

Towering Sounds

The music of UNH students, staff rings from the carillon

Friday, December 9, 2016



When it comes to campus traditions, there are few more familiar than the songs that toll from the Thompson Hall tower every morning at 11. Listen for a moment and you might hear a familiar tune — the theme from “Harry Potter,” perhaps, or, during the holiday season, a Christmas carol. This week, though, you may want to listen a little more closely as you walk through campus. That’s because 10 new student and staff compositions will make a ringing debut on the carillon.

What’s a carillon? It’s a musical instrument, usually made up of a series of at least two dozen bronze bells, that are played either on their own or together. UNH’s carillon is unique — instead of a tower full of massive bells, it uses 286 small metal bars that act as bells. A keyboard that looks like an organ you’d find in a church is used to “play” the carillon, according to Peter Urquhart, an associate professor of music and the UNH carillonneur, or keeper of the carillon, since 2000.

“A lot of people do know something about it, but where it is,

Behind the Music

He picks the music, but don’t call him a DJ. Peter Urquhart has been

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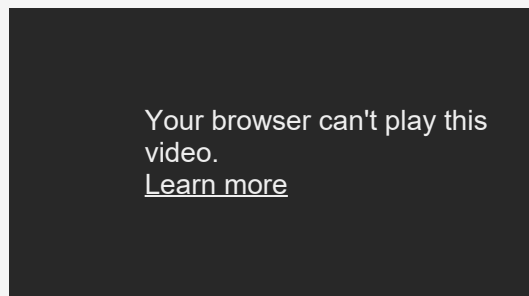
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or what it is, they often don't know," Urquhart says.

The carillon itself is housed in the Elliott Alumni Center; when it rings out, it sends a signal to the speakers in the T-Hall tower. The songs that play each morning are

the UNH carillonneur for about 16 years, setting the tunes that accompany us as we cross campus each day. Here's how he describes his work.



recorded and programmed into the carillon, Urquhart says.

Earlier this year, Urquhart began seeking submissions for the university's second carillon composition contest. It was a way to make the instrument part of UNH's sesquicentennial celebrations, as well as a way to draw attention to it.

He received submissions from undergraduates, graduate students and even staff members. Urquhart's Music Theory II class chose the top 10 submissions, and the winning compositions began chiming across campus on Dec. 9.

One of the winners is Nate Faro '15 '16G, whose composition is based partly on a piece he's writing for the UNH Wind Symphony. The symphony references UNH songs like "The Alma Mater" and "The New Hampshire Hymn," and Faro had written a part for orchestral bells that he eventually scrapped.

"But when the carillon competition rolled around, I went back to that tune and played with it," he says, and it transformed into the piece he submitted.

Composing for the competition wasn't easy — the pieces had to

be short, about a minute long, and simple, according to Urquhart. In his notes to potential composers, Urquhart advised sticking to one or two ringing tones at a time. Three-note chords are “occasionally good, sometimes problematic,” and four-note chords “almost never sound well,” he wrote.

Sam Bradley '14 '15G, a university staff member and one of the 10 winners, embraced the challenges of composing for the carillon. “The instrument has its own quirks and style,” he says. “I thought it would be an interesting opportunity.”

Urquhart began programming the winning compositions into the carillon this fall, and the pieces will be in the regular rotation through mid-December. Bradley heard a preview of his composition once and, “I stood around T-Hall grinning like an idiot,” he says. “It was very rewarding.”

Faro is similarly proud. “I feel like I’ve made a bit of a mark on the university,” he says. “It’s a really nice feeling when you have your own composition played, especially when you hear it ringing across campus.”

Congratulations to all of the carillon composition contest winners:

Mattsen Bradbury-Koster '18

Sam Bradley '14 '15G

Jason Emmond '18

Nate Faro '15 '16G

Josh Gagnon '18

Jack Gorham '18

McKenzie Larson '18

Jennifer Ollari-Barry '18

Karena Pezzullo '18

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