

## **Empowering Directors to Work with New Ringers**

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### **Purpose**

To review the basics of handbell ringing and best practices for leading a handbell ensemble. By the end of this workshop, you should know how to:

- Guide your choir through a series of appropriate warmups to prevent injury.
- Manage director and musician expectations in a beginning handbell choir.
- Demonstrate healthy ringing techniques for basic strokes and special techniques.
- Lead a choir through a series of basic ringing and damping exercises.
- Recognize and apply standard handbell notation.
- Develop strategies for assigning parts in a piece of handbell music.
- Learn how to deal with common challenges in the beginning handbell ensemble.

### **Warmups**

Physical warmups are (or should be) part of every rehearsal. These can include the following exercises particularly focused on range of motion (ROM):

- Arm Rotations
- Shoulder Roll/Shoulder Shrug
- Hug
- Forearm Stretch
- Upper Arm Stretch
- "Praying"
- Flexible Snake
- Wrist Curls/Wrist Rotations
- Putty Press/Keyboard Press
- The Fan/The Claw

### **Setting Expectations for a New Choir**

Letting your musicians know what's expected of them can help ease anxieties and prevent misunderstandings down the road.

Consider developing and communicating policies regarding:

- Attendance/being on time/finding substitutes
- Caring for bells and other equipment
- Gloves
- Performance attire
- Leadership opportunities (e.g., officers, assistant conductor, equipment manager, librarian, wardrobe manager)

Also ask your musicians to articulate their expectations for *you!*

Remember that the definition of success will vary from musician to musician. Expect each ringer's best effort, but be realistic in those expectations.

## **Ringling Basics/Ringing Healthfully**

The handbell ringing stroke involves three parts: preparation/grip, ringing, and recovery/rebound. All three are important and should flow together seamlessly. The speed and size of the movements may change with tempo, but the basic mechanics are the same.

### **Ring with the Whole Body!**

- Feet shoulder width apart
- One foot slightly ahead
- Weight slightly forward in balls of feet
- Knees slightly bent/relaxed
- Ringing involves the whole arm (plus core and leg strength, too)!

### **Basic Handbell Grip**

- Straight thumb—do a "thumb check" periodically during rehearsal!
- Firm but flexible—no "death grip"
- All body parts from thumb to shoulder should be in alignment
- Thumb and index finger provide the "circle of support"
- Ring and little finger provide additional strength and control

### **Basic Ringing Motion**

- Start in "ready to ring" position (elbows in, casting tilted toward body and resting on pectoral muscle)
- Move the bell forward, leading with the base of the handle.
- Flick your wrist to initiate clapper contact
- Move the bell back toward your body as if headed back to "ready to ring"
- Useful images: eating a banana; champagne toast; backwards bicycle

### **Basic Damping**

- Keep bell in motion until it is time to damp
- Maintain alignment even during damping
- Lead with the handle (not the casting)
- Experiment with different shoulder/chest positions for clean and effortless damping

### **Nip These Bad Habits in the Bud—They Can Lead to Injuries!**

- Leading ringing motion with the casting
- Floppy wrists/"painting" with the handbell
- Punching motion
- Damping by sliding or rolling

## Ringling Exercises for the Beginner

Here are a few good exercises to try with beginners, especially those who don't yet read music. Consider putting these on a whiteboard or easel pad at the front of the room to get your ringers used to looking up instead of burying their faces in their binders! Even better, try using exercises with verbal cues only, to get your ringers used to listening to you—and to each other!

R = ring with right hand

L = ring with left hand

\_ = sustain note to end of beat

x = rest (i.e., damp at start of beat)

### Example 1:

R            / L            / R            / L            /  
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 /

R            / R            / L            / L            /  
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 /

### Example 2:

R \_ R \_ / L \_ L \_ / R \_ L \_ / L \_ R \_ /  
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 /

### Example 3:

R R R R / L L L L / R R R R / R L R L /  
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 /

R L R L / R R L R / L L R L / R R R L /  
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 /

L R R L / L L L R / L L L L / R R R R /  
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 /

### Example 4:

x x R x / x R x R / x L x L / L x x R /  
1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 / 1 2 3 4 /

Here are some slightly more advanced exercises, to be used with ringers who know (or are learning) how to read music. Space notes should be rung with the left hand, line notes with the right hand.

These exercises use special techniques (martellato, martellato-lift, and shakes), but can also be utilized with basic ringing/damping instead.

The image displays six staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, each with a specific rhythmic pattern and fingering indicated below the notes. The exercises are as follows:

- Staff 1:** Quarter notes on the line (1, 2, 3, 4) with a quarter rest on the space. Fingering: 1 2 3 & 4 | 1 2 3 & 4 | 1 2 3 & 4.
- Staff 2:** Quarter notes on the line (1, 2, 3, 4) with a quarter rest on the space. Fingering: 1 2 3 & 4 | 1 2 3 & 4 | 1 2 3 4.
- Staff 3:** Quarter notes on the line (1, 2, 3, 4) with a quarter rest on the space. Fingering: 1 & 2 & 3 4 | 1 & 2 & 3 4 | 1 & 2 & 3 4.
- Staff 4:** Quarter notes on the line (1, 2, 3, 4) with a quarter rest on the space. Fingering: 1 & 2 & 3 4 | 1 & 2 & 3 4 | 1 2 & 3 4.
- Staff 5:** Quarter notes on the line (1, 2, 3, 4) with a quarter rest on the space. Fingering: 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3.
- Staff 6:** Quarter notes on the line (1, 3, 4) with a quarter rest on the space. Fingering: 1 3 4 | 1 3 4 | 1 3 4.

## Common Techniques and How to Use Them

See attached page for notation of various techniques.

Common techniques/equipment that will be demonstrated include:

- Echo
- Gyro
- Handchimes
- Let Vibrate (Laissez Vibrer)
- Mallets (suspended, on table)
- Martellato
- Martellato Lift
- Pluck
- Ring Touch
- Shake
- Swing
- Thumb Damp/Hand Damp
- Vibrato

## Handbell Music and Notation

### Difficulty Level System (see attached)

- Almost all recently published handbell music is leveled.
- Levels are guidelines for success, not a mark of accomplishment!
- It's better to make beautiful music with a Level 2 piece than to struggle with a Level 3 piece.
- Ready to move beyond Level 1? Look for pieces with short sections that will stretch your ringers rather than jumping into Level 2 with both feet.

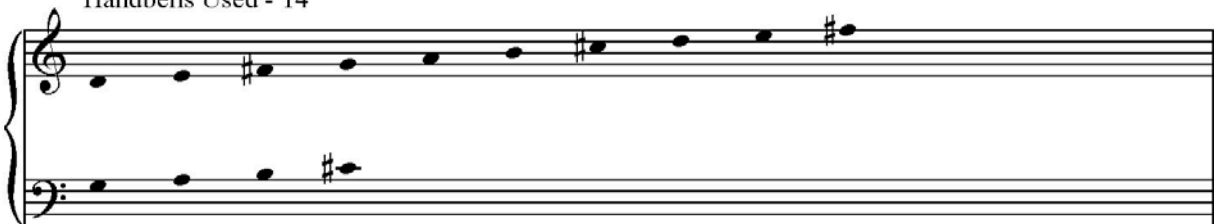
### Bells Used Chart (Examples)

#### Example A:

2 Octaves  
Handbells Used - 14

Trio/Quartet/Ensemble

BUNESSAN  
arr. Janet Hall



#### Example B:

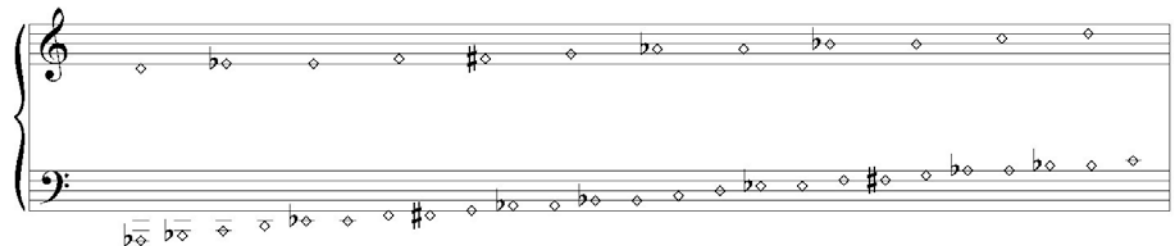
Handbells used: 2 octaves (15 bells)

Optional Handchimes used: 7 chimes



### Example C:

for 3, 4, 5 or 6 octaves handbells and optional 3, 4, 5, or 6 octaves handchimes



### Optional Bells

- Handbell music is usually written for 2-3 octaves or 3-5 (or more) octaves. If your set is on the small end of the range, the music will indicate which notes to omit with square [ ] or angle < > brackets.
- Larger choirs can double the melody up an octave where indicated and/or add additional bass notes an octave lower as indicated. The publisher should indicate with notations how to facilitate these doublings (i.e., are all stems-up treble notes doubled? Or just the melody notes?)

### Tips for Maximum Success

#### Assigning Parts

See attached page for standard part assignments and table layouts. There are *many* alternatives to these traditional assignments. See *Handbell Helper* or *Ringing Right! From the Beginning* (in resource list) for some alternate approaches and the theory behind them.

### **Principles of Good Assignments**

- Assign all bells before introducing the music to the bell choir
- Keep your ringers' physical limitations (re: size and weight of bells, as well as any coordination or visual limitations) in mind
- Consider bell-switching and bell-sharing challenges and opportunities. How (and by whom) can these challenges be met?
- If a bell cannot be rung *musically* as it is written, it needs to be reassigned
- Once the music is learned, ringers should be able to ring their parts correctly 99 percent of the time

### **Rotating vs. Permanent Assignments: Pros and Cons**

#### **Permanent Assignments:**

- + Best for new ringers and nonmusicians; offers a feeling of security
- + Ringers become proficient at their position
- + Can improve musicianship through familiarity
- Ringers may become possessive of "their" bells

#### **Rotating Assignments:**

- + May prevent boredom
- + Gives director flexibility to place strongest ringers where needed
- + Ringers become more versatile and adept at the entire instrument
- Ringers may be less technically proficient in any given position

### **To Mark or Not to Mark?**

Marking music (e.g., blue for left hand, red for right hand, with lines drawn to indicate duration of pitch and arrows drawn to indicate bell changes) can aid new bell ringers, especially those who are just learning to read music. Some directors spend hours color-coding each new piece of music! Consider the following points, however, as you think about whether and how to mark your musicians' music:

- Heavily marked music requires a separate binder for each musician, which can result in a cluttered bell table
- Marking music *for* ringers dictates a system, which can help with consistency but also may impose limitations as the choir improves (e.g., weaving, nontraditional assignments)
- Marking music *for* ringers puts the pressure for success on the director as much as on the ringer
- Heavily marking music reduces the lifespan of any piece of music and increases costs
- Consider offering suggestions for how to mark music and encouraging ringers to mark their own music in a way that will be most helpful for them! This can also help facilitate at-home study and genuine understanding of the music

### **Growing Gradually**

Just because your church or organization owns 5 octaves of bells doesn't mean you have to use all of them! If you have a new choir, consider ringing on 2 octaves at first and then expanding as ringers' experience and confidence grows. It takes (strength) training and practice to ring bass bells, and special skills and practice to ring the upper 4<sup>th</sup> octave and beyond. Beautiful music is being written for as few as 1-2 octaves of bells; use the personnel you have now and expand only as they are ready!

### **Dealing with Ringers of Various Skill Levels**

Every musical ensemble represents a range of skill levels; your handbell group is no different. If your group includes experienced ringers as well as beginners, here are some tips to help manage the challenges:

- Stretch experienced ringers by giving them demanding assignments (see "Rotating v. Permanent Assignments" above)
- Strapped for personnel? Utilize your more experienced ringers—in a 4-octave choir one ringer can ring G6-C7 in a 4-in-hand configuration, for example.
- Don't let more experienced ringers become "bell hogs" unless they can ring musically; encourage collaborative problem-solving for bell-sharing challenges
- Offer opportunities for solo or small ensemble ringing, or for training as an assistant conductor or section leader
- Don't allow musicians to correct one another
- Offer kindness and encouragement to every ringer, regardless of their skill level. Every musician has the opportunity to improve!

### **Recommended Resources**

Berry, Susan	<i>Healthy Ringing for Handbells and Handchimes</i>
Moore, Daniel K.	<i>Ringin' Right! From the Beginning</i>
Thompson, Martha Lynn	<i>Handbell Helper: A Guide for Beginning Directors and Choirs</i>
Van Valey, Janet and Susan Berry	<i>Learning to Ring series (with Director's Guide)</i>



## Handbell Music Difficulty Levels (from Handbell Musicians of America)

### Level 1

- **Meters:** 4/4, C (common time), 3/4, and 2/4
- **Notes and/or Rest Values:** while, dotted-half, quarter
- **Rhythmic Elements:** No subdivision of beats, simple use of ties
- **Techniques:** Ring, shoulder damp, Sk, TD, echo, martellato, Sw, RT - all with adequate preparation time
- **Handbell/Handchime Changes:** None (no accidentals)
- **Articulation:** See *Techniques*
- **Dynamic Levels:** All from *pp* to *ff* in homophonic style (all ringing at the same level) with limited use of *crescendo* or *diminuendo*
- **Tempo:** Slow to moderate

### Level 2

- **Meters:** 2/2, cut time, 3/2, and simple mixed meters of 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4
- **Notes and/or Rest Values:** Eighths, the dotted-quarter followed by an eighth, simple combinations of eighths and quarters
- **Rhythmic Elements:** Syncopation – simple patterns such as eighth-quarter-eighth, anacrusis – pick-up notes or upbeats and their effect on the final measure
- **Techniques:** Table damp, PI, martellato-lift, malleting, and any combination of two different techniques with adequate preparation time
- **Handbell/Handchime Changes:** Limited number of changes per ringer with adequate preparation time
- **Articulation:** See *Techniques*
- **Dynamic Levels:** *Crescendo* and *diminuendo* polyphonic style with simple dynamic contrasts (such as two voices having different dynamic levels)
- **Tempo:** Slow to moderate

### Level 3

- **Meters:** 6/8, 3/4 (in one pulse per measure), 3/8, 9/8, 12/8, 6/4
- **Notes and/or Rest Values:** Sixteenth, dotted-eighth and sixteenth note patterns, triplet
- **Rhythmic Elements:** Syncopation
- **Techniques:** Brush damp
- **Handbell/Handchime Changes:** Extensive number of changes per ringer
- **Articulation:** Combinations of techniques in eighth-note patterns at moderate *tempi*
- **Dynamic Levels:** *Subito piano* or *subito forte* without rest, more complex polyphony with more than two independent voices, more rapid shifts of dynamic levels
- **Tempo:** More changes of *tempo* within the work

### Level 4

- **Meters:** Mixed of 6/8 and 3/4, 5/4
- **Notes and/or Rest Values:** All of previous at faster tempo, triplet over two beats
- **Rhythmic Elements:** Syncopation – more complex, using sixteenth-notes and ties
- **Techniques:** Brush damp
- **Handbell/Handchime Changes:** Extensive number of changes per ringer
- **Articulation:** Combinations of techniques in eighth-note patterns at moderate *tempi*
- **Dynamic Levels:** *Subito piano* or *subito forte* without rest, more complex polyphony with more than two independent voices, more rapid shifts of dynamic levels
- **Tempo:** More changes of *tempo* within the work

### Level 5

- **Meters:** Irregular meters
- **Notes and/or Rest Values:** Dotted rhythms in compound meters at fast tempi, duples against triples
- **Rhythmic Elements:** Syncopation – more complex, mixed patterns
- **Techniques:** Ring-hook-damp sequences, handbell passes at moderate *tempi*
- **Handbell/Handchime Changes:** Unlimited
- **Articulation:** Any combination at faster *tempi*
- **Dynamic Levels:** Rapid shifts between levels with no preparation, more frequent use of *crescendo* and *decrescendo*
- **Tempo:** More changes of *tempo* within a work including abrupt shifts

### Level 6

- **Meters:** Unlimited
- **Notes and/or Rest Values:** More than four eighth or sixteenth-notes to a pulse (such as five, six, seven, etc.), thirty-second notes
- **Rhythmic Elements:** Complex rhythms at any tempo
- **Techniques:** All, any *tempi*
- **Handbell/Handchime Changes:** Unlimited
- **Articulation:** Unlimited combinations at any *tempo*
- **Dynamic Levels:** No limits on shifts (sudden or gradual) or accents
- **Tempo:** Only those imposed by the nature of the instrument, complex changes within a work