

KNOWING YOUR SCORE — BASIC SCORE STUDY TECHNIQUES

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I. SCORE STUDY FOR DIRECTORS

A. WAYS TO STUDY THE SCORE

1. **“Listen” to the music** mentally while reading through the score. This requires a quiet place free of interruptions. You will get better at listening to music with your “inner ear” with practice.
2. **Play through the piece** or sections of the piece on a keyboard. If your keyboard skills are not up to this, have a keyboardist help you. Most handbell music cannot be played note for note on a keyboard, but certainly the gist of the music can be given.
3. **Listen to a recording** of the piece as you look through the score. Use the promotional recordings provided by handbell publishers, or record a rehearsal of your own group.

VERY IMPORTANT!!! – DIRECT THE MUSIC! Whether using a recording, a keyboard, or your inner ear, be sure to physically direct the music a number of times before rehearsing. Isolate problem spots and practice them until you are comfortable with them. After all, your job is to direct, and you have to direct at the first rehearsal! Practice doing this, and spend time refining your direction in between rehearsals.

NOTE: Simply running through a piece once in your head just before rehearsal begins or, worse, listening to a promo recording weeks before the first rehearsal does not constitute score study!

- B. **WHAT TO LOOK FOR** – Isolate problem areas and have a strong idea of what you want musically before rehearsing. Return to the score as rehearsals progress to isolate areas that give continued trouble or are not flowing musically.

1. **The Director’s Challenges** – Continually evaluate your strengths and weaknesses as a director, and monitor your progress as you learn. This is true for any of these common problems:
 - a. **Dynamic changes** – Make your conducting motions reflect what you want musically. Are you directing everything mf, or do you clearly make your motions smaller for softer, larger for louder?
 - b. **Tempo changes** – Know precisely where the ringers are to slow down, speed up, or change tempos. ANTICIPATE these spots. If the ritard. is on beat 3, be sure you’ve given a signal for this on beat 2.
 - c. Know where **fermatas** are without looking at the score. Conducting a fermata is more effective if you are making eye contact.

- d. Start and end the music in the **character of the piece** – for instance, don't start a quiet prayerful offering with a giant march-like gesture. There may be several good solutions, so experiment.
- e. **Tempo** – Many directors tend to follow rather than lead ringers. Know at what speed you would like to perform a piece, as well as at what tempos you feel your ringers can successfully sight read and rehearse a piece. A metronome might be useful.
- f. **Repeated sections** – Know which sections of the music are literal repeats or near-repeats of previous sections. An effective rehearsal technique is to rehearse a passage until it is strong, then either jump to the identical section immediately or just after some work on another section. This will boost confidence and help rehearse page turns.
- g. Handbells are a visual as well as auditory medium. Make conscious decisions about how you would like the **presentation of the piece** to look. Will the ringers use motions that are broad, powerful, angular, smooth, soft, legato, synchronized, etc.? What will the beginning of the piece look like? What will the end of the piece look like? Begin creating the “picture” of the music from the first rehearsal.

2. The Ringers' Challenges

- a. **Changing bells** is the most difficult task a ringer has, or certainly that the bell group as a whole has to cope with. Places with lots of accidentals are the most difficult. Some solutions:

- 1) **Share a bell** with a neighbor – Ringing is a team effort and if one ringer's hands are full, often a neighbor has a free one to help out.
- 2) **Reassign an accidental to another ringer** if it only plays once or a few times in the piece.

NOTE: Reassigning and sometimes even the decision to share bells is the **DIRECTOR'S** job, not the ringer's. While it is true that many ringers are good at coming up with their own solutions, it is also true that even some advanced ringers exclude sharing and reassigning. It's best if the decision comes from the director, at least until the ringers get used to the frequent need for help from the team.

- 3) **Four-in-hand** – This is for small bells only, but can be a very fine tool for the purpose.
- 4) **Weaving** – This solution will depend on tempos and other technical considerations, but can solve the bell changing problem quickly.
- 5) **Passing a bell** from hand to hand – The tangle may be undone simply by passing a bell from the ringer's left hand to their right hand or vice-versa.
- 6) Temporarily place bells **out of keyboard order** to allow for easy, confident reaches and pick-ups. Of course, you'll want to place the bells back in keyboard order when convenient.

- 7) **Start the passage with the other hand.** This places the bell in the “wrong” hand temporarily. It’s actually not the “wrong” hand, since the music is being played musically and confidently; it’s temporarily out of its home position.
- 8) **Use a duplicate bell.** Using duplicate bells is not “cheating.” In fact, it’s a great technique for making sure the notes are being played comfortably.
- 9) **Get more ringers.** Many hands make light work. Sometimes, the best way to untangle a problem is simply to use more ringers.
- b. **Changing techniques** – Going from ringing to plucking, mallets to ringing, etc., is a technical struggle. Know where these passages occur, point them out, rehearse them carefully.
- c. **Changing from bells to chimes** or chimes to bells – Often adequate time for these changes is not given in the music. Identify these places ahead of time, rehearse them carefully. Reassigning, using duplicate bells or chimes, and the other solutions listed above may be needed.
- d. **Melody in the middle range** – The middle bells (4’s and 5’s) simply do not carry as well as the upper bells and the very low bells. Look for places in the score where middle bells need to be prominent. Mid-range ringers often play both melody and accompaniment. Look over their parts so you can offer guidance.
- e. **Page turns** – Spot the most challenging page turns, make suggestions for how to get through them, and rehearse them specifically. You greatly reduce wasted rehearsal time if you rehearse page turns as their own technical problem.

II. SCORE STUDY FOR RINGERS (and how directors can guide them)

What Ringers Are Looking For (even before the first reading)

- A. **Handbells Used Chart** – See which bells you will be using, then skim the piece to find the places where any accidentals or key changes occur. This will facilitate readings and early rehearsals.
- B. **Key Signature**
 1. A flat on line B in the key signature means that all B's in all octaves are to be played as B-flat unless otherwise indicated. A sharp on line F in the key signature means that all F's in all octaves are to be played as F-sharp unless otherwise indicated. This is true of all sharps and flats in the key signature.
 2. Knowledge of what key you are in is useful. For instance, if you are in the key of E-flat, you can be certain that E-flat will play quite a lot, where C and D will not.
 3. Knowledge of minor keys can also be useful. For instance, in the key of A minor, the G ringer can be sure that they will be playing many G-sharps.
- C. Locate **technically challenging spots** ahead of time as noted above in the section for directors. Check with your director for possible solutions.
- D. **Page turns** – Locate the most challenging page turns and work out as much as you can before reading the piece. Be straightforward with your director about which page turns give you the most trouble so they can be addressed and solved in the early stages of rehearsal.

III. THE MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF SCORE STUDY FOR BOTH RINGERS AND DIRECTORS!

The three words in the handbell world which are used by far the most and which have come to be unquestionably the most useless are “watch the director.” Identify specific places in the music where ringers can look up from their music and communicate with the director. Here are some suggestions:

1. **The beginning** – Be sure there is communication and eye contact when ringing is begun.

NOTE: Watching the count-off given by the director attentively, then immediately burying your head in the music as you play does not constitute watching. Memorize the first 3 or 4 bars of music and be sure you and your director are playing music together!

2. **The end** – Once the final chord is struck look up for the cut-off. If the piece ends with a stopped sound, be sure you are looking up so you will know exactly when to play the final sound. Memorize the last few bars of every piece.
3. **Whole notes, dotted half notes, half notes** – Once a long note is struck, if the ringer is not watching to see where those next couple beats are, the ringer is relying solely on his or her own counting. Counting is an absolute necessity, of course, but becomes meaningless if the ringer is not counting in time with the director!
4. **Rests** – There really isn't anything better to do than to look up and check in with the director during rests.
5. **Repeated patterns** – Both ringers and directors should identify patterns that repeat a number of times in succession. There is no logic to looking at the music if you know you are just going to play the same notes in the same rhythm 18 times! Look up!
6. **Change of tempo** – Most ringers look up at a ritard. Don't forget to memorize the next measure, too - a tempo!
7. **Technically difficult passages** (see above) – Technically challenging spots tend to slow down or speed up. Challenge yourself to watch during these passages to make sure you are in sync – that will mean memorizing a few more notes!
8. **Changes in dynamics** – You may have seen the indication to get softer, but you don't know how much softer unless you are watching the director.
9. **Fermatas** – The rhythm of the piece has stopped. There's no way to know what's going to happen next if your eyes aren't on the director.

There are numerous other places in the music where ringers can watch the director. Both ringers and directors should find these spots and make sure good communication is happening throughout rehearsals and performances.

Conclusion: Score study saves valuable rehearsal time and greatly increases the musical and technical confidence of both ringers and directors. With only a little time spent studying the music, you can create wonderful communication between ringers and director that results in a musically rewarding presentation.