

SERENADING THE CORNELL CAMPUS IN GREAT TRADITION

The Cornell Chimes

The chimes of McGraw Tower are essential to the Cornell experience. Long after lectures have been forgotten and grades become insignificant, the ring of the chimes and the stature of the clock tower remain a vivid memory in the mind of Cornellians. Cornell students, past and present, have at some point hurried to class upon hearing the chimes declare the hour, or felt a surge of pride as the bells boom out the Alma Mater. Yet, few Cornellians know the story behind the chimes—their history at the university, the way in which they are played, and what they mean to the Cornell community.

The Cornell chimes have been ringing since the university opened in 1868. Although the university needed to acquire countless objects and fund extensive projects in the months prior to its opening, President Andrew Dickson White could think of nothing that would complement Cornell more than a chime. A gift from Jennie McGraw, daughter of university trustee John McGraw, enabled the university to purchase and set up the bells a few weeks before Cornell was scheduled to open.

The original chime of nine bells grew to ten in 1869 and moved from a temporary wooden structure to their permanent home in McGraw Tower in 1891. Structures inside the tower were continually modified to facilitate the ringing of the bells. At the turn of the century, the university built a platform above the tower's clock so that the chimesmasters, the Cornellians who play the chimes, could hear themselves play. New bells were periodically added to the existing chime over the twentieth century, so that by 1982, nineteen bells hung in the McGraw Tower belfry.

By the 1990s, the age of the chimes and McGraw Tower had become obvious. The tower had been worn down by more than a century of wind and water erosion, and the bells begged for retuning. The Chimes Advisory Council had wanted to retune the existing bells and add to the collection since the 1980s, but they decided to stall the project until renovations on McGraw Tower were scheduled to begin.

In June of 1998, the chimes left the tower for the first time since the 1960s. All nineteen bells were lifted out of the belfry by crane and shipped to the Meeks and Watson bell foundry in Batavia, Ohio, to be tuned and recast over the course of a year. Meeks and Watson also cast two new bells, in high E-flat and high A-flat. They were installed with the refurbished chimes.

A revamped McGraw Tower welcomed the chimes home, boasting repointed masonry outside and a larger playing area inside. During Homecoming Weekend 1999, Cornell celebrated the return of the chimes. The "Ring in the New" series of campus-wide events culminated in the chimes rededication ceremony and the premiere of "Resound," a piece performed by the Cornell chimes and the Cornell brass ensemble.

Since the restoration of the bells and McGraw Tower, the chimes have never sounded better. The two new bells, the tuning of the entire chime, and the installation of a music notation program in the tower's computer allow today's chimesmasters to arrange and play music that A. D. White could have never dreamed possible.

Sheila Markar



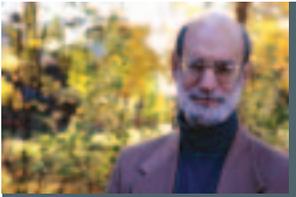
Cathy Jordan '03, M.A.T. '05, head chimesmaster, plays a duet, "The Moldau," by Smetana with chimesmaster Eric Hayes '05.

Cathy Jordan '03, the 2003–4 head chimesmaster, describes how the Cornell chimes are played today. Currently completing a master of arts degree in teaching, Jordan has been a chimesmaster since her freshman year at Cornell. All the chimesmasters are veterans of a rigorous audition process that lasts ten weeks and whittles forty candidates down to a chosen few. There are eight chimesmasters who each play three concerts a week. As head chimesmaster, Jordan also conducts auditions and coordinates concert requests from the Cornell community.

Contrary to popular belief, being a chimesmaster is hard work. The chimesmasters run up more than 150 stairs to kick down the pedals and push down the levers that make the bells ring. Jordan exclaims, "Some people think the chimes are all computer run, that we just push a button and the bells boom out a song—they couldn't be more wrong!" The efforts of the chimesmasters pay off; Cornell is recognized as having one of the best chimes programs in the country. Jordan recalls from her trips to other colleges that, "Our chimes program is better organized than most universities and completely student run, which is unique."



Frank D'Amico/CU



Michael Kammen

"I always enjoy hearing the alma mater and the classical music, as well as the popular songs that are played. It's also fun to listen intently when I am not sure, at first, of what is being played to see whether I can identify the piece, all of which makes it fun to walk across the quad at 1:10 or walk to my car at six o'clock."

Michael Kammen, professor of history

Every Cornellian has something to say about the chimes. Michael Kammen, History, appreciates their diverse repertoire: "I always enjoy hearing the alma mater and the classical music, as well as the popular songs that are played. It's also fun to listen intently when I am not sure, at first, of what is being played to see whether I can identify the piece, all of which makes it fun to walk across the quad at 1:10 or walk to my car at six o'clock."

Stephanie Kwai '05 is also thankful for the musical interludes that the chimes provide, "I work at the café in Olin, and business is pretty hectic during the day. It's refreshing to pause and listen to the chimes concerts in the afternoon; their music is a nice change from the noise of the café."

Some Cornellians would like the chimes to include different kinds of music in their repertoire. Ritwik Rastogi '05 admits, "I like the chimes and all, but it would be cool if they could play different kinds of music. They should try playing rap songs; I want a break from the classical stuff."

From peace of mind to piece of history, Cornellians have a variety of reasons to appreciate the chimes. David Corson '65 helped fund the 1998 restoration of the bells and McGraw Tower. He recommends that everyone in the Cornell community learn about the chimes. "*The Cornell Chimes*, by Ed McKeown, is a great book. For someone interested in the history of the chimes, that's the place to go to bring it all together. But the best way to learn about the chimes is to talk to the chimesmasters."

The chimesmasters encourage Cornellians to climb up McGraw Tower at one or six o'clock to see and find out how a university relic comes to life. Struck on the first day of classes in 1868 and still ringing in the twenty-first century, the chimes are a Cornell tradition that resounds through the ages.

Shelia Yasmin Marikar '05

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For more information:

<http://www.chimes.cornell.edu>