

The Virginian-Pilot

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The Virginia Arts Festival rings in 20th anniversary – literally

- By Rashod Ollison
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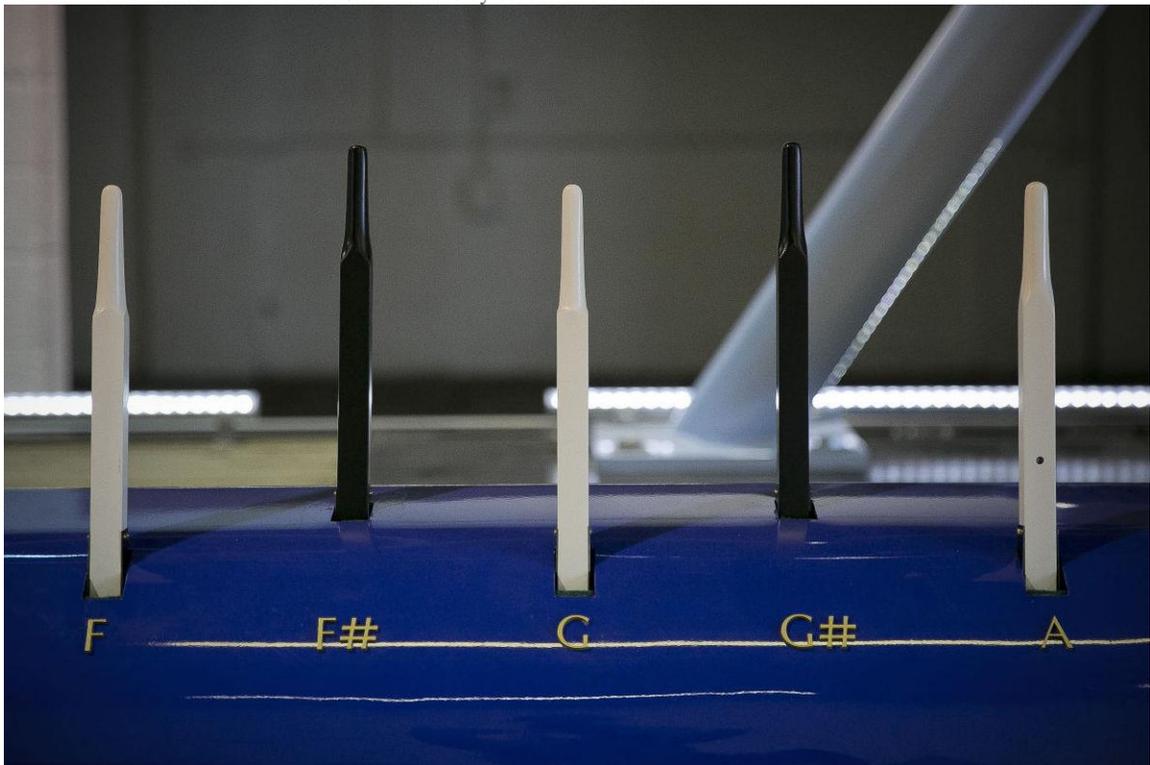
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Rob Cross, artistic director of Virginia Art Festival, tests out a 23-bell mobile carillon the Virginia Art Festival was commissioned for the 20th anniversary season.



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Ba Ciccolella, production assistant, and Gregg Damanti, director of production, check out a 23-bell mobile carillon the Virginia Art Festival was commissioned for the 20th anniversary season in Norfolk.



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Levers are one option for operating the carillon. It can also be played traditional piano-style through an attached keyboard.



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Scott Jackson, general manager of Virginia Art Festival, checks out a bell. The 25,900 pound carillon is 38 feet long and 8 feet wide.



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Lewis Webb listens to a song played by Kim McCoy, associate director of development for Virginia Art Festival.

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Beyond offering star performers from many disciplines, the Virginia Arts Festival is literally announcing itself this year by ringing the bells.

To mark its 20th anniversary, VAF will unveil a 23-bell mobile carillon, something of a mobile ambassador that will be playable by everyone. It's roughly the size of a semi truck with a car carrier, serving as both mammoth musical instrument and sculptural art. The bells are mounted on a frame that spells out "VAF" that will be driven to venues to ring home the point that each event is associated with the arts festival.

The instrument is engineered so that a person can play it at a keyboard or ring the individual bells by pulling levers.

Impossible to miss, the carillon, which cost \$415,000 and was funded by an anonymous donor, will be parked in front of 12 events during the festival, including opening night tonight at MacArthur Center.

“This iconic structure speaks to the tradition that church bells have played in the history of greater Norfolk,” VAF Perry Artistic Director Rob Cross said in a statement.

VAF went with a venerable manufacturer for the structure. It was made by the Verdin Co., a Cincinnati-based company that has been making bells, carillons and large clocks for 173 years. Verdin’s work can be seen at Walt Disney World, the University of Notre Dame and other spots around the country.

While the framework is custom-made, the bells are old and carry an interesting history. They were refurbished from a carillon built in 1928, commissioned by graduates of the now-defunct, all-female Ward-Belmont College in Nashville, Tenn., to honor troops killed in Flanders, Belgium, during World War I.

The 23 bells, cast in England, were mounted in a converted water tower. The carillon was dedicated during homecoming week at Ward-Belmont in 1929. Five years later, the bells pealed “Hail to the Chief” when President Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt visited. But in 1951, as financial woes mounted, the carillon was dismantled and the school closed.

The bells stayed silent for more than six decades. Belmont University, the successor institution, built a new carillon for its campus, and the Verdin Co. acquired the old bells, which were refurbished for the VAF structure.

VAF’s Cross said: “It is a beautiful marriage of the past and the future. What a wonderful way of continuing our goal of taking the festival beyond the concert hall.”

The carillon will be on display for the following events:

- **April 8:** Opening night party, MacArthur Center Park in Norfolk
 - **April 9-10:** Spring for Dance Gala, Scope Plaza/Chrysler Hall in Norfolk
 - **April 21-24:** Tattoo Hullabaloo, Scope Plaza
 - **April 28-May 1:** Fringe Festival, Neon District in Norfolk
 - **May 7-8:** Malpaso dance company and the Texas Tenors, Sandler Center for the Performing Arts, Virginia Beach
 - **May 21:** World Arts Celebration, City Center at Oyster Point, Newport News
 - **May 22:** Boyz II Men, Scope Plaza/Chrysler Hall
 - **May 29:** Attucks Community Day, Church Street Park near the Attucks Theatre in Norfolk
 - **May 30:** Memorial Day concert, City Center at Oyster Point, Newport News
 - **June 9:** Tchaikovsky Spectacular, Town Point Park, Norfolk
 - **June 24-26:** Funhouse Fest, the lawn of the Art Museums of Colonial Williamsburg
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