

L/ Life



Ring in the holidays

Bell choirs shine at Christmastime and all year long **E4**

Bell choir members at Christ Episcopal Church in Bellport will perform during a 10 a.m. service today. The choir is directed by Anne Thomas, front, second from left.

ACT 2

A pioneering career as a nurse practitioner **INSIDE**



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

EXPERIENCE

Teddy Roosevelt walked here, and you can too **E3**

MORGAN CAMPBELL

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Maurice Kemp, of Bellport, from left, Chris McVoy, of Shirley, and Lesley McCoy, of East Patchogue, during practice at Christ Episcopal Church in Bellport. ■ Video: newsday.tv

MORGAN CAMPBELL

HEAR THEM RING

Musicians wield weighty **handbells** for maximum joy

ONLY IN NEWSDAY

BY LIZA N. BURBY

Special to Newsday

Bright and festive notes rang out at First Presbyterian Church of Babylon last month — but not from an organ or traditional choir.

They came from 61 bronze handbells, each rung by one of a dozen musicians, all waiting for their moment to strike.

This rehearsal by Long Island reSound, a community handbell ensemble with another group in Rocky Point, included arrangements for “Simple Gifts” and “Little Saint Nick,” ringing out treble and bass clef pitches, joined by mallets and choir chimes.

The effect was rich, joyful

and meticulously coordinated.

Long Island reSound founder Jenny Murray, 44, of Mastic, said handbell performing is unlike any other type of music in that every individual matters or the entire musical piece won’t come together. In fact, while they’re called handbell choirs in churches, and ensembles in community settings, Murray said “teams” might be a better word. Each ringer waits silently for their note to appear and every player must show up and get it right. The Christmas season is a time for them to shine, with several performances scheduled across Long Island today.

“There’s really no other ensemble I can think of besides a barbershop quartet where if one person is missing it really affects the whole ensemble,” said Murray, who has been playing handbells in the same church since 1995. “It is a huge commitment and takes huge dedication. But it’s

Hear them today

- "Christmas Lessons and Carols" at 10 a.m. service at St. John's Episcopal Church in Cold Spring Harbor
- Long Island reSound "Simple Gifts" concert at 2 p.m. at the Oceanside Library
- "Lessons and Carols" at 10 a.m. service, Christ Episcopal Church, Bellport

a very rewarding and fun experience."

IDLE BELLS

But handbell performers aren't well-known on Long Island, said Anne Thomas, of Brookhaven, who has been the bell choir director for Christ Episcopal Church in Bellport since 2005. Before that she was a member of large church handbell choirs in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.

"In other states, every small town has a bell choir, but not on Long Island," said Thomas, 74, who started ringing at age 10. "It's very difficult to keep . . . a group that wants to ring bells all together all the time. And so a lot of churches might have four interested people, and they need eight or nine to have a bell choir."

And it's not for a lack of instruments. Murray said that on Long Island there are churches that have bells and not enough ringers, "so their bells are just collecting dust," she said. "That makes me very sad."

RINGERS IN NEW YORK

While local players said they aren't sure how many handbell choirs exist on Long Island, Linda Onorevole, executive director of Cincinnati-based Handbell Musicians of America, said the organization has 70 memberships in New York. These represent churches, schools, community ensembles and individuals, accounting for more than 350 ringers statewide.

"Handbells are more than just something that you can experience at Christmas, because they don't just play sacred music," she said. "People are so intrigued by it because it's such an unusual-sounding instrument and so beautiful."

Murray hopes

Annabelle Stead, 11, of Huntington, performs with the handbell choir during a service last month at United Lutheran Church of Long Island in Huntington Station.

that when people attend performances like the ones put on by Long Island reSound, they will be inspired to join. She and her mother, Jan Murray, 65, have also started It's a Bell Thing, a print-on-demand bell-related company for "handbell obsessed ringers."

"We just have to get people interested in the instrument and hopefully get more bells ringing," Jenny Murray said.

PLAYING FOR THE JOY

Performers don't need a musical background to play, Thomas said. "Some people will tell you that if you can count to four, you can play bells," she said. "That is not exactly true unless you have a very beginner group." Her Bellport choir includes musicians with music degrees alongside those who ring simply for the joy of it.

Matthew Koraus, director



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of music ministries at Church of St. Patrick in Huntington, created a handbell choir when his vocal choirs could not meet during the COVID-19 pandemic. With no prior experience, Koraus and his vocalists learned together, creating a virtual handbell choir that eventually held an outdoor concert.

"It was a

challenge with the wind knocking over the music stands," he recalled. "But since then the choir has grown to include both experienced and new members and has become a key part of our parish's holiday events, including the Christ-

mas tree lighting."

Performers in Murray's advanced ensemble teams have to be able to read music. She

See COVER STORY on E6

Three generations: Jenny Murray, from left, Harmony Goyette, 12, and Jan Murray at Long Island reSound handbell ensemble practice in Babylon.



MORGAN CAMPBELL

Ring, dampen, tap, thump

COVER STORY from E5

said all ringers' notes are based on the black and white keys on a piano, and each person is responsible for two white keys and the corresponding black keys. That means they all play four bells.

"Picture 13 people at a piano, and each one has a finger on one note, and they're reading the same music, and they're waiting for their note to appear before they hit their key," said Murray, who plays treble bells.

MORE THAN ONE WAY TO PLAY A BELL

Handbell compositions have varied movements and techniques, Murray said. Longer notes require extending the arm, whereas shorter ones call for keeping the handbell closer to the body. Musicians play on padded tables with 4 inches of foam that can be used to lower the bells to make a percussive thump sound, a technique known as a martellato.

Ring the bells is fun, said Bryce Westervelt, handbell director for St. John's Episcopal Church in Cold Spring Harbor, a choir that began in the 1960s. "But then there are also alternate techniques you can use, whether you're hitting them on the table, dampening them or swinging them," he said.

Laurie Haddock, the handbell choir director at the United Lutheran Church of Long Island in Huntington Station, said, "I think people are surprised that you can make many different sounds with bells, like tapping them on the table or plucking [manually moving the bell clapper] them," she said.

The directors said that because learning the different symbols and finding the notes and the dynamics can be overwhelming for performers — and requires so much concentration — sometimes they have to remind ringers to smile.

Bells can weigh 7.5 ounces to nearly 12 pounds. When they are too heavy to lift quickly they are instead hit with mallets, Westervelt said.

And they can be expensive. Most come from one of two handbell manufacturers, Malmark or Schulmerich, both based in Pennsylvania. Murray said a new set of Malmark bells for five octaves, 61



MORGAN CAMPBELL



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Above, the bell choir of St. John's Episcopal Church in Cold Spring Harbor, which will perform at today's 10 a.m. service.

At left, Jan Murray directs a Long Island reSound rehearsal in Babylon. The ensemble performs at 2 p.m. today at the Oceanside Library.

in all, is about \$40,000. Individual bells range from about \$250 to \$2,500.

A FAMILY THING

For many, the sense of connection runs across generations.

Thomas, the bell choir director in Bellport, said that bells "are a family thing" for her

since her daughter used to ring with her as a teenager and now she plays with her own two daughters in their Virginia church.

Haddock, 60, of Huntington Station, said she started with the bell choir at her current church, formerly called St. Peter's, when she was a child in

the 1970s. Back then the church had three handbell choirs — one for children, a youth choir and an adult choir. Today, she directs 11 players, the youngest of whom is a sixth grader, up through men and women in their late 60s. They play during service on the fourth Sunday of the month, as well as on Christ-

mas and Easter.

"It's hard to find bell choir musicians. I think people are scared of it. It's not something that they would've learned in school or in college," said Haddock, a retired elementary music teacher. "But for me, I think it's just such an awesome part of our church history. I've had family members who've been in it — my mom was in it for 15 years with me — and it's just really dedicated people. It's very family oriented. All of my children have been part of my bell choirs. One of my daughters is in my bell choir right now, and my son, who is a music teacher in Delaware, when he comes home, he subs in my bell choir if I need him."

John Kuegel, 61, of Bellport, has been ringing at Christ Episcopal Church since 1975. His children, Emma, 19, and Liam, 13, now play alongside him.

"What has kept me interested all these years is I find the sound to be so beautiful when it comes together correctly," he said. "There's these magical moments that happen. And it is a joy for me to play music with my children."

'FULL-CIRCLE MOMENT'

Murray noted that her mother has been her choir director since childhood and has led Long Island reSound since 2014. Two years ago, Murray's daughter, Harmony Goyette, 12, joined the group, becoming a third-generation player in the Babylon ensemble's bass section. Harmony said she's "been at every rehearsal since I was born."

"It feels really cool to be with my mom and my grandma doing something like this," she said. "It's hard to explain, but knowing that my grandma started this when she was around my age, and then she directed it, and then my mom did it around my age too — I'm just kind of doing it as a full-circle moment in a way."

Haddock urged those who haven't experienced handbell concerts to give one a listen this season.

"People should see it, listen to it, and then, if they ever have a chance, just go try it," she said. "Once you try it, you get hooked, and it's such a great experience to be making music like that."