

Carillon concerts toll free at park

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To get to one of the jewels of Stone Mountain Park, take a short walk down a long, curving sidewalk through wildflowers and woods surrounded by a lake amid the sounds of ducks and squirrels. At the bottom of the walk, nestled in a small, five-level rock amphitheater is the steel and glass booth that houses the park's electronic carillon. At about 11:40 a.m., **Mabel Sansing Sharp** gives her 30-minute concerts at least twice daily, five times a week. To get to one of the jewels of Stone Mountain Park, take a short walk down a long, curving sidewalk through wildflowers and woods surrounded by a lake amid the sounds of ducks and squirrels.

At the bottom of the walk, nestled in a small, five-level rock amphitheater is the steel and glass booth that houses the park's electronic carillon - the instrument whose bell tones carry three-fourths of a mile.

At about 11:40 a.m., the woman who has since 1973 charmed people from all over the world with her 30-minute concerts at least twice daily, five times a week, arrives like clockwork at the carillon.

Mabel Sansing Sharp, a tiny woman whose spirited eyes twinkle behind wire-rimmed glasses, relaxes for a few minutes before her

noon performance and dons the pink ballet slippers she wears when she gently taps the carillon's pedals.

Before touching any keys, she steps outside to speak to the people gathered to watch her play.

"Any special requests?" she asks. "You're going to get pot luck if you don't."

Someone asks for "I Believe." Another person wants "Ave Maria." Today, there are people from California. "Well, you've got to hear 'California, Here I Come,' don't you?" Mrs. **Sharp** asks with her broad, friendly grin.

One of the people outside is Jeannine Chilton, a regular park walker who admits she is afflicted with "carillonitis."

"I don't drink and I don't smoke, but I'm addicted to the carillon at Stone Mountain," says Mrs. Chilton, who listens to cassette tapes of Mrs. **Sharp** playing the carillon as she walks through the park with her dog, Joe. "Being out here is just one of the most enjoyable things I've ever done - just the music and how friendly she is."

Standing near Mrs. Chilton are Joyce and Chuck Bruce from Redwood Falls, Minn., in Atlanta to visit Mrs. Bruce's "adopted" parents, Frank and Helen Maloney of Stone Mountain.

"I was here [at the carillon] six years ago," Mrs. Bruce says. "When I came back, I said, 'I want to go to Stone Mountain and the only thing I want to do is go to the carillon.' "

They knew they were in for a treat - the majestic sound of the music they requested played lovingly on an instrument composed of 732 bell tones of 12 different types, each with a range of 61 notes. The bell tones are magnified more than one million times

and sent out by cable to specifically designated speakers in the spiraling 13-story bell tower nearby.

Mrs. **Sharp**'s music draws return visits from across the world. And couples who were married at the carillon come back often for their anniversaries.

But of her talent, Mrs. **Sharp** says in her neighborly way: "I've never been a serious pianist. It's strictly enjoyment. To me, music is meant to enjoy, not to impress."

The ballet slippers in place, the proper keys pushed, Mrs. **Sharp** is ready to thrill her crowd. The Smokerise area resident who raises chickens, white doves and pet quails for a hobby converses easily while she plays, never reading music, as her audience looks on.

Mrs. **Sharp** started piano lessons at age 4. "Number one, I wouldn't leave the piano alone. I guess they figured if I was going to make that racket I might as well read notes," she says.

But music was not to be her life until much further down the road.

Mrs. **Sharp** was first employed at Stone Mountain Park in the late 1960s in the engineering and construction department. She left for a while to work in map-making for the state.

She returned to the park in 1973 to play the carillon, a gift to the park from the Coca-Cola Co. Coca-Cola had exhibited the instrument at the New York World's Fair where it was played by internationally known carillonneur John Klein, Mrs. **Sharp**'s instructor.

In 1974, Mrs. **Sharp** was appointed by Gov. Jimmy Carter as carillonneur for the state of Georgia.

"I had the engineering background. I knew the music. I sort of fell into it," Mrs. **Sharp** said. After 17 years, she still relishes her job, her audience ("I ride shotgun on photography," she says as she snaps a shot for a group outside the carillon), and the challenge of getting a request for a song she doesn't know.

"I've hit three out of three today," she says, as her rendition of "Georgia on My Mind" wafts across the park.

"Wind Beneath My Wings"? "I can reduce you to tears on that one," she says, in great show fashion. "To me, the carillon is therapy to more people than you realize."

"How Great Thou Art," she adds, is one of her most requested melodies.

"That's why I always play that at the end," Mrs. **Sharp** said. "That's when the regulars head back up the path."

Carillon concert schedule: Monday to Saturday, noon and 4 p.m.; Sunday, hymns at 1 p.m., additional concerts at 3 and 5 p.m. (All concerts on Mondays and Tuesdays are prerecorded.)

Photo: The sound of music: **Mabel Sansing Sharp** plays Stone Mountain Park's electronic carillon, a gift to the park from the Coca-Cola Co. / Dianne Laakso/Staff