MALLETING SUSPENDED BELLS

by Kevin McChesney

As the name of the technique implies, you will strike a handbell that is held in the air, not resting on the padded table, with a mallet. Thus, this is a two-handed technique, with one hand holding the handle of the bell and the other manipulating the mallet.

It is notated with a plus sign - "+" - which is not to be confused with the sign for malleting bells while they rest on the table, which is the plus sign combined with a staccate dot.

To give the technique its optimum sound, you need to find the proper point on the outside surface of the casting of the bell where the mallet is to strike. This is easily done. Locate the point where the clapper strikes the casting on the inside surface. Translate the distance – from the clapper at this strikepoint to the lip of the bell – to the outside surface. That point on the outside surface is roughly where you want to strike the bell with the mallet for this technique.

Of course, the clapper striking the casting during a normal ringing stroke happens against the surface that is furthest from the ringer. For malleting on suspended bells, you will want to strike the surface of the casting which is facing you. There is no need to turn the bell at all as there is no difference in sound from point to point around the surface of the casting, as long as you are at a point roughly the same distance from the lip as the clapper is from the lip when it strikes the casting.

HOLDING THE BELL

By far the most common question associated with malleting suspended bells is how to hold the bell. Should it remain upright as in the ringing position? Should it hang downward? Should it be placed in a sideways orientation and struck vertically?

The term "suspended bells" is unfortunate, as it implies "hanging" a bell, letting it dangle downward. But the proper way to execute this technique is to hold the bell *upright* in its normal ringing position (with rare exceptions — see malleting multiple suspended bells below).

The reasoning here is that this will eliminate the extra and possibly stressful step of actually turning the bell over or sideways before striking it. There is simply not time for this. Also, if the bell is to be rung after it has been malleted, which is likely, it is already in the upright position, ready to ring. Finally, holding the bells upright in normal ringing position avoids any undue distraction for those watching. It is distracting and confusing for congregations and audiences when ringers go through a number of twists and turns to get the bells into various hanging positions for malleting.

Now, some groups swear by the idea of holding the bells upside down, hanging them from the hand and fingers, for the mallet-on-suspended-bells technique. This comes from interpreting the word "suspended" too literally. "Suspended" means "in the air"; it is NOT synonymous with "hanging!" Malleting the bells held upright should be regarded as the standard way to execute this technique.

THE STRIKE

With the bells held upright, the mallet strikes the surface closest to the ringer, at the point described above, with a gentle, gliding motion. There is never any reason, even at loud dynamic levels, to strike the bell in a forceful, abrupt manner. Practice playing with a relaxed stroke; there is better control of dynamics and expression if all movements are relaxed.

You will, of course, wish to use larger mallets for the larger bells and smaller mallets for the smaller bells. Refer to mallet manufacturer information concerning the proper distribution of the different size mallets among a set of handbells.

THE DIFFICULTIES OF MALLETING SUSPENDED BELLS

Because malleting even a single bell using this technique requires two hands, there are immediately problems getting to and from the technique in passages that contain other techniques, and covering all bells that are to be played in this fashion becomes at best a strong consideration and at worst a tangled mess.

Further, dynamics are a consideration with this technique. Balance is also challenging when the malleting on suspended bells takes place simultaneously with other techniques in other parts of the set. There is also the problem of voicing the set, making sure that there is consistency between the sounds of the various sized bells when this technique is used.

Finally, one of the most important musical considerations of malleting on suspended bells is the problem of damping.

GETTING TO AND FROM THE TECHNIQUE, COVERING ALL NOTES TO BE MALLETED, AND MALLETING MULTIPLE BELLS

These technical problems go hand in hand in the sense that if the bells to be malleted are assigned correctly, getting to and from the technique in passages that contain other techniques becomes much simpler.

We are so used to the idea that a select couple of notes are the permanent assignment of a given ringer that often we disregard the need for stretching and sometimes breaking that "rule." For instance, the E6/F6 ringer may be more than capable of covering those two notes, all their accidentals, the octave above, and even the chimes associated with these notes. But because there are only two hands per ringer, there are definite physical limitations on how many bells an individual ringer can hold and mallet.

A word about the compositions and arrangements that contain this technique: Composers and arrangers simply write the notes that are to be heard, and define the techniques used to produce the sounds desired. While there is certainly some consideration given to how the techniques are to be executed and some passages are written very carefully to take these considerations into account, there are many more instances where the notes are simply put to page and the problems of how to play them are now the problems of the ringers and director.

So how do we get through those common passages where multiple bells are to be malleted while suspended?

First, a single ringer should have no problem holding one or two bells in one hand and malleting with the other, as long as the bells are of a size that fits in the hand (clearly anything from around C5 and below is going to have to be held singly — some of these larger bells can be held two-in-one-hand for a very short period of time, but this is difficult). Two bells may be held in one hand, both of them with the casting upright, by putting the handles in an "X," much like a shelley ring.

If the bells are held in the upright, normal ringing position, there is clearly no problem going from ringing into a passage of malleting suspended bells when only one bell is involved. Simply hold the bell upright, put any bells that have been in the other hand down and pick up a mallet, and you are ready to go.

Similarly, when two bells are involved there is very little problem. Again, keep one bell upright in regular ringing position, cross this bell with the other bell (handles in an "X"), and pick up the mallet with the other hand. The cross may be done by crossing the bells in the air (which is necessary if they are not to be damped in between) or by taking the second bell from the table by grasping the handle with the index and middle fingers.

Getting back into regular ringing or another technique is quite simple when only one or two bells are involved. The bells are in normal ringing position already, and it is a small matter to uncross them when the music allows.

Of course, the person who has those two bells to deal with may have to mallet them both at once. This is certainly more difficult, but attainable with a little practice. The hand that is malleting needs to hold two mallets now, crossing the handles of the mallets in an "X." It takes a little aim to strike the two bells in a relaxed way, but with repetition you should pick this up quickly. If this is cumbersome, a ringer to right or left may have a hand free, and could reach over and mallet one of the bells being held by their neighbor.

A problem comes when one ringer is supposed to mallet more than two bells. There are a few options here, each of which depends on the technical considerations in the surrounding passages:

- Strictly speaking, one ringer can hold four bells upright comfortably, two in each hand. Of course, that leaves no hand free for mallets, but if the neighboring ringers do have hands free, these bells may be held upright by one ringer and struck with mallets by the neighboring ringers. Visually, this may be questionable, but can be made to work by minimizing the reaching involved and by striking the bells low and close to the table, then the person holding the bells moves them upwards in a standard ringing motion. This should allow the technique to blend in to the ringing motions of the piece.
- 2) Bells may be reassigned, either temporarily for these passages, or throughout the piece depending on the musical needs. This option is not as popular with ringers and directors because it breaks the usual thinking about conventional assignments and takes some extra mental work to remember just who gets what. Still, with a little practice, it becomes quite natural to give a bell to a neighbor or even to pass the bell down several positions and back if needed to cover all the bells that are to be malleted. These solutions will mean some careful planning ahead will be necessary to get into and out of mallet-on-suspended-bell passages.

- 3) A COMMON AND DIFFICULT CASE! Often the bells in the octave marked 7 are to be malleted while held upright and so are the corresponding 6's. These are often assigned to the same ringer in conventional assignments for ringing. However, it can prove to be truly impossible to mallet both octaves while the bells are in the air. Some reassigning is extremely likely to be needed for these passages, whether a neighboring ringer takes over one of these bells for a passage, or whether bells are assigned permanently to a different ringer than usual.
- 4) Duplicate bells This solution is often overlooked because the perception is that it is a logistical hassle to borrow bells from another set. However, experience has borne out time and again that many programs are very willing to loan out individual bells for specific pieces (and, of course, you should be willing to help them in similar circumstances as well!). If, for example, the E6/F6 ringer is stuck with more bells to mallet than a human being can play, there is the possibility of borrowing a duplicate E7 (or whatever bell works out in the passage in question) and assigning that duplicate bell to another ringer (likely one of the bass or 4's ringers who doesn't have all this malleting to deal with). The small logistical entanglement is well worth the ease with which the passages will now come together.
- 5) Handbell tree A final solution to the problem of malleting multiple suspended bells is to form a handbell tree. If you aren't going to use duplicate bells for this, know that this will require MUCH set up time, so there needs to be ample opportunity to interlock the handles and make the tree! And it will also take a LOT of time to take the tree apart again, so again the music must be very accommodating. The likelihood is that you will form a handbell tree from duplicate bells, which can be set ahead of time. In this instance, of course, the bells will indeed be hanging down in a tree rather than in the normal upright ringing position, but that's simply how a handbell tree looks and is appropriate.

DYNAMICS AND BALANCE

Malleting of suspended bells is usually used as a soft, gentle technique, creating a light, gossamer sound. While loud malleting is certainly possible, it's best to think of this technique as effective at levels of *mf* or softer.

When playing a passage using this technique and there are other techniques going on simultaneously, special consideration should be given to matters of balance. For instance, if the melody is rung by lower bells and the accompaniment is mallets on suspended higher bells, the malleted notes could drown out the melody, or the malleted notes may be so soft they are not being heard. Trust your ear in these passages, and most problems should right themselves easily.

It's also important that the mallets be held firmly but not with a lot of tension in the hands and wrists. This tension can lead to lack of dynamic control.

When bells of different sizes are malleted while suspended, it is often true that certain bells "stick out" and others are buried. Usually, the upper bells are heard more easily and the lower bells are softer when malleted. Again, trust your ears and expect to mallet the lower bells, particularly the 3's and 4's, a bit more strongly even in softer passages.

WHAT ABOUT DAMPING?

We've answered the most common question about this technique – how to hold the bells. The second most common question is – "What about damping when we are malleting suspended bells?"

It is important to know that the very nature of this technique makes completely accurate damping virtually impossible. It is a very rare passage of malleting suspended bells that allows the ringers to damp cleanly and precisely, no matter how wonderfully they've assigned these bells. Most writers are well-acquainted with these facts, and expect some blurring of sound during these passages.

Unless the passage is marked LV, which is very common, you do not have license to abandon damping altogether during these passages. Damping when practical is necessary to prevent such a blur of sound that the music no longer speaks. The best rule of thumb is to use shoulders and sometimes fingers to damp when practical (unless the passage is specifically marked LV), and to expect some overlapping tones during these passages.

SUBSTITUTING RINGING

When precision damping in passages containing mallets on suspended bells seems to be an absolute necessity in the opinion of the director, substitute standard ringing and damping. However, be sure that you have thought this decision out very carefully and that you are not unduly tampering with the musical ideas of the composer or arranger.

The decision to substitute ringing for mallets on suspended bells should not be made glibly or solely on the basis of the fact that ringing is easier than this kind of malleting. Malleting suspended bells is a more challenging technique than many of the other techniques in the bell choir's arsenal, but it does have a distinctive sound and musical quality. The extra rehearsal spent working out assignments for these passages and getting the balance and dynamics just right brings about great musical rewards.

