Steven Ball, carillonneur and a professor in the School of Music, Theater, and Dance, teaches students to play the massive bells in Burton Tower and welcomes visitors daily from 12:00 to 12:30 P.M. to see the carillon in action.
For Whom the Bells Toll

The Charles Baird Carillon in the Burton Memorial Tower issues ringing melodies from 53 bells — weighing anywhere from 21 pounds to 12 tons — and has been a campus staple for 75 years.

IT’S SUCH AN INGRAINED PART of campus life that it may go unnoticed: just background noise from noon to 12:30 p.m. when classes are in session, and also before commencement ceremonies and during special events. Songs can range from “The Victors” to Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven” to Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face.”

“I encourage the students to be very creative,” says Steven Ball, the University’s seventh carillonneur and carillon instructor. “Going back to the 17th century, the carillon played the music of the day. It was the Muzak of the time. We want to keep it relevant to society.”

This massive musical machine, made up of 43,000 pounds of bells (21.5 tons) that take up the 10th floor of the tower, is a piece of University history. Charles Baird, a former athletic director, donated the money to build the carillon in 1936. Early on, the clock bells replaced the University janitor’s job of waking students by ringing handbells.

Once it was in operation, U-M became the first school in North America to teach carillon music. U-M is also the first campus to have two carillons, the other being the Lurie Carillon on North Campus.

In 2011, carillonneurs from around the world came to see and play the Baird Carillon on the occasion of its 75th year. The anniversary also included a restoration that brought back the original keyboard and original bells from a number of scattered places, including an Ohio warehouse. New bells were cast in England in 1974.

“The carillon is “a national treasure,” says Ball, who teaches students to strike the baton-like keys and press the foot pedals that pull its strings and levers.

“Most people never stop to think about it,” says Ball. “They never realize that somebody is making music up there. People never even know who you are.”

GET A SNEAK PEAK INSIDE THE CARILLON
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