

glanced over and . . . "Wait a minute. Dude! Isn't that the guy who used to be Bobby Wheeler in 'Taxi'?"

Yes. It was. Jeff Conaway, who also used to be Kenickie in "Grease" and Zack Allen in "Babylon [See **STARS**, Page E6]



searching the watery underworld for the legendary "dead man's chest."

The film has heart, Nighy says, attributing the appeal of the first "Pirates" movie to [See **DEPP**, Page E6]

Making music with a peal

Hamilton musician rings up her 100th handbell composition

BY ANNE LEVIN
STAFF WRITER

Susan T. Sylvester describes herself as a "serious handbell geek."

In a specially designed music room at the rear of Sylvester's Hamilton home, rows of black cases lined with red velvet hold the objects of her obsession. These handbells — some shiny and new, others antique and burished — are prominently placed not just in their specially designed cases, but in other parts of the house.

"They're beautiful and they just sound so lovely together," Sylvester says, when asked to explain her fascination with the instruments. "There is an ethereal, enchanting sound to them. They just sound gorgeous."

Sylvester, who works as a technical assistant in the library at Westminster Choir College of Rider University in Princeton, recently published her 100th composition for handbells.

She was well-established in her career as a pianist, organist and church musician when she was asked to "ring" a set of handbells her church had acquired to celebrate its 100th anniversary in 1989. She took three seminars at Westminster and was hooked.

By 1991, Sylvester was publishing works she composed for handbells. Director of music for St. Mark Lutheran Church in Hamilton, she now directs two handbell choirs and frequently is commissioned to write pieces for bell choirs around the country. She has taught composi-

tion and served as a clinician for many festivals and seminars.

"I started composing right away, little things for choir," she says. "One day, I saw an ad requesting manuscripts, so I sent them a piece. To my eternal shock, I got a contract three weeks later.

"I sent more, to other publishers, just to make sure it wasn't a fluke — and they all took them. So I thought, 'Hey, I'm good at this.' And I've been writing ever since."

No one is sure exactly when handbells were invented, but they are mentioned in Exodus as part of Hebrew worship and are shown decorating the robes of priests.

Bells were steeped in superstition during medieval times. Tune ringing became popular in the 1700s when the more musical tower bell ringers discovered it was easier to ring handbells than tower bells. The handbells were more versatile, too, able to ring out a wider variety of music.

By the mid-19th century, handbell ringing had reached its heyday in Britain. Handbells were probably first heard in the United States at that time. Circus impresario P.T. Barnum imported a group from England and dressed them in Swiss outfits, calling them the Swiss Bell Ringers.

"That's why many people associate bells with Switzerland, but there really is no connection," says Sylvester,

[See **BELLS**, Page E6]



FRANK JACOBS III

Susan T. Sylvester plays the handbells. She recently wrote her 100th composition for handbell ch

BELLS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE E1

who credits an American woman named Margaret Shurcliff with the rise in popularity of handbell ringing in this country. After returning from a trip to England with a small set of handbells given to her by English tower-bell ringers, Shurcliff rang carols on Beacon Hill in Boston. The rich sound was heard by others who sent to England for more handbell sets and interest snowballed.

While many people associate the ringing of handbells with Christmas music, the instruments show up in many styles of music.

"You hear them in jazz, rock, classical — certainly not just Christmas," says Sylvester. "I like a variety of music and the bells are highly appropriate for so many styles."

Ringling handbells requires a certain amount of strength and coordination, Sylvester demonstrates as she rhythmically raises and lowers two bells in one hand and one large one in the other.

"When you play, you don't just stand there and bong," she says. "You have to move them around and when the whole choir is doing that, it's visually beautiful. Some bell choirs actually do real choreography."

Playing the handbells is easy to learn, Sylvester says, but difficult to master. The skill is a good one to teach children, because there is an element of teamwork involved. Ringing bells has become a family activity for the Sylvesters. Her husband and son play; her husband, who plays percussion, "became addicted right away and he also composes," she says.

Sylvester's compositions have increased in complexity over the years.

"I like to push the envelope and get into all different genres of music," she says. "I like to experiment."

She buys her bells online, mostly, and has a set from the 1740s.

"They last centuries if you take care of them," she says. "Time is good to bells because it takes bronze 20 years to fully settle."

With works in print by 19 different music publishers and a series of books on ringing for young children, Sylvester is making a significant mark in the bell-ringing arena.

"It's a great medium for people and it's a major part of what I do," she says. "I'm a handbell geek and proud of it."

ST

CONTINUE

5," sat between from "The Mur from "Family A floor and decidi going to do and show, ever again

Conaway, w kicked off "Cele under suspicior thinking he just more. He could ing while some up, took a look walked away. It man.

Back in 1997 lon 5" was on, tl Those places w pecially for the s those sci-fi peop come in costum about the show And you wouldr amount of mone All cash.

But this . . . t The ego takes a start to wonder indignity.

Why do the U to themselves?

Butch Patric! Used to Be Eddi thought about it