

Overtone

The Official Journal of the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers

May/June 2010

That's Entertainment



**A Look at the Raleigh Ringers'
First 20 Years**

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That's Entertainment!

In their 20-year history, the Raleigh Ringers have mastered the art of handbell ringing, entertainment, tie-dye, and a whole lot more

by Laurel Cleary

Recently a leadership professor at a fine private university said to his class, "I've never heard a good bell choir. And I don't want to hear another bad one." The good professor has certainly never heard The Raleigh Ringers perform. For if he had, he might say many things about bell choirs, but one thing he surely would not say is that he'd never heard a good one.

The Raleigh Ringers, preeminent community handbell ensemble from Raleigh, North Carolina, who celebrate their 20th anniversary this year, have their roots, not unusually, in the church. In the late 1980s David Harris directed the ringers at Hudson Memorial Presbyterian Church in Raleigh. It was a good enough gig, but there were certain constraints upon his directorship that provoked David to think outside the church box and imagine more for himself and his group.

David was dissatisfied with working to perfect music only to play it on one Sunday and then put it away. He longed to perform more types of music, more often, and for more people. He took a step in that direction by organizing a summer concert in which his choir would revisit pieces played throughout the year and add a few secular pieces to the mix. But that was still only one event annually.

As he began to imagine more for his choir, David began to test drive his dreams. His group began to do outreach events in which they would perform at churches that did not have bells but were thinking about the possibility of acquiring a set. They discovered they enjoyed this and wanted to do more and more of it.

David also wanted to elevate the skill level of his choir, which can be difficult to do in the church setting, where ringing is primarily a ministry and is open to people of varying levels of ability. He wanted to create an auditioned group so that he would have more flexibility to play all kinds of music, some appropriate for worship, but some also that was better suited to the concert stage. It gradually came to seem that the best way to accomplish all this was to form a community choir.

So David left the choir of Hudson Memorial in 1990 to hold auditions for the group that would become The Raleigh Ringers. He started with 15 ringers drawn from the church and the community, all of whom were eager to show what they could do. But... it wasn't as easy as they'd imagined.

"We wanted to perform as soon as possible," said Sherry Graham, an original member. "But when no one's ever heard of you before, no one's going to buy a ticket to come hear you play. We gave a lot of free concerts for a few years. We played everywhere we could: Christmas tree lightings, weddings, the grand opening of a new supermarket..."

They struggled. "We worked hard and put lots of hours into rehearsals," said David, "and still we had only small audiences. It was disappointing." Too many people, it seemed, either had no concept of what a handbell concert might be or, like

the good leadership professor, didn't want to hear another bad one. But then...a lucky break!

The fledgling group, in its continuing effort to find an audience, sent flyers to every imaginable local media outlet in hopes of attracting attention. Lo and behold, a popular local rock and roll radio station took them seriously and invited them into their studio in December 1992 to play Christmas carols. The ringers saw their opportunity.



In a brilliant move David, a rock and roll fan, invited one of his ringer's brothers to arrange "Stairway to Heaven" for handbells. The group worked it up and then, on the air, after doing their *Jingle Bell-ian* duty, whipped out "Stairway" and wowed not only the station personnel but also their audience, who called in droves to ask who in the world was playing Led Zeppelin on something other than electric guitars.

"I truly believe," said Sherry, "that our doing

Above: The Raleigh Ringers of Raleigh, North Carolina. Photo by Greg Plachta, Plachta Studios.

Facing Page: The Raleigh Ringers in their 2008 Holiday Concert at Meymandi Concert Hall in Raleigh. Photo by Mark Manring.



The “other side” of the Raleigh Ringers: The group dons their signature tie-dye garb and other accessories to perform the now famous rock portion of their concert at Meymandi Concert Hall in Raleigh. Photo by Mark Manning.

the rock and roll piece on the radio attracted a new audience to our concerts, one that we might otherwise not ever have reached.”

“Of course,” she added wryly, “we’ve taken a little bit of heat for it. We still have the occasional person who comes to a concert and complains afterward that it would have been a really good concert if not for all that ‘crazy stuff.’”

On the one hand, then, The Raleigh Ringers began to cultivate a non-bell-savvy audience through their experimentation with rock and roll. But they had an equally important introduction to the organized handbell world when they were invited to be a guest choir at the AGEHR Directors Seminar in Springfield, Massachusetts, also in 1992.

This brought them face to face with all the composers and directors who really knew the instrument. It was also, however, the last stop on a week-long tour during which the group was plagued—literally—by a virulent gastro-intestinal virus that caused them to dub the entire trip “The Great Imodium Tour.”

“The Great Imodium Tour is something that none of us will ever forget,” said Sherry. “We had to send two people home on airplanes, it was that bad. What we played at any given concert depended on who could stand up and remain at the table for the duration.

“At a medical clinic in Trenton, New Jersey, they lined us all up in a hallway and stuck thermometers in everyone’s mouths.

The doctor told Dave, ‘You people need to cancel the rest of your crazy tour and go home while you still have two people who can drive!’” She smiled. “We did not listen.”

The intrepid group pulled in substitutes for the people who had been sent home and were able to play their entire program in Springfield. “We were very relieved,” said Sherry, “and very proud of our fortitude!”

That tour increased their name recognition within the Guild and was an important stepping stone to a greater number of opportunities to perform and, increasingly, to teach classes, at guild events. “And today,” said David, “we do that kind of thing quite often. Almost every summer we play for a guild event somewhere. This summer we’re going to Topeka, Kansas, for one of the area festivals and doing a highlighted concert for all their registrants.” They also now sponsor the Capital Area Handbell Festival for adults every November and the Capital Area Young Ringers Festival in January or February. And they volunteer time to work with children from area low income housing projects.

Another significant milestone for the group was their participation in an event called Handbell Exploration, in 1994, in Scottsdale, Arizona. It was there that they first met composer Fred Gramann and began what has become a long-standing creative collaboration with him. Sherry credits this event, and the encouragement they received from it, with giving them the

confidence to go ahead with their first recording.

That recording was released in 1995. They hired an amazing sound engineer who worked patiently with them to find the best way to record them. They took up too much space for the average recording studio, so their biggest challenge was to find a place that didn't have a lot of outside noise.

"We found a church kind of out in the boondocks," said Sherry. "Our biggest noise problem was some birds that we had to chase away. And the church told the lawn mowing guys not to come that day."

The group now has four CDs, with a fifth scheduled for release later this year. But what really put them on the map was the release in 2002 of their video, *One Winter Evening at Meymandi*.

David explained the genesis of the video. "People would say, 'It's great, we really enjoy listening to your CDs. But we also really like watching what you do.' After a number of years of these requests, we took some time to understand how to put together a video project. Finally in 2002 it happened."

Raleigh Ringers managing director Nancy Ritter explained that there was a lot of preplanning involved with the video. "It was filmed in December, but we began committee meetings in July to talk about every aspect of what had to be done. We met weekly. We researched a lot of videographers. Afterward there was the artwork, and editing and production. It was pretty much a full year project."

The video was filmed live during two of the group's Christmas concerts at the Meymandi Concert Hall, the brand new home of the North Carolina Symphony. Sherry, reflecting on it now, said, "At the time Meymandi Hall was being planned neither I nor anyone else at that table had any idea that we would be giving three shows there every December."

But it's true. Each year The Raleigh Ringers perform for upwards of 4,000 people in their three holiday concerts. That's a many-fold increase over the 150 people they originally struggled to attract in 1990, when they performed at a local college recital hall that seats 280.

"I like our DVD," says Nancy Ritter, "because it shows we really do a stage show. It's not really a handbell concert." There has been, as it's turned out, a lot of agreement about that. (Take note, professor.)

Shortly before the video project was completed, David approached a local network of PBS stations and asked them, "We have plans to produce a professionally done video project. Would you be interested in having us make that an hour-long holiday special?"

One local PBS producer had been to a number of Raleigh Ringer concerts and greatly enjoyed them. He liked David's idea and asked to see what he had. He liked it enough to air it in North Carolina that first year. It was so well received that he then hooked David up with American Public TV, a company that syndicates programs through PBS stations all around the country. Now the program has been shown in 45 states on over 250 PBS stations.

"What's cool about that," said David, "is, yes, it's cool for The Raleigh Ringers, but I think also for handbells in general. We have had so many people contact us after seeing that pro-



Top photo: Ringers participate in the RR's first Techniques Workshop at their new facility, RRC (Raleigh Ringers Central), in March 2010, offering three different classes to 40 people. Photo by Nancy Ritter. Middle photo: RR Director David Harris acknowledges the group after a piece. Photo by Mark Manning. Bottom Photo: Blake Long and Bob Auchter perform during the rock portion of a concert. Photo by Mark Manning.

gram. I feel like we've helped our instrument out a lot. Just last weekend at a festival someone said to me, 'I've been playing now for three years. You know the reason I started? I saw your television show and I thought, I want to do that! And it's been fun ever since.' So it's not only grown an audience for listening to handbells, but it's grown participants. That's been really rewarding and fulfilling for us."

All this makes The Raleigh Ringers pretty special. But that's not all of it by a long shot. Another part is their bells.

"We've been saying for many years that we have the largest collection of handbells owned by one performing organization," said David. "I think that's accurate. We've never really proved it. But nobody has ever challenged us on it."

The group borrowed their first set of bells, five octaves of Malmark. Once they could afford it, they purchased them. And they haven't stopped adding to their collection since.

"We heard Whitechapel bells, which are made in England, at a festival and we thought, what would it be like to mix the two together?" A grant from the City of Raleigh helped buy a set, which allowed them "to begin to experiment ringing different kinds of bells together, using them in different parts of pieces, or as a different voice. It's become a big part of what we do."

So now you may hear the full melodic tone of the Malmark bell combined with the bright metallic Whitechapel, or the deep elegiac toll of the Whitechapel cup bells, the sweet round sound of the Choirchimes, the shrill shimmer of the Schulmerich Silver Melody bells, or the plaintive peal of the Petit & Fritsen Dutch bells. "We have so many different instruments," said Nancy. "Dave's always adding bells from the different sets to a line here and a line there. So you can end up with 12 different bells in front of you, aside from your normal two, plus their accidentals! It makes the music so much more orchestral."

Another distinction of The Raleigh Ringers is their commissioned work. The group's original relationships with Fred Gramann and Dr. William Payn (who wrote their first commis-

sioned piece, "Illumination," in 1992) have expanded to include somewhere between 35 and 40 unique composers, including Bill Griffin, Arnold Sherman, Hart Morris, and Cathy Moglebust.

"Our object in commissioning music is to expand the repertoire," said David, "to get new pieces published. Jeffers Music publishes what they call The Raleigh Ringers Series. It's sort of our stamp of approval for other community groups that want

some great new music to learn. We think this instrument can go in lots of different directions and that it's been somewhat pigeonholed over the years, and we want to share our music with other groups."

The Raleigh Ringers share more than their music. They are happy also to share their wealth of experience about how to manage a community group. "People come to us quite often for advice and ideas," said David, "and we share things quite willingly, like how we run auditions, our bylaws and our structure, recording advice and the like."

And they have always been huge supporters of the Pinnacle events for community groups. David chaired the first such event in 2000, and the group has played at three out of four of them since, as well as teaching classes. All of it is an effort to support other groups and help them grow.

Auditions for the group

are held each January. Their audition announcement reads: "If you love performing challenging music in front of huge appreciative audiences without having to quit your day job, then consider auditioning for The Raleigh Ringers."

A somewhat controversial practice of the group is their requirement that each member audition every year. This strikes some people as cold and heartless, particularly since a number of people have moved to the Raleigh area specifically to ring with them.

Sherry explained the logic of the annual audition. "What we did not want to do was tie ourselves to our skill level by tying ourselves to one particular group of people. I don't see any way in the world we could have done what we've done any other way."



Raleigh Ringers Central (RRC), a 2,400-square-foot building acquired in 2007, houses an office, conference room, kitchen, storage for all the group's merchandise and equipment, and a large rehearsal space. Photo by Greg Plachta, Plachta Studios.

The Raleigh Ringers

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David corroborated. “If you come from the professional music world, which is really where we’re trying to bring this instrument, that’s what happens. It’s a difficult thing. It’s the thing about my job that I like the least. But if you ask individual members, they’ll tell you it’s a necessary thing. It’s helped us grow as a group.”

In the audition, David looks for three things: musical skills, coordination skills, and commitment. He presents potential members with the calendar of scheduled events for the coming year and gauges their reactions: enthusiasm or apprehension?

For Alexandra Jantzen it was definitely the former. Alexandra is one of the newest members of The Raleigh Ringers. She was accepted after her audition in January. “This has always been the group that I’ve compared everything else to, and I’m really thrilled to be a part of it,” she said. “It’s just on another level than anything I’ve ever done before. It’s already pushed me more than anything else I’ve done. It’s really awesome!”

“I learned early on,” said David, “that I would have people come to audition and ring every bell off the table and blow me away but then, when we got into the season, they were the president of this club and involved in that and had family stuff there and we couldn’t take as many concerts as we liked. So if you join The Raleigh Ringers we’re not saying this is the only thing you do, but it has to be way high on your list.”

The strategy has worked. “Musically the group has done just exactly what we hoped it would do,” said Sherry. “The group is now able to play music that their first-year group would have been completely incapable of performing.”

Their commitment to excellence has paid off. The Raleigh Ringers send an e-mail newsletter to 2,500 people. They have a mailing list with 15,000 names on it. Their Facebook fan page has 1,900 fans. They’ve sold nearly 65,000 CDs and DVDs and thousands of pairs of their trademark tie-dyed gloves (a rock and roll tradition). And their concerts are no longer free.

Success has bred more success. The group owns a 17-passenger van and a box truck to transport equipment. And since the fall of 2007 they have also owned a 2,400-square-foot building that houses an office, a conference room, all their merchandise, equipment, a kitchen, and a large rehearsal space.

“The importance of the building is huge,” said Sherry. “Before the building we had stuff stored in a public storage facility—stage sets and stuff that we didn’t use except at the holiday and spring concerts; and at two different buildings at a retirement community that was allowing us to rehearse there. So every rehearsal a bunch of people had to get there half an hour early to go to these different areas to get all the tables and bells and haul them to the rehearsal site—up the elevator, down the hall—and set it all up. And now it’s all there, the tables are always up. It’s just wonderful!”

They also have a part-time paid managing director, Nancy Ritter, who handles publicity, marketing, database, donor programs, contracts, and tour logistics. “I love what I do,” she said. “This is a dream job. I get up excited every day to work on this stuff.” All that, and she gets to ring with the group as well.

“It’s great music and a great challenge,” she said. “And the audiences are amazing. It’s a lot of fun to play for a thousand people who are on their feet cheering for you.”

“My personal feeling,” said David, “is that one of the most rewarding things I hear after a concert is, ‘This is one of the best concerts—period—I’ve ever been to.’ I want to reach the people in our audience. That’s why I’ve always tried to do a variety of things in our performances. People see that we play serious music but we have fun too. People come to our concerts and go tell others, ‘Yeah! You gotta go. You gotta go.’ We have been successful in entertaining people.”

Now, suddenly, The Raleigh Ringers have been in existence for 20 years. They plan to mark the occasion with a May 23 concert at a favorite venue, the Stewart Theater at North Carolina State University. They’ll bring back music they haven’t played for a while. They’ll invite former ringers to come and be recognized and attend a reception afterwards. And they’ll premiere a piece written especially for the 20th anniversary by William Payn called “Passages.” It promises to be a fun, exciting evening.

Can you imagine what the good professor might say to his class if he were to attend the 20th anniversary concert? He’d probably adjust his tie, run a hand through his beard, and say, “I—*ahem*—heard The Raleigh Ringers perform last Saturday night. Wow. Now *that’s* entertainment!”



About the Author

Laurel Cleary has been ringing handbells at Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church in Gig Harbor, Washington, for five years. Her most memorable ringing moment occurred when the clapper in her G4 bell came completely loose shortly before intermission during her choir’s Christmas performance with the Tacoma Symphony. She is proud to say that she neither missed a beat nor lost the clapper when that happened. Laurel works as communications assistant at Chapel Hill, where she is responsible for the bimonthly newsletter, and the weekly church bulletin. She also writes for websites, leads a Bible study, and has written for the Area X newsletter and *Overtones*.