

Overtones

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Right Place at the Right Time
A Look at The Raleigh Ringers' 30-year History

Tips & Tools

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Holiday concert at Meymandi Concert Hall in Raleigh, North Carolina.

Right Place at the Right Time

A look at the 30-year history of The Raleigh Ringers

If you've been around handbells long enough, chances are you've heard of The Raleigh Ringers, of Raleigh, North Carolina. And if you've been to one of their shows, you'd think the group was a concept carefully designed by a set of seasoned, professional musicians, and highly trained technical personnel. The Raleigh Ringers, however, has its roots in a church group that performed an annual concert in addition to their regular Sunday services and decided they wanted to more. The group was formed with a desire to perform, lots of hard work, and fair amount of being in the right place at the right time.

by **J.R. Smith**

Founder and director David Harris directed the handbell choirs at Hudson Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh. Disappointed that the groups would work hard to prepare a piece to be heard only by those who attended services the particular

Sunday it was played, Harris decided to put together an end-of-season concert. He said, "We had the same personnel for the entire church year, so why not bring back some of that music, except for the real seasonal Christmas stuff, and put together a short

program of the things we had played in worship plus a couple of fun secular pieces like a Sousa march or a show tune?”

And so they created the church’s Summer BellFest. He said, “that had become pretty popular not only with folks in the church but folks in the community who had started to come.” As the group became more well-known in the community, they began to perform outreach and to travel a bit as well. A core group in the program would visit churches who were thinking about purchasing bells and show them how they could be used in worship. They also traveled to various places around the Raleigh area and even to Walt Disney World. Harris said, “We really liked the concert thing and the outreach ... so in January 1990, we decided to break out on our own and start a community group.

An important inspiration for Harris’ starting such a group was Don Allured’s Westminster Choir College group, which had toured in Raleigh several times during the period he was directing the church group. He said, “I was just in awe of what they were able to do.”

Having little experience with community groups, they jumped right in and held auditions. Harris said, “At that time, we could only find eight or ten groups in the country that were pure community groups. We didn’t have a lot to go on.” They put information in the newspaper and other free publications about auditions, which attracted 16 auditionees. Harris commented, “We wanted 15 members, but one lady stepped out about halfway through the audition night, so we had our 15. And as scared as I was about auditions, they were very easy that night. Of course, it became very different in future years.”

With their first 15 members and some bells on loan from Marmark, the Raleigh Ringers was born and started on its path to becoming one of the most well-known and sought-after community groups by both audiences and ringers, not to mention HMA festival and workshop organizers.

Watching a Raleigh Ringers concert, one would assume the group comprises mostly highly-trained music majors and professional musicians. In fact, for most of their personnel, music is their avocation rather than their profession. Even director Harris works in the computer field and began his longtime experience in handbells as a ringer with his wife in a church group.

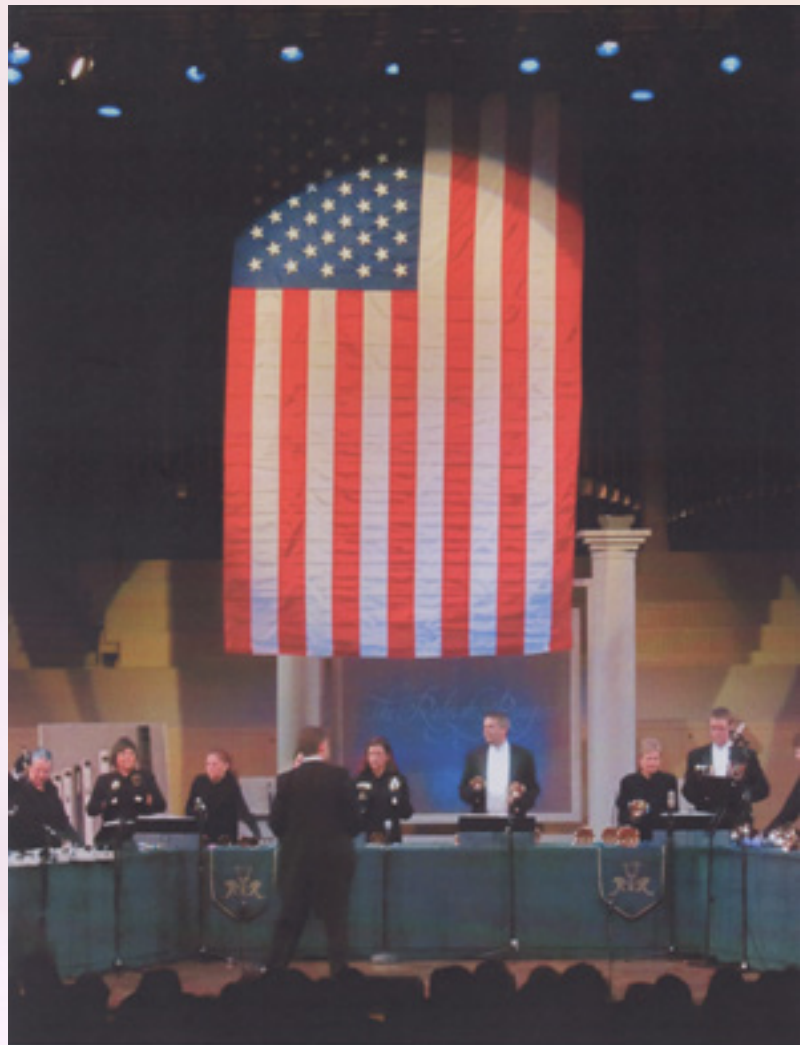
Harris said, “I joined when my wife-to-be at the time joined the church because they had a bell choir. I played for a couple of years, then the director retired and they asked me to take over.” The extent of his experience with any sort of conducting was as a drum major in band. He said, “I knew a little bit about conducting patterns and so forth. I was thrown right into it.”

Harris credits his development as a handbell conductor to Handbell Musicians of America (then the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers). He said, “I always thank the Guild because it’s through doing some of the master classes with Bill Payn and other conducting classes at the area level and classes at seminars that I had picked up a lot of it.” He continued, “I also did a lot of private study with Dr. Payn, and he has helped me out a lot over the years.”

Ringers in the Right Place

The story of The Raleigh Ringers is largely one of being in the right place at the right time. Some of the Raleigh Ringers’ founding members as well as some of its newer members recalled their stories.

Sandy Hopson, one of the founding members who was not a member of the original church group recollected that she “lucked out” in that her husband had gone to work at a firm in Raleigh at the time. She said, “I went back to my handbell director who taught me all through elementary, middle school, and high school and said ‘do you know anybody in this area?’”



The organizers at Chautauqua Amphitheater surprised the group with a flag drop at a July 4 performance during “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

Her former director had served on the Area 3 board and knew that Harris was beginning a community group. Hopson continued, “I had no clue what that was, because I grew up with the church. So, I lucked out in that I ended up down here at just the right time.”

Founding member Cindy Massey had joined Harris’ church group as a substitute during the year before the first Raleigh Ringers auditions. She recalled, “I had only been ringing just a couple of years and a friend of a friend of a friend knew that Dave needed a sub the Christmas before the Raleigh Ringers was formed.” After subbing for just two months in the church



Playing with the North Carolina Symphony

group, she auditioned and became one of the first 15 ringers.

While some members of the Raleigh Ringers simply found themselves in the right place at the right time, others put themselves in the right place deliberately. Angie Chiatello, a more recent member, shares such a story. She grew up playing in church choirs then attended Purdue University in Indiana, where she joined their well-known advanced bell choir. During her final year there, the group had played Paul McKlveen's arrangement of "Bohemian Rhapsody," which had been commissioned as one of the Raleigh Ringers' renowned rock 'n' roll numbers. The Purdue group attended then AGEHR's Pinnacle 2000, where the Raleigh Ringers were going to perform. Chiatello said, "I knew there was a group called The Raleigh Ringers because we had played 'Bohemian Rhapsody,' but that was the extent of my knowledge of the community choir realm."

Chiatello recalled experiencing Pinnacle performances by the likes of Sonos, Campanile, and The Raleigh Ringers. She described them as being "three very different points on the spectrum of what could be done with bells in a community group setting." After her Pinnacle experience, she knew that after graduating, she wanted to continue playing bells. She said, "When I started looking for jobs, I won't lie, part of the draw to Raleigh was The Raleigh Ringers."

Another member, Allison Keisler, was first introduced to

the group at one of the many workshops they lead in North Carolina. She became a fan, began attending concerts, and said to herself, "I want to do that someday." She continued, "But it took me a long time to get to that point." What eventually led her to audition was when she attended the group's Virtuoso event, an annual event for advanced ringers. She said, "I auditioned for Virtuoso, became part of that, and had a great time ... I loved ringing with people who loved bells as much as I did, and I decided it was time to join."

The Early Years

Their first few years, The Raleigh Ringers mostly sponsored their own home concerts and did not perform many out-of-town gigs. For the out-of-town performances they did do, Harris said, "we would sometimes invite ourselves." He said they would jump on local arts festivals and other such events. He said, "Most all were not paid; they were things where we wanted to get exposure and show people the kinds of things we could do."

During its first few years, the group attended various area and national AGEHR events. Massey said, "We would go as a participating choir, and it was several years before that began to turn around and we would be invited to perform."

One of the first performances where the group was invited to perform in a mainstream setting was at the Chautauqua Amphitheater in Chautauqua, New York. Chautauqua is a resort community which offers an extensive summer program of fine and performing arts, lectures, worship, and recreational activities. In 1996, the group played a few pieces as part of their Sunday sacred song service. They were subsequently invited to play on their own in 1999. Harris said, "We were honored enough to be on that stage (in 1996), then '99 was the first time we did a complete concert of just The Raleigh Ringers at the amphitheater." It was that concert where they premiered Bill Griffin's arrangement of "Stars and Stripes Forever," a piece they have included in their repertoire almost every year since.

Scheduled to play at Chautauqua again this year, have been rescheduled for next year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Huge Milestone for The Raleigh Ringers and for Handbells in General

A huge milestone for The Raleigh Ringers, according to Harris, was the Public Broadcasting System's 2002 airing of their new DVD *One Winter Evening at Meymandi*. Many people had been asking about a DVD, so after many such requests, and following a good deal of research, the group hired video and audio crews who recorded live during two of the group's Christmas concerts at one of their regular venues, Meymandi Concert Hall, which is also the home of the North Carolina Symphony.

Harris recalled that Massey had found a person at UNC-TV, the local PBS station which covers all of North Carolina, and they decided to show him the recording. He said that three-quarters of the DVD was holiday material. He said, "We took that portion and put together a skeleton of what a holiday program would be. He explained, "We have had so many instances—like other handbell choirs talk about—of having to sell ourselves so much since so many people don't know bells—so

we have to bring a video with us or we have to demonstrate or play bells.” But he continued, “this person that Cindy found at UNC-TV said, ‘wait a second, you don’t have to go any further. I’ve been to your concerts, and my wife and I love them and we come every year.’”

Their contact, Scott Davis, worked to get the video approved as a PBS special for UNC-TV. Harris said, “We just happened to get to the right person. He was enthusiastic about what we do and, not only did it play in North Carolina that year, he helped us to syndicate it nationally. He went on, “The second time we did it, they came to us.” UNC-TV said their first program with The Raleigh Ringers was very successful and that they don’t have very many programs that go national and that they wanted to do it again. The second time, Harris said, they worked together on the production with the station’s crews.

Harris said, “That’s been fantastic for us. And it’s not really only for us, I always like to say.” He said that there were many people in remote areas that get PBS who have never seen bells before. He said, “They sent us email and [called us] asking, ‘how do I play bells? How do I get involved with a choir? And we thought that was a really cool thing for handbells in general, because of the reach of those 250 PBS stations that showed the program.”

Virtuoso

The Raleigh Ringers is well-known for acting as clinicians at several HMA events across the nation. They also host a number of their own local teaching events. In recent years, they have developed an annual intense performance event for a small group—a double choir—of advanced musicians. Harris had spoken with Dr. William Payn while attending events about how to make such an event work financially with the high costs of renting both rehearsal and performance space.

While the group had its own building for rehearsals, the cost of a concert hall made such an event for a small number of musicians prohibitive. Eventually, a solution came to mind. Harris said, “We finally decided, why not dedicate half of our spring concert that The Raleigh Ringers always does in our Meymandi Concert Hall to present Virtuoso. We’re renting the hall anyway, and people are used to coming to our spring concert. We’ll split the concert with the Virtuoso group.”

Conducted by Dr. Payn, Virtuoso, Harris said, attracts many people who want an intense rehearsal and performance experience. He added, “Bill’s not shy about the things that aren’t going well, that we really need to work through. But everybody that comes now realizes that you come knowing every single note and you really are there to get musicality, the phrasing, the dynamics, and all of that wonderful stuff that Bill can provide.”

On Being a Raleigh Ringer

The Raleigh Ringers attract large audiences wherever they

perform, which is obviously a product of the commitment made by every one of its members. Chiatello said, “Our goal is 100% of the notes 100% of the time. We don’t cheat—if you can’t get something, we figure out a different way.” She continued, “Every year after auditions, Dave talks to us and says, ‘auditions are over, this is not you for yourself—now it’s the group.’ We’re all here for the same goal: We all want to make this thing that’s better than just ourselves, and the only way to do that is to work as a team.”

“Then,” Chiatello continued, “we get to share that with audiences. We get people who begrudgingly got brought to a handbell concert who come up and say, ‘I didn’t know you could do this on bells.’ ... so to be able to share with them what



Teaching a techniques class during a workshop in their rehearsal building.

this instrument can do, and to touch people with that music we worked so hard on because we love this instrument. I think those are probably the two things—making the music and sharing the music.”

Massey sums up her experience with The Raleigh Ringers saying, “I was a frustrated musician. I have liked music since I was really tiny, but I grew up in a family where we couldn’t afford the instruments, so I was only able to be in the band for a few years in elementary school ... I always admired everyone that was able to be in the band and I wanted to do that. When I first heard handbells at church, I thought ‘Oh, that’s what I want to do.’ Now, how I ended up being invited by Dave to come and sub in his group and subsequently being in The Raleigh Ringers, I don’t know—right place at the right time, but it’s been a blast for a long time.”

See the entire interview with The Raleigh Ringers, including more about their Virtuoso event, the famed Rockin’ Raleigh Ringers, their vast array of instruments, and the Raleigh Ringers experience in the online edition of *Overtones* at <https://HandbellMembers.org>