

Music Appealing to the Ear

Burlington maestro's bell projects turn city into concert hall

By KYLE MUNSON, Des Moines Register Music Critic, December 21, 2004

Ding.

Patrick Hazell is maestro of one of the most unconventional orchestras in the world, and his concert hall is a scenic downtown in a horseshoe-shaped valley rolling down to the Mississippi River.

Dong.

Last week, Hazell, 59 , yanked on a rope at First United Methodist Church in Burlington to test one of his instruments - a bell weighing 1,400 pounds. He was fine-tuning the musical score for his next performance here Sunday. "This is a hard one to finesse," Hazell concluded, staring at the ceiling high above, where the rope disappeared through a tiny hole into the bell tower. "You kind of have to be a little bit of a musician to ring this one."

Ding.

Hazell climbed a series of rickety ladders into the bell tower, led by Senior Pastor Dennis Tevis. Icy gusts of wind buffeted the two men once they reached the top. There it was: The bell, forged in 1850 by the Buckeye Bell Foundry, G.W. Coffin and Co. in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Dong.

Hazell gazed around him at six other towers within view in downtown Burlington - all housing bells that will ring when his Hawkeye Valley Bell Project reverberates Sunday. The instruments in Hazell's orchestra are these massive bells. Church bells. Fire-station bells. A total of nine bells around Burlington. Bells that a century ago were primary sources of broadcasting news to townsfolk - the happy peal of wedding or worship bells, the mournfully slow tolling of funeral bells, the persistent alarm of a fire bell.

Today, Hazell, who lives in Washington, Ia., has reclaimed use of the bells for art's sake, as well as to rally community spirit. He's a blues musician by trade. A veteran live performer. A fixture in nightclubs and at fairs and festivals around

the Midwest. Now he's getting noticed for the unconventional sound of his bell projects.

"It sounds kind of like a giant wind chime, I guess," said Jon Gloeckner, who with his wife, singer-songwriter Jen Gloeckner, helped Hazell coordinate a bell project in Dubuque. "It's not going to produce a song. It's different depending on where you're sitting and listening."

To produce such a project, Hazell first takes stock of all the available bells. He determines the pitch and loudness of each bell and their proximity. Then he writes an hourlong musical score by hand on graph paper, to be performed by teams of ringers stationed at each bell.

"It's neat for a town this size, something that you don't find in a large city," said Carol Purell, who lives downtown, next door to one of the bells at the Arts for Living Center, a community museum housed in a former Methodist church built in 1868.

A city enchanted. Burlington has been enchanted by the bell projects. "It kind of froze time for an hour," is how one of Hazell's three sons, Jon, a budding filmmaker based in Burlington, described the atmosphere during the ringings.

Many of Burlington's residents perform in the projects. Most of Hazell's ringers aren't musicians but friends, church members and other locals. He never rings a bell himself, so he can scurry around town and hear how his composition is blending together from different points.

"I really felt like I'd let a genie out of the bottle," Hazell said of the awed reactions he received after he staged his first ringing, on Feb. 2, 2003, in Burlington. "It was a 'Twilight Zone' thing."

Since then, Hazell has staged four more ringings in Burlington - May 1, Aug. 1 and Nov. 1 in 2003, and this year on March 20. He branched out with a ringing June 11 in Russia and one in Dubuque on Sept. 19. Sunday's bell project will be his eighth. "It was an incredible opportunity for all of Dubuque to do one thing together," said Steve Meysing, pastor at St. John's Lutheran Church in Dubuque. "It brought people outside, sharing public spaces in ways that broke down every barrier that we create between people."

Here's how a typical ringing plays out in Burlington: The ringers convene at 5:30 p.m. at the Blue Shop, a storefront downtown that Hazell owns and uses as an occasional concert venue. Ringers fan out, in clusters of two or more, and take

their places at the bells by 6:30, synchronized watches in hand. Most bells are rung by ropes, but some require only a simple flip of an electric switch.

"It's kind of a workout, really, pulling the rope on a bell for six to seven minutes," said experienced ringer Lois Rigdon.

Two of the bells ring on the street. The bell at St. Paul's Catholic Church, the oldest church bell in town, dates to 1842 and hangs in a display case in front of the church. The fire station bell also is streetside, since renovation of the crumbling bell tower proved too costly in the early 1950s. The ringing begins promptly at 7 and ends at 8. Afterward, the ringers return to the Blue Shop to celebrate.

Experimental leanings:

On Dec. 13, Hazell made the rounds of all the bell sites in Burlington to distribute his new score. He often was met with a familiar greeting before he could utter a word.

"Looks like bell ringers to me."

"Are we gonna do the ding-dongs?"

The popular image of Hazell around Iowa and the Midwest is that of a bluesman. In 2000 he was inducted into the Des Moines-based Iowa Blues Hall of Fame. He's also famous for one-man-band concerts in which he plays keyboards, blows the harmonica and keeps the beat on a bass drum while singing.

Burlington native Bart Howard wrote the Frank Sinatra staple, "Fly Me to the Moon," but Hazell never has had a "hit." His musical impact has been much broader than a single song. He taught himself to play boogie-woogie piano in 1956 using his older brother's LP collection - playing along to the songs of Pete Johnson, Hadda Brooks and Red Prysock.

The Mother Blues Band that Hazell founded in the late 1960s and led until 1982 was a proving ground for other pillar roots musicians in Iowa besides himself, including Joe Price, who now lives and records with his wife, Vicki, in Lansing, Ia.; and Bo Ramsey, a fellow Burlington native who had a 1974-78 stint with Mother Blues and today tours relentlessly with Pieta Brown.

Yet behind this rootsy image, Hazell always has nurtured his experimental muse.

About 25 years ago in Arkansas, his ears perked up at the complex sound patterns of cicadas, so he incorporated their circular, overlapping rhythms into his music. "It's a lot more compelling than the standard 4/4 beat of a rock song," he said.

Through a chance meeting in 1986 in a corner bar in Burlington, Hazell was enlisted to perform in Belgium and later Germany. It was in Germany that he heard more than cursory ringing of church bells - performances of up to 45 minutes in which the pealing, multiple bells of a single church seemed to be "vibrating the whole environment." Hazell has made more than a dozen trips to Germany and has tentative plans to return next year.

"It's the really mesmerizing chant-like aspects that I love," Hazell said. "It's one of my favorite things about going to Europe, being able to listen to those bells ring."

Hazell taught an experimental music class at Washington High School in the late 1980s and early 1990s, where his students composed such brazenly original tunes as "Santa Was Eating the Christmas Tree."

He is the kind of musician who asks himself such questions as, "What was our sound environment like in 1860?"

He'll spend time alone in the middle of an Iowa farm field in the dead of winter just to get away from the "white noise" humming through our daily lives - traffic, refrigerators, air conditioners, planes. The aural clutter of electricity. Internal combustion engines. Commerce.

In that sense, Hazell designed his bell projects to make people aware of the ambient noise of Burlington and the other communities where they are performed. "It really caused people to stop and listen," said Steve Meysing of Dubuque. "It really helped reconnect us with the natural world."

Spurred by Hazell's performances, Burlington is rediscovering its church bells for their beautiful tones and as possible tourist attractions. Cathy Henderson, who runs a bed-and-breakfast downtown, told Hazell on Monday that she has noticed how the churches now peal their bells with more gusto every Sunday. Val Giannettino, executive director of Downtown Partners Inc., is coordinating an effort to cast permanent spotlights on all the steeples downtown. Hazell "took it to that next level of turning it into this whole concert kind of thing," Giannettino said. Henderson is one of the Burlington residents who have long thought that the town of 27,000 should market itself as a "City of Steeples."

Invitation to Russia:

The export of Hazell's bell project to Russia can be traced to a pair of celebrated Udmurt folk musicians, Sergey Kungurov and Nadia Utkina , who happened to visit Burlington in January 2003 in the weeks leading up to Hazell's first bell ringing. They weren't able to stay and hear the performance, but the concept alone and discussions with Hazell led them to invite him to take his bell project overseas - specifically to the city of Izhevsk , the capital of the Udmurt province located about 600 miles east of Moscow.

Hazell scouted Izhevsk's bells in November 2003 and produced a bell project there last June. He also returned for most of November to attend the grandiose 85th birthday party for Mikhail Kalashnikov, inventor of the AK-47 assault rifle. Kalashnikov's grandson, Igor Krasnovsky, heard Hazell perform in a nightclub during the visit and told him he considered the bell projects to be a harmonic convergence, heralding a new era in Russian history. Hazell is booked to return to Russia in February for a jazz and folk festival and then again next summer to take part in a documentary on the Siberian Highway that will use church bells as its soundtrack.

Established as a bluesman Hazell built a long tenure of blues gigs in Iowa before finding his way overseas.

Ever since his first album, 1977's "Harvest Dance" with his Mother Blues Band, he has run an independent operation with his own Blue Rhythm Records. He has released more than 35 albums - even he loses count. He sells them primarily through his own gigs and his Web site, www.patrickhazell.com.

At least a dozen more albums are waiting for him to polish and release. Hazell considers some of his live performances recorded this year, about 50 hours' worth of music, to be some of his best material yet. His stockpile of music includes recent collaborations with a Turkish singer who's also a research scientist living in Iowa City.

In recent years, he has cut back his tour schedule to about 55 gigs each year, less than half of what it was. After decades of chasing work, he now waits for nightclubs to phone him.

As it turns out, some of the first sounds Hazell ever heard, the ringing bells of his hometown, were his ticket to the international career in music he had designs on all along.

Steve Brower, who attended high school with Hazell in Burlington, said the bell projects "illustrate that music should be in our lives - it doesn't have to be particularly in band, a school band or a rock band or some kind of official music event. It should be there all the time."

Project history

Hazell's bell projects have been performed in Iowa and Russia. Here is a timeline of events:

FEB. 2, 2003 : Burlington

MAY 1, 2003 : Burlington

AUG. 1, 2003 : Burlington

NOV. 1, 2003 : Burlington

NOVEMBER 2003 : Planning session in Russia for project in Izhevsk , the capital of Urdmurt province

MARCH 20, 2004 : Burlington

JUNE 11, 2004 : Izhevsk

SEPT. 19, 2004 : Dubuque

SUNDAY : Burlington