 1986, the 17-year-old Schulmerich instrument broke down beyond repair. The carillon and the LaGuardia Tower with its blue-lighted belfry and amber turret lights had long become a cherished fixture of campus life, while the LaGuardia Tower and gold Dome had become the very symbol of Brooklyn College.



The late President Robert L. Hess had a personal love of carillon music and a desire to perpetuate the tradition which he referred to as "music to my ears." He was determined that the sounds of the bells would return to the campus again...and quickly; he made immediate arrangements to have a new Maas-Rowe carillon installed to replace the Schulmerich unit. At the same time, he directed that the atmospheric lighting in the belfry be enhanced. Brooklyn Center's sound and lighting technicians have maintained the system ever since.

The new Maas-Rowe carillon was put into service in June 1986. This carillon instrument, the current one now being heard, is modeled after the classic carillons found in the churches and universities of Europe. It consists of 15 tuned tubular bells which produce the same rich, sonic tone quality as traditional, full-sized steeple bells. These toll quarter-hour with the Westminster melody progression and strike the hour number. In addition, the carillon has a seven-bell

Gaudia Campanis or joyous bell peel (random swinging bells) that is used on holidays and at the beginning of official college functions such as commencement (in monastic times the *Gaudia Campanis* peel was used to proclaim feasts and holy days).

Another type of peel or what is referred to as a "bell change" is known as the *Populous Vocabunt* and was used to call the monks from the fields or to call the towns folk to meetings; it is a swinging bell peel that we now use to announce the convocation of official college gatherings such as the Stated Meeting of the Faculty.

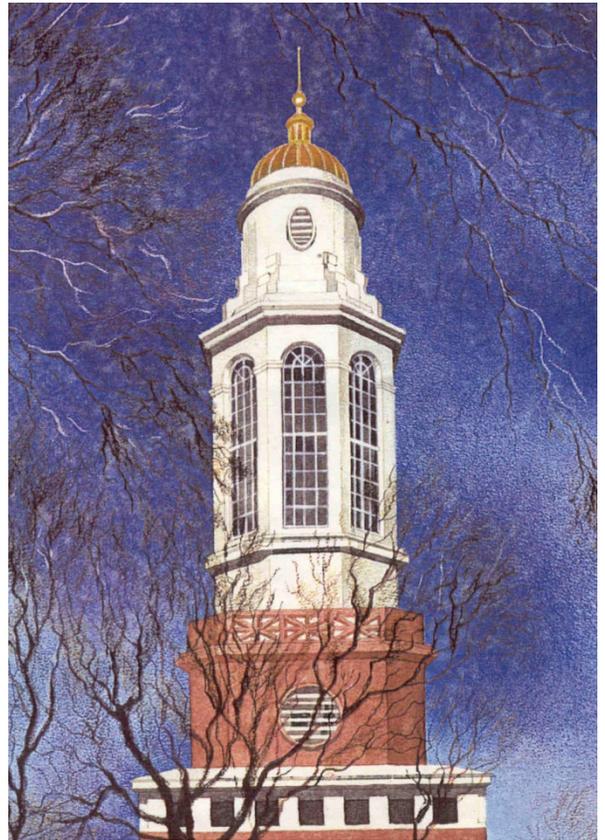
A repertoire of more than one hundred classical, general, patriotic and Christmas/Chanukah melodies can be programmed to play at various times during the day. The computer, which controls the sequence of these musical events, is very flexible, allowing melodies to be played during class breaks. Carillon melodies are programmed at 12n, 3pm and 6pm on days when classes are not in session at those times, and at the class breaks closest to those hours when classes are in session. Mini-concerts of three melodies are played during club hours (the 12 noon hour) and during the 6pm to 6:30pm break. The daily sequence begins at 9am during the week and at noon on Saturday and Sundays.

A distinctive two-bell class-break strike is sounded for the beginning and ending of each class period except when a class begins or ends on an hour quarter -- then the Westminster melody takes precedence.

At 11pm the Carillon sounds the *De Profundis*. This is the traditional, single, deep-bell toll that is struck at the end of the day. During the Middle Ages, it was used to announce the beginning of the Grand Silence in monastic Europe. It is still used on university campuses to signal the day's end -- a time of quiet reflection (and time to watch the news). The *De Profundis* is the last event programmed by the system.

The Maas-Rowe Carillon also provides a Requiem strike. This somber, single bell toll is used to announce an official day of mourning. If the college President, the Mayor, the Governor or the President calls for an official day of mourning, such as was done for the astronauts of the Columbia, the Requiem bell is tolled at 12n, 3pm and at 6pm. The Westminster melodies as well as any other bell strikes (except the *De Profundis*) are silenced all day long on such occasions.

There is a special memorial sounding of the *De Profundis* Requiem bell every year on September 11th commemorating that tragic event. One minute Requiem tolls mark the exact moment when each of the tragic events took place. The Requiem toll sounds when each plane hit the World Trade Centers, the Pentagon and the crash in the field in PA, as well as when each of the towers fell. Fittingly, Dr. Hess's beloved carillon, which he took such a passionate interest in refurbishing, tolled the *De Profundis* on the day of his memorial service.



The clockworks are no longer a mechanically driven affair, but are controlled by an on-board computer, making the accuracy of the carillon as good as a very expensive quartz watch. The computer clock is reset to the atomic clock, Meridian Time at the Naval Observatory every week to insure accuracy. The computer actually programs the Westminster hour melody to start ahead of the hour so that when the melody finishes, the first strike of the hour bell will mark the hour exactly to the second! It is probably the most accurate time-piece on the campus.

The computer system wisely incorporates a "curfew" which will not allow any event to be programmed either inadvertently or by design between the hours of 11pm and 7am. This is to assure that no event is accidentally programmed in the middle of the night. In the event of a power failure, a back-up power supply protects the computer

memory from losing track of the correct time or its programs. The entire control system is no longer housed in the LaGuardia Tower but in the systems control room in the Performing Arts complex.

Incidentally, the carillon computer does not control the LaGuardia Tower clock that faces the quadrangle. This large clock is an original mechanical gear mechanism that is driven by motors and relays and is the original piece of equipment that was installed when LaGuardia Hall was built. It's surprisingly accurate for such an old timepiece.

For these many years, the LaGuardia carillon has rung out its melodies through every historical event that the community has lived through, many joyous, some sad. One of the more momentous occasions was when the then President Bill Clinton visited the college and spoke to a packed audience and a crowd overflowing onto Campus Road. It was quite thrilling to hear the Secret Service on their walkie-talkies, describing his location and ETA at every intersection along Flatbush Avenue as the motorcade drove to the college and then to hear the carillon play "Hail To The Chief" as POTUS drove into the Performing Arts Center parking lot and then walked through the stage door onto the stage!



On a sunny Spring or Autumn day, a gentle wind can carry the peaceful melodies of the carillon in every direction to the trees and sidewalks and gardens of the surrounding neighborhoods; of a pleasant evening, strollers walking along the campus paths are reassured by the sound of the bells and the tower's welcoming blue and amber glow. It may not be enough to set everything right in the world, but it certainly helps make the campus an inviting, friendlier place -- a comforting, symbolic oasis amidst the hustle and stresses of daily life. We are fortunate to be able to enjoy this continuing Brooklyn College tradition that has graced our campus and the surrounding community for so long that it has become an integral part of campus life.

Mr. Frank Angel is currently the Director of Brooklyn Center Cinema and Systems Supervisor at Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts. He was informally appointed "keeper of the belfry" by the late President Dr. Hess and continues to program and maintain the Maas-Rowe carillon computer equipment. For over 45 years he has happily worked to keep the LaGuardia Tower Carillon and special atmospheric lighting in good repair and the tradition intact.

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