

# For him the bells toll

By Helen McKenzie



**I**t all started with a mistake. Isaac Wong (BPharm '03) was walking through the Quadrangle listening to a tune coming from the Great Tower. Then he heard a wrong note and his belief that the carillon's bells were played mechanically or "by robot" was shattered and his curiosity to find out just *how* they were played was sparked.

Now, at 29, Wong is a member of an exclusive group of musicians: carillonists – or carillonneurs – who

play the world's largest, heaviest, and some might say, most evocative instrument.

Wong has recently returned from the Royal Carillon School in Mechelen, Belgium, where he studied performance, composition and campanology. As the first Australian to graduate (with Great Distinction) Wong is keen to pass on the knowledge and experience he gained from his time at the historic home of the carillon. Why Belgium?

"After the Dark Ages the cities

profile

of Bruges, Antwerp, Brussels and Mechelen became wealthier and wealthier. These cities were not run by noble men but by merchants and craftsmen who were keen to show off their wealth and power," Wong says, happily giving a formal history lesson one minute then, with a warm grin, treating the listener to visual pictures of "Isaac at large" and the carillons he has played.

"Clock towers became a technological and architectural symbol of a city's level of sophistication," he explains. "The grander the tower and the greater the number of bells, the better. Mechelen was one of the biggest bell founding centres 500 years ago."

From the relative luxury of Sydney's Great Tower, where the carillon room is carpeted, clean and light filled, Wong talks of others that are "Spooky, dusty and downright dangerous. Towers where there are no stairs, just ladders. You go vertically up for 30 feet [9m], trying not to look down and you hope there is not an earthquake. Some of the towers have outside stairs. It can be quite windy 100 metres above the ground."

Sydney's carillon is considered a fine instrument, made in the UK and

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installed in 1928. It comprises 54 bells with a range of four and a half octaves. The lowest note is G on the bottom line of the bass staff; this bell weighs over four tonnes. The musician sits at a console, similar to a piano (but wider) to accommodate keys that are more like wooden levers. The levers are struck with a closed fist in a hammering motion or with two fingers for the bells in the higher range. The carillonist sits and slides along a wooden bench that is over a metre in length; the low notes are duplicated by foot pedals.

Would Sherlock Holmes have been able to identify a carillonist in a group of murder suspects? Yes, probably. The first clue is calluses and blisters on the heel of the fist; Wong even has slightly bent little fingers as a result of years of playing. Another clue would be the level of fitness – access to bell towers is always by many stairs. The University’s clavier room is up 70 stairs, then a further 30 to the bells. The other strange but true fact about carillonists at Sydney is the number of medical professionals for whom the bells have tolled or at least called.

There are GPs, dentists, physiotherapists, a cardiologist and endocrinologists. Isaac is a hospital pharmacist at the Mater. Wong says he cannot speak for the other medico carillonists as to why they have been drawn to the bells but he finds “bells are very therapeutic. Sitting directly under the bells and hearing them resonate is very calming and it is something that not even medications can do for you.”

Hong Kong born, Wong, who started piano lessons at age six, says that playing the carillon is challenging. “It depends on the bells. All the instruments are different and not just slightly different. English bells have a reputation of being long sounded; the resonance carries on for seconds. They have very complicated overtone structures. When I play a C, for example it acts like it has a lot of minor notes that sound on top of the C. That has to do with the shape of the bells; they have a minor 3rd overtone that some people would perceive as the bell being out of tune, but in fact it is a complicated mix of tunes that come with the one note. As you can imagine, if I play a series



Photos: Ted Sealey

of notes with all those minor notes still playing in the background, it can become quite unmelodious; the background harmonies are there no matter what you do.”

Composing for the carillon is equally complex, says Wong. “It takes a very skilful person to arrange music for the bells. We can’t take piano music and just play it directly – that would be a disaster.”

To explain further, Wong quotes, with a smile, his lecturer in Mechelen, Jo “the High Priest of the Carillon” Haazen: “When you start hearing noises, stop. Reconsider how you should play and keep trying until you hear music.”

Wong says there are other traits of carillonists he has met in his travels that may have interested Sherlock Holmes. “You need curiosity – this helps you in the first place to make your way up the tower to find out what all the noise is about. Then you need a certain amount of courage because wherever you play everyone can hear you.” Then with a grin he says, “you also need a little bit of mischief in you. You are at the top of a tower and no one can stop you playing!”

# Hot to go.

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