

How to Listen to the CARILLON

by

GLADYS WATKINS

[A 2YA Broadcast]

BEFORE I can enlarge on the title of this talk—"How to Listen to the Carillon"—I must lead up to the subject by introducing other points which have a direct bearing on the one I have chosen as a title.

The music of bells is utterly unlike any other, for a bell has characteristics unique among other musical instruments.

To-night you will not be asked to listen to the long story of their beginning and development, though that is teeming with interest, historic, tragic, romantic and poetic. Of tragic historic interest was the dreadful ringing of the Bell of St. Bartholomew's in Paris, which signalled a massacre unparalleled in its ferocity.

In later days was the stirring call to arms—the Germans were invading Belgium, and that great master carillonist, Jef. Denyn, played the carillon of St. Rombant's in Malines, calling to arms the sons of Belgium with a patriotic fervour which set their hearts on fire. Then there is the famous poem which we all recited with so much enthusiasm—"Curfew shall not ring to-night!" The poem which thrilled our schoolgirl and schoolboy hearts!

Until the end of the 15th Century, bells were used attached to the city clocks to indicate time; then in the 16th Century a clavier and pedals were introduced which made it possible for the bells to be played by human agency, and quite independently of the clocks.

The clavier is set in a wooden frame and consists of 2 rows of rounded wooden levers played by the hands and a row of flat levers (rather larger), which are used by the feet for the feet are needed to bring the heavier bells into play. These foot and hand levers are attached by a system of wires, springs, etc., to the clappers of the bells. The bells, which in their turn are fixed into a steel frame in rows, do not swing, but are stationary.

The clappers are drawn down by a separate system to within about 2 inches of the lip of the bell, and strike the bell from that distance.

Now, you can understand that, because the clapper has a journey of only 2 inches, the full resonance of the bell is not used, and the player can only use the momentum gathered during that short journey of 2 inches for his biggest tones.

This is an important point for the listeners to remember. They are not going to hear the full power of the bell. If it were possible to

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Gladys Watkins.
—Douglas photograph.

use all the tone a bell is capable of, we might be able to hear our Carillon out in Cook Strait, or on the summits of the Rimutakas!

Now, for something about a bell. A bell is cast to a certain note. It is called the "strike note." When that note is sounded there are set vibrating other notes (of course much fainter, but plainly audible); these over-

tones or harmonics are the octave below the strike note, the octave above, and the 3rd and 5th above. These four bell harmonics must be in tune with one another, and with the "strike note," and the "strike note," of course, in tune with the other notes in the chromatic scale.

One of the points of difference between a "Carillon" and a "Chime" is that in the case of the former the scale is arranged in semi-tones—twelve sounds in the octave—(our own Carillon has four complete octaves, making 49 bells). In the case of a "Chime," it is built on the diatonic scale, consisting of tones and semi-tones. Now, here comes another point it is necessary to stress on the minds of listeners. When the bells are played on April 25, of terrible and glorious memories, you are going to hear music absolutely new to your experience. You will hear harmonised melodies, and around those melodies will float a mist of sound formed by those harmonics which I have just mentioned, and which veil the melody from beginning to end.

AT first the ear is bewildered by that apparent confusion, but after a little one becomes prepared for and actually to enjoy that very thing which makes bell-music so appealing, and so haunting in its beauty.

There have been some experiments when the bells have been "damped." A somewhat similar process to that of the "soft" pedal of a piano—which damps or checks some of the vibrations of the string. These experiments have proved that most of the beauty of bell-music is lost when the "harmonics" are killed by such damping.

The Carillon is capable of much expression and many moods in the hands of an expert and temperamental player. The action, from wooden lever to the clapper, is so finely adjusted that he has command over a wide range of colour or "nuance" as the more sensitive French word expresses it.

The technique to be achieved is something to marvel at, for the player can build up massive chords, (Continued on page 13.)