

WHAT IS THERE IN THE SOUND OF THE BELLS?

COMPOSITIONS ON THE SOUND OF BELLS
FOR FOUR PART MIXED CHOIR,
A NEW ACCESS TO OUR BASIC VALUES AND EMOTIONS

IN THE SOUND OF BELLS

Karin Merazzi-Jacobson

Can our basic values in a fundamentally changed, multi-cultural and secularised society still be transmitted, awakened or revived through chiming church bells and through music? What significance has the sound of church bells to modern man? Peace? Peace disturbed? Fatherland? Foreignness? Community? Exclusion? Responsibility? Freedom? Habit? Memory? History?

In the interdisciplinary project „What is there in the sound of the bells?“ I have turned these questions into music trying to actualise them and to make them accessible out of an artistic and emotional perspective.

BACKGROUND

The oldest known bell cast in metal measures just 8 cm and it was found in the town of Ninive, today in Iraq. It is 3000 years old. The usage of chiming bells was thus no invention by Christianity, although Christians have made use of bells as a means of communication for 1500 years.

We know that chiming bells were used in a liturgical context for the first time at the beginning of the 6th century in Europe. The first known church bell on our continent was brought by Abbot Eugippius from Carthago to his monastery in Naples, and from then on the use of bells spread quickly through the whole of Europe. By the 9th century bells in churches were generally in use and the chiming of bells developed into a rich and refined language. The sacred carillon for liturgical purposes alternates with the profane chiming of the hours and catastrophe alerts and continue to be a part of everyday life.

Many composers have sought inspiration in the sound of chiming bells. “Le Carillon de Westminster” by Louis Vierne and the “Overture 1812” by Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky – the latest has also been humorously interpreted by the Swingle Singers – are just two examples. Sergei Rachmaninov evokes the sound of bells in music, employing his technique of unusually large chords - due to his large hands – in several works: the Choral Symphony „The Bells“, the second piano concerto, the Etude-Tableaux p.33, No. 7), the Prelude in C-sharp minor (Op.3, No. 2), also called „The Bells of Moscow“, and the Prelude in B minor (Op. 32, No. 10).

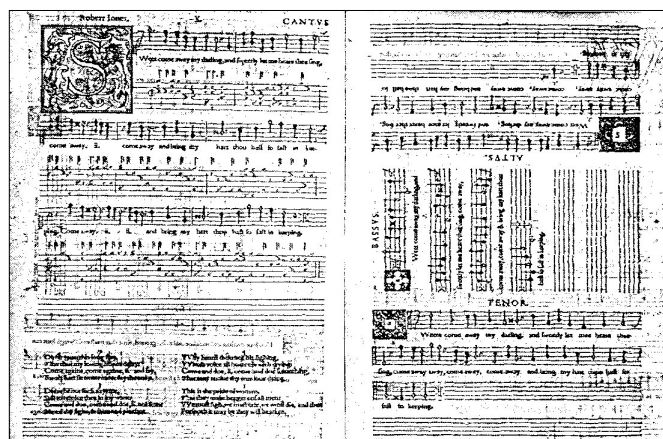
The interactive project „What is there in the sound of he bells?“ grew partly out of my own relation to the sound of the bells of some churches, which I have come to cherish. It was not only the bells purely as a source of sound that inspired me, but what interested me in the process was the artistic involvement with basic values and their expression on an emotional level through the sound of the bells. First as a member of he music commission and later as president of the church council, the strong identification of the local population with their church and its surroundings became clear to me. This emotionality was of consequence not just when it came to concrete modifications of the building itself or of the surroundings. Everywhere to be felt, it was, so to speak, omnipresent.

In 2003 I was asked to put into music the lost window in the choir of the church of Ligerz for the European Day for Cultural Heritage Preservation under the motto “Glass and stained glass“ („Verre et vitrail“). It was to me another profound reflexion on the place church and on its symbolic values impregnating us – often subconsciously or on a non-verbal level – like a backbone which carries everything, but which is not visible. Searching for these values, and after having written vernissage music in the context of the re-opening of the belfry chapel, where the bells gave me inspiration as well as a concrete sound frame, I conceived the project „What is there in the sound of the bells?“

THE INTERACTIVE PROJECT - THE REALISATION

A first realisation of the project was inspired by the bells of the churches of Ligerz (4 bells), Twann (3 bells) and the church St. Benedikt, Biel (5 bells). It took place at the „Nacht der 1000 Fragen“ („The 1000 questions' night“) 2010 in Biel. Further compositions are in planning and can also be written on request.

The bells with their sound and inscriptions are the basis for the setting into music of a newly written poem. The parts are read and sung around an only sheet of paper, like in the Renaissance, see opposite renaissance score from „Songs and Ayres“, by Robert Jones, around 1600. The sound of the bells can also be experienced directly, when the singles notes of the bells in question are taken over by singers



and sung simultaneously in different, complementary rhythms. At a choir concert the audience can participate and with support from the choir warm up on the notes of the single bells in this way. Single visitors or groups of persons can at any moment go to the strategically and individually placed renaissance-score boxes which function as in-door or out-door music stands. There they can listen to the compositions and sing along in their own part thanks to the integrated „singing aid“ and score.

The project „What is there in the sound of the bells?“ can of course be presented again and elsewhere together with new bell compositions and/or in touring exhibitions/performances of the already existing realisations.

- The project comprises a text by an author who lives within hearing distance from the church bell tower, thus having a natural, immediate contact with the sound of the bells.
- The text is set to music as a four-part choir piece. I build the music on the actual tuning (frequency) of the bells and on the bell inscriptions.
- The piece of music can also be laid out artistically as a renaissance score, a feature producing a special face-to-face interaction between the singers who join up in a circle around the score-object. The score is read and sung from all four sides.
- The renaissance score can be presented in a simple printed form, or as a two- or three-dimensional artistic object created with different materials and techniques for indoor as well as for outdoor usage.
- A recording of the new choral work with a vocal ensemble serving as singing-aid is produced and integrated into the artistic object by means of a sound carrier (MP3) and loudspeakers.
- A reduction for piano as a complement to the choir score SATB can be delivered on request.

EXAMPLE

The compositions „Uesi Chilche“/“La Belle Église“, D’Glogge vo Twann“ and „Von Seite zu Seite“ were inspired by the gothic churches Ligerz (BE), Twann (BE) and Biel (BE). The renaissance scores are integrated into artistically decorated boxes (illustration: renaissance score of the composition „D’Glogge vo Twann“). These were presented for the first time at the exhibition „Die Nacht der 1000 Fragen“ (the 1000 questions’ night“ in the garden of the Museum Neuhaus, Biel.

The image displays three versions of a musical score for the piece "D'Glogge vo Twann". On the left is a vertical, narrow score. In the center is a standard horizontal score with multiple staves and lyrics. On the right is another vertical score, wider than the first one, with lyrics written vertically alongside the musical notation.

From the model to the concrete realisation: An example of an artistically elaborated realisation of a renaissance score in the form of score boxes for outdoor use which function as music stands with integrated music scores and as MP3 singing aid.



From the model...



...to the realisation