

Classical Bells, turning 25, to play Plymouth -- and Paris

BY TOM LANG • FREE PRESS SPECIAL WRITER • April 13, 2008

The Classical Bells group will celebrate part of its history by playing at a historical site in France.

Classical Bells is a collection of more than a dozen handbell players from around the metro area. In September, the group will start its 25th concert season -- culminating in May 2009 with a trip to France.

Classical Bells will play at least three concerts there, including one at the American Church in Paris. But what has director Darlene Ebersole even more excited is the concert the group will play inside an old building.

She said the concert in the village of Annecy will be played in the factory which produces carillon bells, the large three- to four-ton bells that hang in bell towers. Carillon bells are cast at the factory there.

"It's like history will come full circle," Ebersole said. "The people who pulled the ropes that ring the carillons, they made the smaller versions of the bells to practice inside where it was warm and they didn't have to climb the tower. That was the beginning of the hand-held bells we play today.

"When you do a concert in a small town, the whole place shows up and it's just going to be a great experience."

Standing invitation

Ebersole, a Canton resident, said that several of the group's members are international travelers, but she has never been to France. Fred Gramann, one of the top handbell conductors in the world, has heard Classical Bells play many times and provided a standing invitation to play at the American Church in Paris, she said.

"They speak so highly of France, the people, the food, the wine, sightseeing in the Alps," Ebersole said of fellow members. "It will be the chance of a lifetime trip. We thought it would be a great way to end the 25th concert season."

If any bell ringers are interested in joining Classical Bells and becoming part of the 25th anniversary season beginning in September, open tryouts will be held in April and May. The group also will perform at St. John's Episcopal Church on Sheldon Road in Plymouth on May 9.

On the record

Classical Bells then will go into a recording studio in June.

The group's business manager and sole male ringer, Joseph Daniel of Troy, said Classical Bells records demo CDs for new bell music produced by Jeffers Handbell Supply Inc. The supplier, based in South Carolina, is the major publishing house for handbell music.

He said Classical Bells will perform 10 different demos in the recording studio that will be used with new, printed music.

"We think it's a great thing to do to give back to the handbell community at large," Daniel said.

Barb Erickson believes she's the only charter member still playing, from the group first founded at St. Matthew's United Methodist Church in Livonia. It is now made up of 14 people attending many other area churches, but still based in Livonia.

Erickson was the music director of the Livonia church when Classical Bells was formed.

"We got handbells as they were coming into area churches more at the time, and I quickly learned you can't teach what you don't know," said Erickson, who has lived in Livonia 40 years. "The original intent of the group was to teach music directors how to use handbells, and then it required that when you learn something, you have to perform it. The way the group has evolved over the years is remarkable."

Erickson reluctantly left the group after the first three years to teach music full time at Blair Moody Elementary School in Taylor. But when she retired she came back in 2000.

"When we started out, we were learning to play handbells just like everyone else," she said about the gap from when she started to when she rejoined. "Now the group has such finesse, and are truly fun to watch. Visually the group doesn't just stand and ring, there is choreography and we move. It's very entertaining."