

I DON'T LIKE THIS PIECE – YET!

by Kevin McChesney

“I don't like this piece!”

This hue and cry arises, in various and sundry forms, from the ranks of the bell choir often and with feeling. Sometimes it's snapped in frustration, sometimes whispered “so the director won't hear” under one's breath, sometimes it's said in other words. Worst of all, sometimes it takes the form of being uncooperative and “acting up.” A bane of the director's existence? A detriment to morale and accomplishing anything in rehearsal? Should we eliminate this attitude, eradicate these statements? **My answer is – yes and no.**

When any group of people is involved, it means there are differences in taste and opinion. That's how it is, and it would be naive to try to eliminate that dynamic from the handbell choir or indeed from any group setting. That's part of what makes the world wonderful and interesting – our differing outlooks and desires and perceptions of what is beautiful and meaningful.

Still, there's no denying that “I don't like this piece,” heard repeatedly, can poison the attitude of the group at its worst, and even at its best can be annoying and troublesome to those who do like the piece and/or are simply doing their best to play the music well. So how do we allow for the fact that not everyone is going to like every piece, that everyone is entitled to their opinion, and still preserve an efficient and energetic rehearsal? **Do we simply forbid the statement “I don't like this piece” and its endless variations?**

It would be tragically naive to make a rule in the rehearsal room that no one is allowed to say that they don't like a piece, that this negative influence won't be tolerated. It might alleviate the harm done to the attitudes of fellow ringers and to the director, but it simply isn't realistic or even necessarily any less harmful to have everyone paste a smile on their face and pretend. The music might well suffer for that just as easily. And even without saying anything, those who don't like a particular title can still “act up” and not work diligently to create the best possible presentation.

“Ok,” you say, “I can't change the ringers, and I'm not likely to eliminate the ‘I don't like this piece’ sentiment. What else can I try to change? Maybe the music we play; maybe the director should cave in to the ringers on titles that are not well-liked. Would that keep the peace?”

Assuming a group presents a variety of material, it is inevitable that any given ringer simply won't like something that the group is playing. So giving in every time to someone not liking a piece is likely to leave very, very little music in the folders.

And trying to find a style that everyone likes and just sticking to that isn't the answer either, because ringers as well as listeners do thrive on variety and won't like playing or hearing the same kinds of things over and over. Even a style that was a big hit once or twice or several times can wear thin with repetition.

Does that just leave grim resignation? We can't change the fact that ringers won't like certain pieces and we can't make the situation better by changing the music we play. But hearing “I don't like this piece” can be disruptive, can hurt morale, and can hurt the feelings of those who do enjoy the piece. So are we just stuck with those bad feelings?

There are a few things about the “I don't like this piece” attitude that, once understood, can help the handbell program take large and happy steps forward.

“Why don’t I like this piece?”

First, the biggest help is for ringers to understand from the outset that there are going to be pieces that they don’t particularly care for in the folder from time to time. This is how it is. If a group is going to present a well-rounded program with varying styles, uses, and musical expressions, it’s bound to happen that something in there won’t particularly appeal to an individual ringer at some point. Maybe quite a number of times. The role of the ringer is to play each piece to the best of his/her ability, regardless of personal opinions about the music.

This is not to say that those opinions don’t matter. It is perfectly legitimate not to care for a certain piece of music. In fact, some of the most constructive ideas for creating a strong presentation of a specific piece come from an individual who doesn’t love the piece as effortlessly and automatically as other ringers, because that person hears the piece more objectively and in a different way. So while “I don’t like this piece” isn’t constructive, something like **“I don’t hear it like that – in fact, I’ve been wondering what it is we’re really trying to say in this passage”** can become a springboard for thinking through the presentation of that passage and therefore a positive influence.

So it’s vital that ringers understand that part of what they signed on for by being in the bell choir is to accept some pieces that they don’t particularly like. In fact, it goes further than that; they not only signed on to accept those pieces, but also to play them to the best of their ability and to contribute whatever they can in words, ideas, talent, and technique to make that piece the very best it can be.

A second element of “I don’t like this piece” that ringers need to take to heart has to do with assigned parts. Whether your group moves around from piece to piece or not, it is simply unavoidable that an individual ringer will occasionally – perhaps even frequently – have a part that is unchallenging or otherwise not as much fun to play as other parts. This is what it is to be a ringer – to have one great, fulfilling, and fun part out of maybe 8 or 10 or more pieces the group plays. There are a couple of pieces out there where every part is challenging, but they are literally 2 or 3 pieces out of thousands. Since it’s just a fact of the ringer’s life that some, even most, parts aren’t all that interesting, it’s important for the morale of the group to remember that “I don’t like this part” is NOT the same thing as “I don’t like this piece.” If you don’t like the part you have on this particular piece, challenge yourself to listen carefully to the music going on around you to understand the merits of the piece and to discover how you can contribute to this musical whole.

A third element of “I don’t like this piece” that needs to be understood rests with the director. Rather than jump to the conclusion that “I don’t like this piece” is just useless and hurtful griping, it would benefit the director to take a little time to understand why a statement like “I don’t like this piece” comes up at all.

A director, like the ringers, needs to accept that not everyone is going to like every piece. Further, the director needs to accept that sometimes that dislike is going to be expressed. The director can do all that is within his/her power to help the ringers express this dislike in positive ways, but some tranquility can be afforded simply by knowing and understanding that “I don’t like this piece” and its endless varieties are part and parcel of what we do.

So why do the ringers feel the need to express this dislike? Can't they just keep it to themselves?

One reason “I don't like this piece” comes up is **frustration**, usually with something other than issues of taste. Rehearsals have to do with ringers learning the music, and learning has times when we make mistakes, take steps backwards as well as forwards, get frustrated at not being able to do things, get frustrated because others in the group haven't solidified their parts. An observant director finds that the number of instances of “I don't like this piece” and a host of similar statements decreases as the group learns the music. I know that in my group, Pikes Peak Ringers, there have been countless times where some or even all of the ringers didn't like a piece when we first started learning it and ended up liking it very much by the time we performed it – sometimes it was even their favorite for the season!

As mentioned above, another reason for these negative statements has to do with **the ringer's individual part**. When a ringer has challenges which (hopefully only for the moment) are beyond him or her, it leads to expressing frustration. Equally true for many ringers, a part that presents little challenge also leads to “I don't like this piece” (though thanks to the overall educating and maturing of the bell world this is thankfully and blessedly changing). A director can save him/herself a lot of grief by understanding this dynamic and by encouraging the ringers to understand that “I don't like this *part*” is not the same as “I don't like this *piece*,” so it benefits everyone for them to be patient and challenge themselves to listen to and be part of the musical whole.

The process of music-making is not truly complete until we have played our music FOR someone.

Much of the time, we get too deeply embroiled in our rehearsal and service/concert schedule. It is all too simple to lose sight of the fact that our goal is to make a presentation in worship or concert and that presentation will be for people – real, living, breathing human beings who are ready to connect with our music and therefore with us.

Caught up in the details, frustrations, and hard work of putting together a solid presentation, it is vital that we don't lose touch with the purpose of it all which is to communicate with those listening and watching.

If it is simple to forget that we are going to have people to play for, it is certainly even simpler to remember the people we are to play for with fear and trepidation. But...

Nervousness can be good.

There is nothing inherently wrong with nervousness. It is a natural and, except for rare individual mutations, unavoidable part of our chemical makeup. There is something intimidating and fear-inducing in offering a part of ourselves to others.

One of the fundamental fears in life is the fear of being rejected, and our sense of nervousness stems from this. Our mind and body react to the idea of being noticed as we ring (or speak or ask someone for a date or juggle or...) with the resounding, terrifying question “what if they don't like me?” There's irony here on a couple of levels. The first is that people DO appreciate what we do. People know effort and sincerity when they see it, and even pretty imperfect performances are embraced by listeners and watchers. The second irony is that we KNOW this to be true! We appreciate the efforts of others, and if pressed most of us would acknowledge that as long as we are doing our best people will be grateful for our efforts.

But it's hard to fight millions of years of evolution, and we still react by being nervous. That's not all bad, by any means. It spurs us on to prepare well so that we make a good showing. It gives us an “edge” that helps us to concentrate and devote energy to our music as we play. **So a little nervousness is a good thing!**

Excessive “nerves” can be debilitating, of course. I’m afraid in my experience as a performer and in working with performers, I’ve never run across a fool-proof method of overcoming nervousness. The only principles I know for sure are:

- 1) **The more you perform, the better you will be at performing and the less nervous you will be.** It takes courage to get out there and do it those first few times, but the nerves do calm down with repeated performing.
- 2) **If you can keep in mind that your audiences and congregations complete your music, give it purpose, that no music has actually been made until you play FOR someone, it helps to focus your preparation and inspire your presentations.** After all, if you were to rehearse a piece for months but never present it to anyone but the other ringers in your bell choir, have you done any more than make a profound speech to a bunch of empty chairs?

In discussing the subject of ringers (and directors, for that matter) liking a piece of music, I think it is vital to keep in mind this simple idea that the music has not been completed until it has been played for people. That means that none of us in the rehearsal room really know how a piece will be received until it is presented, so hasty judgments about whether it will be liked or whether we will like the piece (or at least how it is received) can only be detrimental to diligent and energetic preparation of fine music.

Julian Bream, one of the finest classical guitarists of modern times, maintains that he selects titles for his concerts by actually performing them on a few concerts. While most of us certainly don’t have the luxury of having performances “to burn” as a world-touring performer like Bream has, the principle is a sound one. Until listener reaction and the effectiveness of communication can be experienced, how do we know if a given piece is of value in reaching others? This is, after all, our goal in playing music.

So keep in mind that ultimately we will be playing this music for people and that will truly complete our efforts.

The Listener Completes Us...

Some pieces do fall flat – that’s part and parcel of being a musician. This can happen for any number of reasons – inadequate preparation, lack of focus in rehearsal or performance, a poor match-up between the music and the temperament of the group. It can even happen when the piece is well-presented but simply doesn’t speak to a group of listeners because of venue, what “baggage” the listeners bring to the room, atmosphere, and a host of other elements.

And sometimes the listeners make all the positive difference in the world. My group, The Pikes Peak Ringers, put together a transcription of Holiday for Strings one season in our early years. To be perfectly honest, none of us in the group much cared for the piece. It was hard work, at least for the stage of development we were in at the time, with seemingly very little musical reward. I had chosen it hoping the ringers would enjoy it and looking toward audience appeal. But after a time, I confess I didn’t like the piece much either. Well, we’d put in some hard, time-consuming work and I was determined to make a go of it. So I was honest and open with my ringers and let them know that I understood that they didn’t particularly care for the piece and that frankly I wasn’t very wild about it either. But despite that, we had put in the investment of time and we were going to see it through, so I expected them to give it their very best – fine musical phrasing, excited and involved movements and facial expressions, we even threw in a couple of Lawrence Welk champagne cork noises.

GUESS which piece on our programs got the most applause that season! That's right – good old Holiday for Strings. The listeners (and watchers – I think some of the visual “shtick” helped) just loved it. That was one of my first lessons in understanding it is the listeners that complete the music we make.

The Important Part is “Yet”

Opinions matter and I don't mean to suggest that we should automatically force ourselves to like every piece we play. That would be artificial and would show through in our performances in a negative way. But I do maintain that:

- 1) **We should embrace our audiences and congregations rather than fear them.** It's fine to feel some nervousness, but remember that those listening are very much on your side. They want things to go well for you, and they believe in and appreciate what you have to offer.
- 2) **It is important to remember that the audience/congregation may very well like this piece very much, regardless of how we feel about it,** so it is vital that we give each piece our best effort so that we reach the highest level of communication with our listeners.

Should we NEVER change repertoire if director and ringers don't like a piece? Of course not. Lack of time is the enemy in our programs. If the limited musical reward simply isn't worth the time and energy required to accomplish a strong presentation of a certain piece, then take that piece out of the line-up. I have a tendency to read a book through even when I'm not necessarily enjoying it very much or I'm finding it slow going. I suppose I look at the time already put in and figure I'm invested so I should see it through. I have a friend whose response to that is “NO! If I'm not into the story, I set it aside and start a new book.” He's right, of course. Director and ringers will know if a piece simply isn't working for them. If the piece isn't a good choice, set it aside and get working on a better choice.

That said, remember that “I don't like this piece” often has no relation to whether a ringer likes the piece or not, it's an indication of frustration with his/her part. **So don't throw in the towel on a piece too early. Give the ringers a chance to get through some of the learning stage, then if a piece still isn't going to fly for you, move on.**

A final suggestion: Encourage ringers (and the director) to say “I don't like this piece yet.” The corollary: Make it “I don't like this **PART** yet.”

“Yet” acknowledges that after working through the learning process, we may well end up with a winner here!