



# Batty

As Thompson Memorial Chapel enters its 100th year, we take a look at the students behind the tunes that ring out from its tower.

Carillonneurs Peter Tosirisuk '07 (this page) and Aaron Helfand '05.

**T**ake Me Out to the Ball Game," Bach's "Helft mir Gott's Güte preisen" chorale and "On My Own"

from *Les Misérables* have absolutely nothing in common—save that all three have tolled forth from the bell tower atop Williams' Thompson Memorial Chapel.

As Thompson enters its centennial year, its bells ring out music for every occasion and outlook, well beyond traditional ecclesiastical expectations. "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," for instance, sounded just past midnight last Oct. 27, after the Red Sox took Game Four of the World Series. "The Mountains," according to a 2000 CNN segment about Williams, seems to play on campus every day during bleak stretches in early April, "to remind [students] what's out there behind the clouds." And Chaplain Rick Spalding fondly recalls hearing "Shalom Chaverim" one day as he walked across campus during the Jewish high holidays in the fall.

Thompson's bells ring seven days per week (at 12:50 p.m., 4 p.m. and 7 p.m., except on Monday nights, when they toll 10 minutes early to avoid disturbing 7 o'clock classes). Yet many within earshot forget, and some might not know,

that the performers behind—well, technically, below—those bells are Williams students, most of whom have no previous experience playing the carillon that rings them. "No one comes to campus knowing how to play," says Spalding.

Each fall, Spalding sends out a campus-wide e-mail message inviting inquiries from prospective carillon performers. And he always gets an eager response from a few daring musicians. The students train in September with Catherine Yamamoto (an Alumni Fund officer and mother of Christopher '03) or with a veteran ringer.

"If you mess up, the whole campus can hear that you've just played a wrong note," says senior Aaron Helfand of Northampton, Mass. "So the way to learn is simply to start with easier music and work your way up to the more complicated stuff."

By October, the performers are ready and the bells are in play. Three times each day Helfand or one of his fellow "carillonneurs"—Lillian Chang '05 of Great Neck, N.Y., Tiffany Chao '06 of Beijing, China, Joe McDonough '06 of Portsmouth, N.H., Peter Tosirisuk '07 of Beaumont, Texas,

# in the Belfry

BY ROB WHITE

and Hanjie Yu '07 of Flushing, N.Y.—climbs 46 steps to the tower chamber containing the 10-bell instrument and rings away for 10 to 15 minutes. It's a big commitment, and a lonesome one, since each student solos during his or her time slot. Pay would not be the motivating factor. "It's \$7.75 per hour," says Helfand, "and I work three or four quarter-hour shifts a week. It's hardly worth submitting the paperwork."

So how do the bell-ringers sustain their commitment? Chang, a history major, says she was first drawn to the chimes as a high-schooler touring another college. "I heard about their carillon player playing the theme song from the kids' TV show *Scooby-Doo*. ... I've since played that along with other tunes people don't expect from this traditional, majestic instrument."

Tosirisuk, a biology and political science major and organist, plays "because I think giving short concerts to the campus, anonymously, is fun—and the instrument itself is pretty cool. ... It's amazing to think that someone by Mission can hear what I'm playing in this little room in Thompson Chapel."

## QUASIMODO RECONSIDERED

That "little room" hides behind a narrow door at the top of the stairs just inside the chapel's south (tower) entrance. One howling February afternoon, Helfand unpockets his key (each carillonneur keeps one), unlocks the door and climbs up to the carillon chamber, a drafty, bare-bones space that sports a couple of chairs and an old desk. On the desk rests an even older bakelite-covered miniature organ, where Helfand and other carillonneurs warm up and practice new songs. There's also a

set of notebooks containing music collected by generations of Williams ringers.

Helfand checks the clock on the chamber wall, awaiting his cue from across Route 2, where the Goodrich clock tower bell tolls 4 p.m. As its fourth chime fades, he turns to the carillon keyboard and raises both hands about six inches above the row of 10 "batons"—wooden levers, each two feet long, with three-foot pedals on the floor beneath them. He takes a deep breath and starts pounding away with the anxious force of a mill worker trying to keep up with a conveyor belt of widgets.

The "thwack thwack" of the batons, sometimes thrice per second, echoes through the stone enclosure in pure cacophony. High above, at the edge of hearing, the bells ring in response. "That's the weirdest thing about playing this instrument," says Tosirisuk. "I can't hear what I'm playing while I'm playing ... so we have to hope that it sounds good to the listeners outside."

No one outside the chapel during Helfand's performance would have a clue about the sweaty task inside. Indeed, the bells seem to play themselves. The hymn "Conquering Kings Their Titles Take" simply wafts across campus, tempering the winter chill and moving a few passersby to glance up as they hurry between buildings.

Ending his 10-minute set with "The Mountains," Helfand wipes his brow and leads the way up three more very high, very narrow stairways—another 108 steps in all—to the top of the tower, a reproduction of St. Cuthbert's tower in Wells, England. There hang the bells—10,762 pounds of bronze, cast by the Meneely Bell Company of Troy, N.Y.,



PHOTOS BY ROMAN IWASIWKA



In performance, the inner wall of each of the tower's stationary bells is struck by a hammer connected by a long cable to its corresponding keyboard baton way below.

and installed when the chapel was completed in 1904. All but one of the bells are bolted to wooden beams and do not move in performance. Instead, each bell's inner wall is struck by a hammer connected by a long cable to its corresponding keyboard baton way below.

Then there's what Spalding calls "The Great Bell," the only one that swings when pulled by a thick rope hanging

behind the carillon console in the chamber below. The Great Bell tolls in the morning to signal Mountain Day, at the Alumni Memorial Service during Reunion Weekend, on Commencement Day if it rains and during other extraordinary occasions (Sept. 11, 2001, for example).

Helfand, a studio art and art history major, plays cello in the College's Berkshire Symphony Orchestra and student chamber ensembles. He also took piano lessons for about five years, which helps, because the carillon is arranged like an oversized keyboard. "Even then," he says, "there is a substantial adjustment to make, because the levers of the carillon are not arranged in the same pattern as the black and white keys of a piano."

Williams' carillon covers the eight notes of only one major octave, with two extra notes that allow the carillonneur to play in either of two major keys or one minor key. Real carillons (there are 200 in North America) have at least 23 bells, and much carillon music is written for instruments with a range of four or more octaves, meaning the Williams carillon isn't quite worthy of the name. "Our little secret," says Helfand, is that Williams' instrument is "just a set of chimes [best for] simple tunes with strong melodies and conventional harmonies."

**PLUS ÇA CHANGE**

Helfand's generation shares much in common with past Williams bell ringers. Guy Verney '54, a retired CIGNA vice president and father of Jeff '77, remembers toasting wretched winter days with "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'."

Verney played the carillon for four years as part of his financial aid contract. "There were only two campus carillonneurs then, both from my frat, Beta Theta Pi," he recalls.

Beta had a lot of scholarship students and the pick of student jobs, which were passed down from one brother to the next. "I fell into the carillon business the second semester of my freshman year, when one of the two Beta seniors on 'carillon duty' got married over spring vacation," Verney says. "Since he didn't want to do it anymore, and since I played piano, I got the job."

In Verney's era, the carillon rang at 7:55 a.m., as a "warning" for 8 a.m. classes (which took place on Saturdays as well) and again five minutes before the noon chapel service. As the newcomer, Verney got early morning duty and had to rush from the chapel tower to get to his first class on time. He'd also play for 15 minutes before the required 7 p.m. chapel service on Sundays.

Between his carillon paychecks and advertising revenues from his job as publisher of the College's handbook, Verney turned a profit at least one of his undergraduate years. But the money wasn't everything. When the weather was fine, he says, "I used to go to the very top of the chapel and enjoy the best view in town."

All carillonneurs have their favorite stories. Chang remembers the day she played a couple of John Denver tunes at 4 p.m.: "As I exited Thompson, I saw two of my friends coming from Griffin with these angry looks on their faces. 'Was that you playing John Denver?'" Chang denied it, which may have been for the best. "Apparently their poli-sci test ran overtime, and I had disrupted the entire class," she says.

And Helfand confesses to performing last fall's midnight rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ball Game."



Lillian Chang '05 warms up on a bakelite-covered miniature organ. Notebooks and hymnals (inset) collected by generations of carillonneurs are available for inspiration.

On a daily basis, though, carillon music is so much a part of the campus atmosphere that many faculty members and students may not really hear the bells. That's fine with Helfand, who says, "People may not pay attention at the time, but they do remember."

Or, as Tosirisuk puts it, "The carillon is one of those things that becomes part of the campus unconscious—people may not always notice it, but I think it'd be missed if it disappeared." ■

*Rob White is director of communications for Williams' Department of Alumni Relations and Development.*

A yearlong celebration of Thompson Memorial Chapel's first 100 years officially commences during Reunion Weekend in June. Visitors will appreciate the \$500,000 restoration of the chapel's masonry, woodwork and stained-glass windows (several of which had to be dismantled, cleaned and then reassembled). More about the restoration and centennial can be found at [www.williams.edu/chaplain](http://www.williams.edu/chaplain).

The bells are played by pounding on the carillon keyboard's 10 "batons," each of which is two feet long.

