

ITALY CONFIDENTIAL

Bells ring out as ancient tradition revived by Gen Z enthusiasts

NEW

More than half the members of the Federation of Ambrosian Bellringers in northern Italy are under 23, and record their carillons for thousands of online followers



Corrado Codazza with the group of seven bellringers, all aged under 23

JAMES IMAM FOR THE TIMES

[James Imam](#), Limbiate

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Racing to football practice, eating ice cream on echoing piazzas, arguing with siblings over the television remote: these are some of the things that Italian teenagers do after school on a Friday.

Another is ringing bells.

In the tower of a parish church in Limbiate, a village just outside Milan, a group of young bellringers aged from 13 to 22 tug on ropes as a leader calls out their numbers. A smartphone placed at one ringer's feet records the spectacle for thousands of online followers.

As other ancient skills such as glassblowing and stone masonry face an uncertain future across the continent, a craze for campanology has caught on in Lombardy with [new bellringing recruits](#) determined to keep the tradition alive and share it online.



Bellringers in Limbiate, near Milan, set up bells in the church's bell chamber to be played with a carillon keyboard

JAMES IMAM FOR THE TIMES



“When I was two years old, I heard the bells in my town and fell in love with the sound,” said Nicolò Manzo, 13, the group’s youngest member, during the gathering at St George’s Church. “My parents racked up a big petrol bill driving me around to hear bells in various towns.”

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Manzo is the youngest member of the Federation of Ambrosian Bellringers, a group dedicated to preserving northern Italy’s distinctive manual bellringing tradition. More than half its 53 members are under 30, and the number of under-18s has more than doubled since its founding.

“We were amazed to find so many young enthusiasts. It made us believe the tradition could have a future,” said Corrado Codazza, 59, who was one of the founders of the association and an enthusiast of the Ambrosian bellringing tradition of Lombardy and Piedmont. In the tradition, which takes its name from Milan’s patron saint, Ambrose, bells are rung from the bottom of the tower with long ropes and swing slowly.

When the association was founded in 2009 practitioners of the Ambrosian system were scarce. “The tradition was practically non-existent,” he said. Now the picture is markedly different.

Last year, Unesco added Italy and Spain’s bellringing traditions to its Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Italy is believed to have about 8,000 bellringers.

The tradition of bellringing in Italy is at least 14 centuries old. In a text from the year 622, the nobleman Ludovico Moscardo described how bells in Verona tolled to announce the death of a bishop.

Bell towers became important symbols of power, with 283 recorded in Milan in 1798. Some in the country remain instantly recognisable landmarks. The 325ft bell tower of St Mark's Basilica in Venice, once a watchtower and beacon for passing ships, is still the city's tallest structure.



Petronio Basilica, where lighter bells are used to create a unique sound

ALAMY

As cities built towers, distinct local bellringing styles emerged. Ringers at Bologna's vast San Petronio Basilica helped establish the Bolognese ringing tradition, which uses lighter bells. These traditions suffered setbacks during the Second World War, when the fascist government requisitioned bells to be melted down for arms. The spread of [automated bell-ringing systems](#) in the mid-20th century further eroded manual traditions.

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Yet Codazza says the codified melodies of local styles — used to mark marriages, funerals and masses — remain an integral part of daily life. “Every sequence sends a precise message to the

faithful,” he says. “The Ambrosian tradition is part of our history.”

As well as its distinctive melodies, Ambrosian bellringing, which dates from the 18th century, is defined by heavily counterbalanced bells and the optional use of a carillon keyboard in the bell chamber, where a single player strikes keys with their fists to produce melodies.



Every sequence of bells sends a precise message to the faithful

JAMES IMAM FOR THE TIMES

St George’s five-note keyboard is designed for traditional melodies but it can also be used for popular tunes, including *Jingle Bells*. During a demonstration, a player rings out *Sarà perché ti amo*, the 1981 hit by the Italian pop group Ricchi e Poveri.

Although the popular tunes and the social media presence help, many young recruits had their interests piqued in more traditional ways.

“A very nice priest let me play the church bells for the village feast when I was eight or nine,” says Gabriele Mezzanatica, 15. “It was amazing as I’d always dreamt of playing them.”

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