

**DETAILS:**

**What:** Embellishments Handbell Ensemble. Phyllis Kirk, conductor.

**When:** Saturday, 3 p.m.

**Admission:** Free. Call 870-4119 for more information.

**Where:** Steiner Auditorium, Birmingham Museum of Art, 2000 Eighth Ave. North.



**MUSIC**

## Embellishments' handbell magic: Tunes at a flick of a wrist

By MICHAEL HUEBNER  
News staff writer

His gloved hands grasping the handles of four bells, Embellishments' Kyle Henderson waited patiently for his assigned pitches, E and F, to come by in the printed score of "West Indies Carol." He also kept a close watch for the same pitches an octave away.

Those are prominent melody notes in handbell music, so it didn't take long before he flicked his wrists to produce a series of resounding pings. Nearby, Anne Graves did

her part each time D and E above middle C were required. The rest of the group filled in their respective parts.

But there was a gap in the low chimes that stuck out like a missing tooth. One member, arriving a few minutes late and armed with a sincere apology, filled in the silences and all was right.

Like any musical endeavor, it takes more than filling in the notes to make it work. That's where Embellishments' conductor,



NEWS STAFF/COURTNEY HERGESHEIMER

Embellishments' Kyle Henderson juggles four bells at once at a rehearsal at Shades Valley Presbyterian Church. He covers pitches E and F in two octaves.

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## BELLS: Embellishments is a musical arsenal

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Phyllis Kirk, comes in. In a meeting room at Shades Valley Presbyterian Church recently, she was rehearsing the group for Saturday's concert at the Birmingham Museum of Art.

"That's what makes bells hard to do," she says. "They have to have this beautiful line going, even though they play at different times. Part of my job is to see that the high bells do not overshadow the low bells. They have to make it all sound like one sound."

It's what the 15-member ensemble has been working toward since it was founded. One of only two community handbell ensembles in Alabama, Embellishments has been giving concerts since 2001. Although some members represented the state at a conference of handbell ringers in Australia last summer, Kirk feels the ensemble is just now coming into its own, aspiring to the likes of the Raleigh Ringers, a group that has achieved international fame.

"Every group has its own script, but we do want to be one of the best in the country," she says. "Sonos, in California, has more of a classical approach. Raleigh Ringers does a lot of classical, but they also do a lot of shtick. We're somewhere in between."

Saturday's program bears that out. In addition to music by Gliere, Grieg, Rachmaninoff and Brahms, they'll play a variety of Christmas music, including "Sing We Now of Christmas," music from "It's Christmastime Again, Charlie Brown," "Up on the Housetop" and Stough's arrangement of "Silent Night."

It's substantially different from the repertoire played by many church-affiliated handbell choirs.

"Most people who think of handbell groups think of church," says Stough. "But this is a whole different feel. Instead of just church music, you have the classics. It opens it up for some fun stuff, too, things that church groups just aren't going to play."

Ringer Anne Graves has played in several handbell ensembles and directs a group at Shades Crest Baptist Church.

"At my church, we would not play pieces like Barber's 'Adagio for Strings,'" Graves says. "The ability to read and play music is not quite up to the level of this community group."

In fact, all of Embellishments' members have strong musical training. Graves is a flutist and Celtic harpist. Stough plays cello, bass and guitar. Kirk, who received a choral performance degree at Oklahoma Baptist University, sang seven times in a Robert Shaw-led chorus in Carnegie Hall. She has conducted handbell ensembles in 38 states, twice in Canada and once in Australia, and has published three handbell compositions.

Embellishments' arsenal includes more than six octaves of bells and seven octaves of chimes, made by Schulmerich and Malmark, both Pennsylvania bell founders. Others in their collection come from Holland and England. They're played in a variety of ways — with or without mallets, shake (tremolo), ring-and-touch and staccato.

"This means to 'mark,'" says Kirk, pointing to a downward arrow in the notation. "If it has an arrow going up, it's 'mark and lift' and you get a percussive sound, but then it continues. One of the interesting things about handbells is they're still developing new techniques."

Kirk's standards for Embellishments are understandably high, and each member must pass auditions.

"Most are amateurs, but several were music majors," she says. "They all have musical backgrounds. If someone doesn't, they should know the techniques and have a good sense of the music."

Good rhythm, Kirk says, is the key to being a good handbell ringer.

"Other things can be imparted, but if they don't have a sense of rhythm, handbells are not for them," she says.

"And concentration," adds Stough. "And patience. I don't know how to explain it. With all the groups I've played with, it's always a lot of fun and teamwork. It's a team sport, so to speak."

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