

Guide for Getting Started with Handbells in Schools



Handbell Musicians
OF AMERICA

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Getting Started

Equipment needed

Handbells/Handchimes (Handbells and Handchimes are a transposed instrument)

- 2 octaves = about 7+ ringers, G4-G6
- 3 octaves = about 11+ ringers, C4-C7

Tables

- 2 octaves = about 18 feet
- 3 octaves = about 24 feet
- 30 inches wide
- All the same height (29 inches works well)

Foam

- The same amount as the table tops
- 4 inches deep is best

Fabric to cover foam pads (most groups prefer corduroy)

Three-ring binders with split backs

- The split back is folded under itself so the binder acts as a table-top music stand, which raises the music inside so it is easier to read.
- There are usually two ringing positions per binder, so two octaves require four binders for ringers and one more for the conductor, and three octaves require six binders for ringers and one more for the conductor.

Gloves

- Some groups prefer to wear gloves so as to not put excessive fingerprints on the handbells.

Rehearsal Room Setup

Tables are set up according to the rehearsal/performance space. Ideally, the tables are in a contiguous line, either straight or in a U- or L-shape. Parallel lines make it more difficult for the ringers in the back to see the conductor and for the audience to hear the bells in the back.

Bells are traditionally set up in keyboard order (for the ringers), meaning the lowest bells are on the conductor's right (the ringers' left) ascending chromatically. To help identify the "black keys," the chromatic (sharps and flats) bells are placed slightly closer to the conductor's side of the table.

Each music binder is usually set up between two ringing positions (i.e., G4,A4 and B4,C5). Label each binder so the ringers use the same music each time.

Basic Ringing Techniques

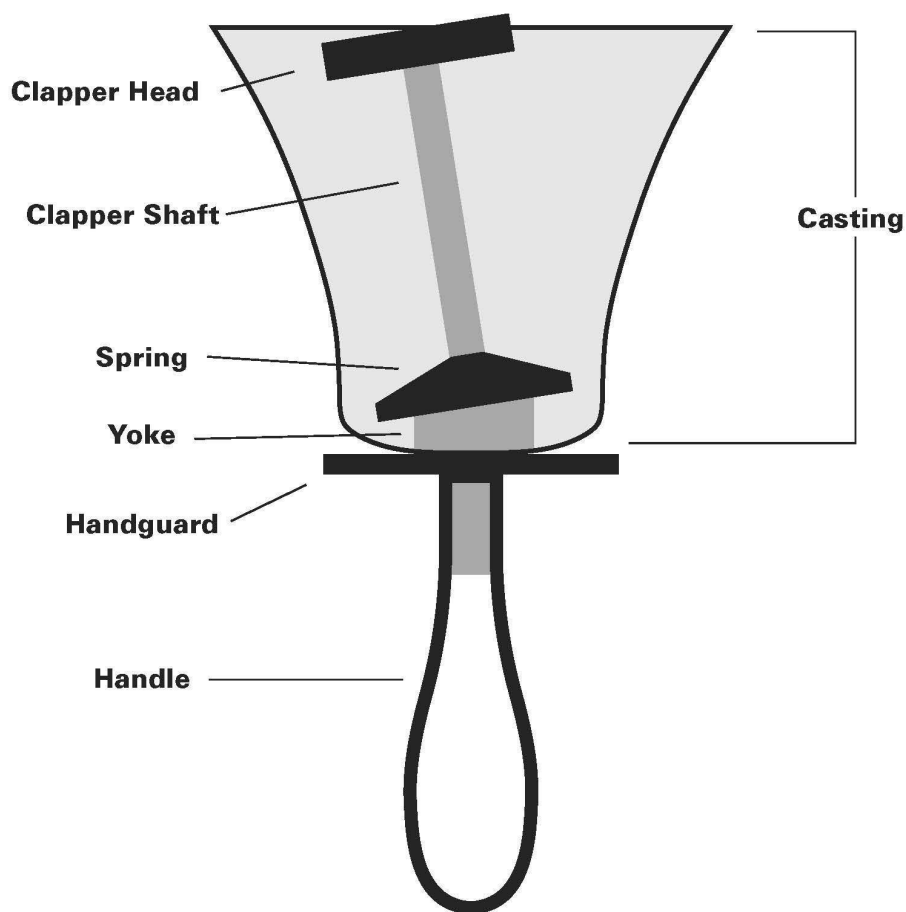
Parts of the bell

Before the students begin ringing techniques, start by identifying the parts of the bell.

Anatomy of a Handbell

The following diagram represents the basic structure of an English Handbell. It does not represent any particular make of handbell, nor does it show all the inner parts of the clapper mechanism. It is only meant to identify common parts for teaching purposes.

Please note that exact sizes and shapes of the parts, as well as their orientation, vary by manufacturer.



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Basic Ringing Technique

Start by placing one bell on the table in front of the student, with the bell symbol on the handle facing up. Then have them follow these steps:

1. Pick up the bell so that the bell symbol faces you, and the handguard rests on the plateau created between your thumb and fingers. Your forearm should be parallel to the table and your wrist should be neutral—not bent up or down, backward or forward, or to either side.
2. Close your index finger around the handle to meet your thumb in a relaxed, easy grip for supporting the bell in your hand. Keep the other fingers of your hand relaxed and easy, lightly touching the handle of the bell, allowing the bell to rest on the top of the hand.
3. Raise your arm and bring the bell to your shoulder, with the rim of the casting lightly touching your shoulder and the clapper away from the forward edge of the casting. (This is the “ready to ring” position.)
4. Keep the wrist neutral, and move the casting forward with the arm and by squeezing the handle with your fingers to move the handle into the palm of hand, causing the clapper to move forward and strike the front edge of the casting. The bell should always rest on the top of the circle created by the thumb and first finger.
5. After the bell rings, relax the fingers on the handle so the handle moves away from the body and the clapper moves to the back of the bell, ready to ring again.
6. Continue to practice making the bell ring using this method. Remember to keep the wrist neutral and the grip relaxed.

Full Ringing Stroke

Sound is produced from the vibration of the casting when the clapper strikes—so the sound comes from the casting, not the inside of the bell. It’s important to make sure the bell casting is always facing your audience.

Practice a circular motion, starting from the shoulder and moving down and out in an arc, ringing the bell at the bottom front of the circle, and continuing around the circle back to the shoulder to damp the bell. (The size of the circle is determined by the length of the note being rung—larger circles for longer notes and smaller circles for shorter notes.)

You can also think of a capital D, where your body represents the flat side of the letter and the rounded part represents the ringing arc. Practice ringing notes of different values and try adjusting the size of the ringing stroke accordingly.

Damping

Unless otherwise noted in the music, bells should be damped at the end of the note value. For example, if you are ringing a whole note in 4/4 time, let the bell ring for four counts and stop the sound at the end of count four.

The sound of the bells are stopped by damping the bell on the shoulder, with the hand or fingers, or by pushing the bell into the table, depending on what comes next in the music or by the type of technique needed. To stop the sound, you stop the vibration of the casting. Shoulder damping is the most common and standard damping technique. For larger bells, make sure the full side of the bell casting is pressed to the shoulder to stop the sound.

Table damping is used when you need to change to a different bell after the one in hand is rung. Ring the bell normally for the full value of the note, then move the bell to a position parallel with the table and damp it by pressing it into the foam. Additionally, hand or finger damping can be used in faster passages for more accurate note values.

Executing dynamics

The dynamics of the bell are controlled by the speed of the clapper striking the casting. Slower speeds produce a softer sound, while faster speeds produce a louder sound. The ringer controls the speed of the clapper through the motion of the hand and arm. A lighter stroke with a slight squeeze of the handle will result in a softer strike. A more forceful stroke with a stronger squeeze on the handle produces a louder sound. Experiment with different methods for changing the dynamics of the bell. However, always keep a safe and healthy ringing stroke in mind and avoid snapping or actively engaging the wrist.

Executing various ringing techniques

The chart on the following page is taken from the *Handbell and Handchime Notation Guide*, published by Handbell Musicians of America. These demonstrate notations you will see in handbell and handchime music. Following the chart is a brief description of how to execute the most common techniques. Complete details for all the techniques are available in the *Notation Guide*.

Handbell and Handchime Notation

Notation Symbol Chart

	Terminology	Optional Notes	<i>optional opt.</i>
BD	Brush Damp	Enclosures for optional notes	() [] < > { }
CD	Controlled Diminuendo	Pluck	PI
	Damp Sign	Pluck Lift	PI.↑
	Echo	Ring	R
	Gyro	Ring Touch	RT
	Handbell Tree	Rolled Chord	
HB	Handbell	Selective Damp for chord notes	
HC	Handchime	Selective Damp for single note	
HD	Hand Damp	Shake	Sk and/or
	Notehead shape used for a handchime part to distinguish it from a handbell part when both are notated on the same staff.	Singing Bell	SB
LV	Let Vibrate or Laissez Vibrer	Swing	Sw ↓ ↑
Mal.	Mallet	Voice-Leading Lines	
+	Mallet on suspended handbell	Thumb Damp	TD
‡	Mallet with handbell on table	Table Land Damp	TLD
‡↑	Mallet Lift	Tap Pluck	TPI
	Mallet Roll on suspended handbell	Trill	<i>tr</i>
	Mallet Roll with handbell on table	Vibrato	<i>vib.</i>
▼	Martellato	The Voicer's Mark or strikepoint is a permanently scribed line inside the handbell casting applied by the voicing technician to identify the point of optimum tonal response at which the clapper is aligned in the striking plane.	Voicer's Mark or Strikepoint
▼↑	Martellato Lift		

Let Vibrate or Laissez Vibrer (LV)

An LV marking in the score is an instruction to allow the sound of the handbell to resonate, regardless of note value or rests, until damping is indicated. Damping will be indicated in three ways:

1. A new LV indicates all ringing bells should be damped and a new LV will begin.
2. The letter R indicates that you should return to the normal manner of ringing and damping according to note values and rests.
3. The Damp Sign (see notation chart) indicates the end of the current LV. Return to normal ringing unless a new LV is indicated.

Swing (SW)

This indicates a full-arm swing after ringing the handbell, so that the casting moves from the opening facing up to the opening facing down. Take care not to strike the bell on the table or on a wall behind you; adjust the length of your swing to avoid this. The SW marking will be followed by up and down arrows indicating the direction your arm should swing, up or down, and the beats when the swing should occur.

Staccato stopped sounds

A stopped sound is indicated by a staccato dot over the note. The dot will often be accompanied by an additional marking to indicate the type of stopped sound to execute.

- **Pluck (PL)** indicates that you place the handbell on the padded table and use the thumb and first two fingers to throw the clapper into the casting to create the sound.
- **Thumb Damp (TD)** indicates the thumb of the hand holding the handbell should be placed on the outside of the casting, producing the stopped sound when the clapper strikes the handbell. The addition of one or two fingers may be required on larger bells to create a completely stopped sound. The director should work with the group to make sure a consistent stopped sound is created up and down the table.
- **Mallet (shown as a + over the dot)** indicates that the handbell should be struck with a mallet while resting on the table. Mallets are available in a variety of sizes and levels of hardness. Higher/smaller handbells will require a harder mallet and lower/larger bells should be struck with a softer mallet. Mallets made for handbells will have markings on the mallet shaft to indicate the range of handbells for which they are appropriate. To mallet a handbell, hold the mallet shaft between the thumb and index finger, loosely wrapping the other fingers around for balance. Strike the handbell on the outside of the casting from a distance equal to that from which the clapper would strike on the inside of the bell. The mallet should strike the casting at a point that corresponds to the clapper strike-point on the inside.

After striking, the mallet head should bounce back to the start position. Particular care should be taken in malleting larger bass handbells, as the metal is thinner on the larger bells and can crack more easily.

Suspended mallet (+)

A + without a dot above a note indicates that you should strike the handbell with a mallet while holding it suspended above the table. The same principles apply for striking the handbell when it is suspended as when it is on the padded table. Hold the handbell so the casting faces the audience, and

strike the outside of the casting with the mallet at a point on the casting where the clapper would strike the inside of the bell. After striking, the mallet head should bounce back to the start position.

Martellato (or Mart)

The martellato symbol indicates that the handbell is sounded by holding it by the handle and gently striking the full body of the handbell horizontally on a properly padded table. The handbell should start no more than a couple of inches from the surface of the table. Once the handbell sounds, it is immediately stopped by the padding on the table. It is important not to start too high or strike the bell too hard into the table to avoid damaging the handbell. Bass bells below G3 should not be mated. Handchimes should never be mated.

Martellato Lift (or Mart Lift)

To execute a martellato lift, follow the steps for a standard martellato, then immediately lift the handbell up from the table so the sound sustains.

Shake (SK)

A shake is executed by rapidly shaking the handbell so the clapper strikes both sides of the casting. The duration of the shake is shown by the note value.

For more information or complete details for all techniques, see the *Handbell and Handchime Notation Guide*, available from Handbell Musicians of America.

Basic Directing Skills

Bell assignments

Standard for three octaves (assignments include the corresponding sharps and flats):

C4D4 = position 1, E4F4 = position 2, G4A4 = position 3, B4C5 = position 4, D5E5 = position 5, F5G5 = position 6, A5B5 = position 7, C6D6 = position 8, E6F6 = position 9, G6A6 = position 10, B6C7 = position 11

To change or not to change assignments

- Beginning music readers will benefit from staying in the same position for a while.
- Changing assignments for each different piece encourages better note-reading skills, alleviates boredom, allows the conductor to assign according to individuals' strengths and weaknesses, keeps ringers from "owning bells," and improves overall sense of ensemble and musical skills.

Generalities

- Bass bells (C4 to F4) provide the foundation and tend to have less rhythmic variety. These bells tend to be good for beginning music readers and/or those needing to develop their coordination skills.
- Battery bells (G4 to B5) are the core of the harmony and are busier than bass bells. The A5B5 position can be challenging, both because the notes are more difficult to pick out on the staff and because they are often split between the melody and the harmony in the same piece.
- Higher treble bells (C6 to C7) are generally responsible for the melody and have more complex rhythms. G6 to C7 are more easily picked out on the staff and generally play a little less often than the other high treble bells.
- Level 1 (see page 25 of the *Handbell and Handchime Notation Booklet*) music doesn't have bell changes (accidentals or key changes), but it can use any one key signature for the entire piece. Therefore, your ringers who have Bs, Fs, Es and Cs in particular should be aware if they have a flat or sharp in the key signature.

Choosing literature for beginning Groups

- Starting with level 1 music (see page 25 of the *Handbell and Handchime Notation Booklet*) can be helpful for your beginning ensemble because this repertoire usually has no bell changes (no accidentals or key changes), very few eighth notes, and plenty of preparation time for technique changes.
- Big, full chords build confidence.
- Having "gathering points" helps lost ringers to find their place. Examples are fermatas, ritardandos, or a particular bell technique.
- Large print can help facilitate picking a note out of a chord.

Ringling with Less than a Full Ensemble

The standard assignments

Standard Assignments	
Range	Number of Ringers
2 octaves: G4–G6	8 (top position has just 1 bell)
3 octaves: C4–C7	11
4 octaves: G3–G7	11 + 1 or more in bass (C#7–G7 as octaves)
5 octaves: C3–C8	11 + 2 or more in bass (C#7–C8 as octaves)

What can you do when you don't have that many ringers?

- You have two options: Either work on building skills so ringers can cover more bells or choose your repertoire carefully. In this guide, we will focus on repertoire selection.
- We'll go through five ideas that can help you choose music for your situation. These examples are based on having two to three octaves of bells, and fewer than the 8 to 11 people needed for standard assignments.

Idea 1: Use another instrument on the melody

Idea 2: Use a keyboard to cover some parts

Idea 3: Find music written for fewer bells and ringers

There's quite a bit of literature out there for 4, 8, 12, 13, or 16 bells (and up) which is designed to be played with a small number of ringers.

Idea 4: Split parts in small ensemble music

You could buy a trio and put two people on each part. This would mean you now have a selection for six ringers—and most likely you can eliminate the need for higher level skills such as weaving. Or, you could take a quartet and divide it into five, six, or seven parts. This is especially effective if you have wide ability ranges, as so many of us do.

Idea 5: Select a piece performed entirely on mallets

There are usually several parts that can be combined.

Repertoire for Fewer Bells/Ringers

- www.choraegus.com
Larry Sue has a large number of selections for 8, 12 and 16 bells. Titles are sold individually. 8 bells are G5–G6, 12 bells either C5 to G6 or F5 to C7.
- www.sonologymusic.com
Use the search engine and select “12 Bells” (sold individually).
- *Twelve Bells & Twelve Bells +1* (Patricia Sanders Cota) from Hope Publishing
Multiple collections cover worship (traditional and contemporary), Americana, spirituals, weddings, Lent/Easter & Christmas. 12 (C5 to G6) and 13 bells (C5 to A6).
- *Ring with 6* (Martha Lynn Thompson) from Hope Publishing
Multiple collections cover worship (traditional and contemporary), classics, year-round selections, Lent/Easter & Christmas. Range varies: 14-19 bells from a 3 octave set.
- *Less than a Full Choir* (various) from Cantabile Press
Multiple volumes cover worship (traditional and contemporary), Lent/Easter and Christmas. Generally 12 to 14 bells, treble clef.
- *...in F Major* (various) from Choristers Guild
Collections (spirituals, Christmas, hymns, praise) for 12 bells (F5 to C7)
- *Five or Less* (Bob Burroughs) from Lorenz
Four volumes of short selections (originals and arrangements) in a limited range which can be rung with a maximum of five ringers, number varies by selection.
- *Four Ringer Handbell Collections* (James Kimball) from Kimball Publishing
A series of 14 collections covering worship, folk tunes, Christmas, and secular. Eight bells, all treble clef.
- *Hand in Glove* (Gary Smoke) from High Meadow Music Publishing
Four books for 11 to 18 bells covering hymns, Christmas, and Americana.
- Mayola Music (now sold by Handbell Ringers of Great Britain)
Large number of books of selections of music for 12 bells and more. Many are arranged by Guy Ratcliffe. (For a full list, use this link: http://www.hrgb.org.uk/shop/index.php?main_page=index&cPath=6_11). Your music distributor should be able to get them.

Handbell Music Publishers

AGEHR Publishing

Sold by www.jwpepper.com and
www.handbellworld.com

Alfred Publishing

www.alfred.com

Choristers Guild

www.choristersguild.org

From the Top

www.fromthetopmusic.com

GIA Music

www.giamusic.com

Hope Publishing

www.hopepublishing.com

The Lorenz Company

www.lorenz.com

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www.lorenz.com



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