



## **The Bell Ringers**

For years, I have told a silly joke about a bell ringer, and it draws moans from my family every time I find someone new to tell it to. I believed that bell ringers went out with Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame. I was wrong. Bell ringing is alive and well in Europe, with different styles in the ringing.

The ringing in western Europe is done by professional carillonneurs—not bell ringers—who ring in a traditional Western musical tradition. Carillons are bells that are played by mechanically activated levers and wires connected to the clappers. Bell ringers use ropes to push the clapper. The English developed the full-circle swing style that cannot be done with automation. There are full-circle styles of Bolognese and Veronese that are used in the West in the full-circle ringing.

The Russian Orthodox church-bell ringing is done with a complicated polyrhythmic sequence of sounds, with only the clapper moved by the bell ringer. This art of bell ringing was pushed aside during the period of the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution. Then, in 2008, the first full-time Russian bell-ringing school opened in Moscow. Russia has the largest bell ever cast, called the Tsar Bell, which is 20 feet and 1 inch tall and 22 feet in diameter.

The shapes and sizes of the bells and the location of the clapper striking the bell all play a part in the musical-sound produced. There are 7,140 ring styles in the West; of these, 6,798 are in England the rest are in other Western nations. The Bologna Cathedral has La Nonna, or “the Granny,” and needs up to 14 people to ring the bells. They claim to be better than the bells in Rome!

Bell ringing is alive and is organized into professional groups. The mathematics, terminology and musical understanding needed to learn the trade has led to universities offering classes. Princeton University has a carillon of 67 bells, and Yale has a student-led guild of carillonneurs that ring the bells twice a day. The guild provides a five-week program for recruits to Yale’s Guild. The George Carillon School opened in 2008 in England.

This little bit of knowledge of bell ringing has not stopped my need to tell my dumb joke, but now I can bore these people with more history lessons!

D.H.Coop is a retired fire/paramedic and retired teacher having taught IB and AP World History 30 years. He continues to substitute, tutor and consult. [www.HistoryDepot.com](http://www.HistoryDepot.com)