

What We Did During Summer Vacation 07!

For those who may not be familiar with AGEHR, allow me to give you an idea of what exactly it is. AGEHR stands for the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers. There are over 8,000 members worldwide and each year a National Seminar is held somewhere in the USA where directors and ringers gather to learn and exchange ideas.

“What do you think about meeting as a group in July to play for the AGEHR National Seminar down in Texas?” When Dr. Behnke asked us, The Alleluia Ringers, this question during the 06-07 school year, I’m sure various questions ran through all our heads: “He wants us to do *what*?” “What about my job and summer plans?” “How will I get back out here?” “How are we supposed to play our pieces after not playing together for two months?” “What in the world is AGEHR anyway?” Well, despite a bunch of quizzical and uncertain bell ringers, Dr. Behnke encouraged us to take up the invite to play at the convention, and we all promised as a group to make it happen. And make it happen we did.

From Connecticut to Iowa and everywhere in between, the thirteen members of The Alleluia Ringers and Dr. Behnke met at Concordia at 9:30 a.m. on July 17th where we rehearsed the entire day, stopping only once for some lunchtime refueling at Panera Bread. The next morning, an early flight out of Milwaukee, flew us down to Dallas/ Ft. Worth, Texas. That evening we played a concert at Zion Lutheran Church in Dallas. We were warmly welcomed and it was a good opportunity to prepare for the “big shebang” in store for us the next day.

The following morning we were off to the Westin Park Central Hotel where the Seminar was being held. After unloading, setting up, and rehearsing in the morning, we had a few hours that afternoon to roam about the convention. There were three ringing tracks and over twenty-five classes going on we could choose to sit in on, not to mention well over sixty different tables and stations set up featuring everything from music to bell cases. The classes had something for every aspect: beginner conductors, how to use Finale, and using bells in traditional worship, just to name a few. During this free time, we also had the opportunity to meet numerous composers and bell directors.

After another brief warm-up in the evening, it was time to perform. Did I mention nearly all the composers of the pieces we were playing were present in the audience? No pressure! However, we were all prepared and not only gave them a good concert, but we had a fun time doing so.

I think it’s safe to say nearly every person in the audience, whether a well known composer or a bell ringer, shook each of our hands and expressed their deep admiration and gratitude to us for our performance. We couldn’t have asked for a more rewarding way to wrap up the 2006-2007 school year. To God be the glory.

Shortly upon returning, Dr. Behnke forwarded us a personal note of thanks from Fred Gramann, the director of music at the American Church in Paris, France which I would like to share:

“I wanted to express how much I enjoyed your concert...I had expected a good concert but was not ready for all that I experienced both visually and aurally. It was obvious that every single member of the choir took the time to work out all aspects of their individual contributions so that every bell change, page turn, and technique change became a flowing musical addition to the whole effect. Actions instead of distractions, it was as if each member had prepared as would a concert soloist, insuring that technique would be a tool for creating music. And what music there was. Not a detail was overlooked: the brief silences of rest as the choir breathed before a new section, the creation of musical phrasing uncommon in handbell

ringing, and the gamut of emotions expressed from intimate moments almost personal in nature to energetic outbursts of joy. I thank you all, director and each and every ringer, for the gift of music given from your hearts and received by this heart. I hope that your music and my ears will cross paths again in the future. Blessings on your continued work."

Only after returning back home did I fully realize just how significant this trip was. There were over four hundred people present in Dallas for the Seminar. During our time there, we met people from Korea, Israel, France, England, Hong Kong, and from all over the U.S. We were barely there a day and a half, but what an opportunity to not only play for, but meet and speak with ringers and directors with whom we share the same passion. Dr. Behnke says, "As you can well imagine, it's a great honor to be asked to play an evening concert for this group. It's the first time The Alleluia Ringers have ever been the featured choir for such a national event and it was something we just can't turn down."

I am sure we all took something new back home with us from the Seminar. One thing I learned that never ceases to amaze me is the power behind God's gift of music and how it can bring people together and touch hearts.