

Saved by the Bells

Church concerts are music to community's ears during COVID

WRITTEN BY JULIA MARTIN

When COVID forced the Rev. Melissa Hall of St. James Episcopal Church to shutter the magnificent stone house of worship on Valley Road in Upper Montclair, it pained her deeply. During other crises, such as 9/11 and Superstorm Sandy, the church had opened its doors to offer the community shelter and comfort. At the same time, Sean Price, the director of music ministries, had been wondering how he could bring music to a congregation that couldn't attend church. He had more time on his hands, too, since he'd been furloughed from his job as head sommelier at the Daniel Boulud restaurant DB Bistro Moderne in New York City.

So when Hall asked if he would be willing to play the tower chimes once or twice a week to "reassure people we are here, no matter what happens," he responded with a counter-offer: "How about every day?"

Each noontime, seven days a week for more than a year, Price has mounted the narrow circular stairs in the stone tower and coaxed melodies out of the 11 enormous bells hanging above him in the belfry. Weighing 13,000 pounds, they date to the tower's construction in 1919; seven are dedicated to parishioners who died in World War I. "It's a treat for me to play, and for people to listen to, because it's the real bell sound," says Price, who has undergraduate and master's degrees from Westminster

Choir College in Princeton and studied harpsichord performance at Juilliard.

The noontime concerts, 12 minutes of hymns and secular pieces, have developed a following in the Upper Montclair shopping district. People drawn to the bells' resonant sound, which can be heard up to 2 miles away, often gather on the lawn to listen. "It's been a lifesaver," says Anne Ross, a 91-year-old town resident. "It gets me up and out every day."



CONCERTS WITH A-PEEL St. James Episcopal Church's central location at Valley Road and Bellevue Avenue in Upper Montclair lends itself to noontime entertainment.

St. James is one of only a few churches in the country whose tower bells can still be operated manually. Today, most churches broadcast pre-recorded chimes from speakers in the belfry.

Before COVID, playing the bells was something Price, who also plays the organ and directs the choir for Sunday services, did only on rare occasions. With no heat in the tower, and the difficulty of finding and adapting songs based on just 11 tones, it's a bit of a hardship post.

"You can only play two or three different keys in one octave," he says. "You have to figure out ways to make a song work without deviating too far from the main melody. A lot of songs just don't work."

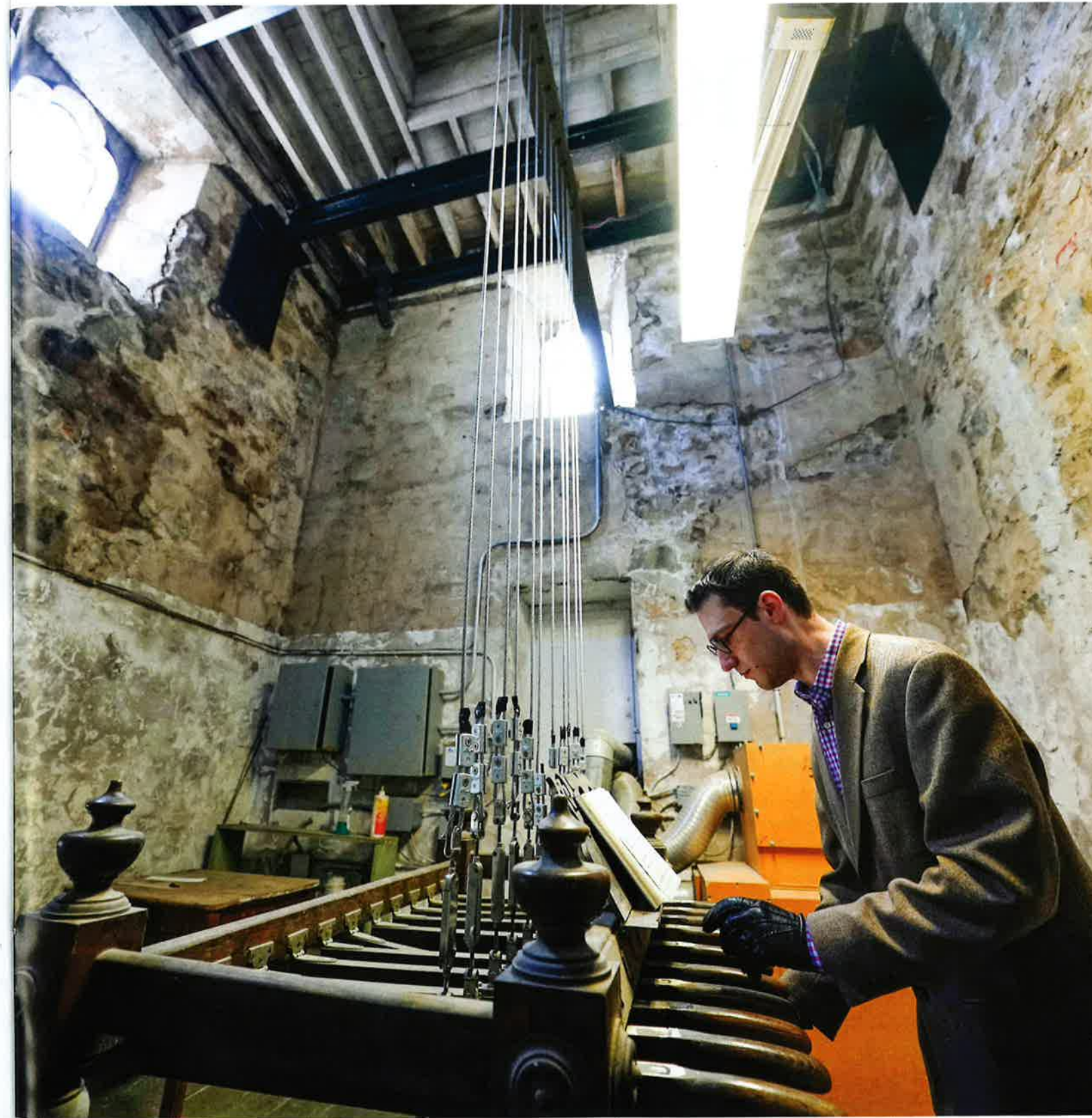
The concerts are also physically demanding: Price must rapidly push down large wooden levers to activate wires attached to each bell's clapper. "One thing I'll never play again is Glenn Miller's 'In the Mood,'" he says. "It's too complicated and way too fast. I thought my arm was going to fall off."

Since many aren't familiar with the hymns, he says, he'll often include a recognizable, playful tune like "Baby Shark" or "B-I-N-G-O," along with a piece from the '20s, '30s or '40s, his favorite musical period.

Despite the challenges, Price has missed only a few days since March 2020 — once when a wire snapped and someone from the McShane Bell Foundry, which dates to 1856, had to come from Baltimore to repair it, and another time when he was "sick as a dog" after his vaccination. He has no plans to stop the noon concerts, but may have to cut back as restaurants reopen and his sommelier duties resume.

Meanwhile, he is still attracting fans. Mary Stein, who lives in Wayne, says she'd just come out of a shop on Valley Road when she heard the "beautiful sounds of 'Amazing Grace'" and crossed the street to stand on the church lawn and listen. "It brightened my day, that's for sure," she says. ■

price@stjamesmontclair.org



TARIQ ZEHAWI