

# HOW TO BE THE ULTIMATE MASSED RINGING PARTICIPANT

by Kevin McChesney

*I haven't prepared "Director's Notes" in many years, except for very advanced events where addressing a host of musical and technical details is necessary. The reason is not that some directors don't conscientiously comb through and apply the notes – they do. But not all directors do, and there is so often room for interpretation of those notes, no matter how carefully prepared, that they can cause more confusion than they prevent. It is inevitable that the ringers and I will have to work through the "Director's Notes" details in rehearsal anyway, so I've abandoned the practice.*

*None of which is to say that it isn't extremely important to diligently prepare festival music so that the most benefit will be derived from the mass ringing experience! In this article, I've put together five general guidelines for preparing for mass ringing events. "Director's Notes" tend to be specific applications of these general considerations anyway. So it is my hope that these guidelines will serve as a simpler, more effective way to approach festival music, as well as a help to your handbell program in general.*

## WATCH!

Well, you knew this was coming! "Watch the director" is the most-used – and the least useful! – phrase in the handbell world. **Leaders say it over and over, but it will never have meaning until we have taught ringers HOW to watch.** Watching may seem obvious, and is more intuitive in choral groups, bands, and orchestras where hundreds of years of tradition have created physical setups that are conducive to watching the director. But in handbells, we battle music stands at awkward heights as well as having to look to our right to see our music when the director is to our left. And the general ringer mentality is that eyes have to be glued to the music at all times – because ringers have not been taught how to look away from the music to watch the director in effective and comfortable ways.

**The key is to find specific places in the music to look up at the director**, spots where there realistically is time to look away from the music without losing your place and where there is a need to obtain information from the director. Here is my list – you will likely think of others:

- 1) **A big round note with nothing in the middle of it.** Whole notes, dotted half notes, and half notes are great places to look up. For a whole note, the first beat of the note is on the printed page, but beats two, three, and four are up there where the director is.
- 2) **The beginning.** As obvious as it sounds to say that the beginning is a terrific place to look up and watch the director, there's more to the story. The director giving a count-off which the ringers watch diligently (one-two-three-four-PLAY!), then all ringers burying their heads in the music as the first note is played does NOT constitute watching! Memorize the first few bars of music so that the director and ringers are making music together.
- 3) **The end.** There's nothing worse than being the only one to miss the cutoff. Memorize the last few bars of music and look up.
- 4) **Repeated patterns.** This is the "you have nothing better to do" principle. After all, you're just going to play the same notes over and over – you might as well look up and see if the director is keeping up with you!
- 5) **Fermatas.** Self-explanatory. If you don't watch at a fermata, how will you know when to go on to the next note?

- 6) **Ritards.** If you don't look up, you won't know how much to slow down. I tell my choirs to look up at ritards to see if Kevin remembered to slow down, because sometimes I don't!
- 7) Going along with ritards is a **tempo**. A tempo is Italian for "MY tempo." (That isn't a literal translation, but it's an effective one!) If your group has a ragged moment at a ritard, probably the a tempo is the problem. Most groups have figured out how to slow down together, but not every group knows how to get revved up again and still be completely together.
- 8) **Changes of tempo.** Obvious.
- 9) **Changes in technique.** Look up when changing from ringing to a stopped technique or vice versa. The potential for tempo and rhythm problems at these points could be virtually eliminated if ringers would train themselves to look up automatically when changing techniques.
- 10) **Shakes.** A shake is a VERY loud sound, especially for the person shaking the bell in whose ear that sound is blasting. And there is no specific metrical rhythm to a shake. It is vital that the ringer look up and watch the director during a shake to keep proper count and time. **RULE:** If you have a shake, you watch!
- 11) **Martellatos.** Actually, it is best for ringers to look up during all stopped techniques as often as possible, because the potential for rushing and other tempo problems is high. Martellatos are the worst offenders as they are a VERY loud sound. To be played in proper tempo, ringers should get in the habit of watching the director at martellatos.

Now that you are watching at these and other places in the music, the **RULE** is –

**When you look at me, and it looks like I'm going too fast... I'm right!**

And the corollary – **If it looks like I'm going too slow... I'm STILL right!**

Counting is a good thing, but actually it's a good idea to learn to stop counting in many places and just let the director do the counting for you. Move when I move – simple as that, as long as you are looking at me.

**The objection:** "If I look away from the music, I'll get lost!" Three solid answers to this:

- 1) Mass ringing is the perfect place to practice looking away from the music to get information from the director. If you do get lost, there are plenty of other ringers who will bail you out.
- 2) Like any technical or musical skill, the more you practice, the better you will get at it.
- 3) If you practice looking up at specific places in the music, you'll know where to look back.

## Prepare the music

This general statement is not as obvious as it appears. Of course we are supposed to be familiar with the music. But again, I'm referring to specifics.

- 1) **Be familiar with bell changes.** There is no harder technique in our instrument than changing bells. (How many ringers does it take to change a light bulb? One, if you can get him/her to put down the light bulb that's already in his/her hand.) Practice the tough bell-change spots thoroughly.
- 2) **Playing a piece from beginning to end over and over does not constitute effective practicing.** Isolate trouble spots, particularly bell changes, changes in tempo, key changes, changes in techniques, and other transitions.
- 3) **"How fast are you going to go?"** This is the question that I get asked the most. The truth is, I'm not precisely sure until I get there. Final tempo depends on overall experience level of the participants, acoustics of the room, physical layout, which considerations I feel are most important to teach during the course of the event, and numerous other factors. The best way to prepare the piece is to work it up to the tempo marked, and experiment with playing it slower and faster at various times. As mentioned above (in last month's article), the ringers need to learn to move when the director moves, following an external indicator of the tempo rather than an internal metronome.
- 4) **"What does this symbol mean?"** There are many resources indicating the meaning of notation. The best is the Notation Booklet offered by AGEHR.
- 5) **"Are we going to use chimes?"** This is specific to me as clinician, but my "rule" on chimes is to play them if you have them, and if you don't have them, play these notes on bells. Any exception to this is easily handled in festival rehearsals. Remember that changing from bells to chimes is the same, difficulty-wise, as a bell change, and these transitions need to be isolated and mastered in your rehearsals.
- 6) **"Is this a misprint?"** Use your intuition. Misprints do make their way into published editions. Usually it is a simple matter to work out what the correct notes or symbols should have been. If there are still problems with misprints on festival day, we can take care of them quickly during our rehearsals.
- 7) **"How will you direct X?"** There is usually no need for me to try to describe how I'll direct a tricky passage in words beforehand. Directors, try a couple of different ways. I'll explain what I'm doing on festival day – it's easier and more efficient to illustrate this visually, and besides, you've worked diligently to watch at these specific spots, so we should have no problems.
- 8) **"Will you take this in 2 or 4?"** (Or in 1 or 3? There are others like this, but 2 or 4 are the most common.) With few exceptions, I don't know this till I get a chance to work with you. Please learn it both ways.
- 9) **"What about changes you, the clinician, want to make to the published music?"** This situation does come up, though infrequently. I've never made a massive change in the music that can't be explained and easily handled during the course of our time together. You've been training to watch a lot and to know your techniques inside and out, so these changes won't be too stressful.

## Know your techniques

Like all music that you play, the festival selections are opportunities for you to reinforce techniques that you have already learned and to master new ones.

- 1) **Basic ringing.** No punching or hammering. The basic ringing technique is a smooth, relaxed upward circle or oval.
- 2) **Damping.** Ringing and damping form a simultaneous motion. When one bell is rung, meaning when the clapper strikes the casting, the other is damped either on the shoulder or on the table at precisely the same time.
- 3) **Use table damping for bell changes.** Table damping the bell that is going to be replaced in your hand by a different bell is more efficient than taking the extra step of shoulder damping and then getting it to the table.
- 4) **LV.** Let Vibrate is a fairly simple technique, but it's important to keep in mind a) it is usually a highly visual technique, so make these passages smooth and expressive, and b) *four* symbols cancel out LV, meaning they indicate it is time to damp the notes that have been rung LV – another LV, R, the target sign, and a change of technique (e.g., going from an LV passage to malleting with bells on the table).
- 5) **Know the symbols for and how to execute stopped techniques.**
  - a) PL – Plucking is usually executed by grabbing the clapper and throwing it down for bells about C5-F5 and below, and by flipping the clapper up for bells above that.
  - b) Mallets with bells on the table – Generally a gentle technique, not a forceful one, mastered by thinking of drawing the sound quickly and lightly out of the bell.
  - c) TD – Simply play with a thumb on the bell to create a staccato sound. Usually best if given a small circle rather than just “punched.”
  - d) Martellato – This is not a martial art! I don't know who started the saying, but the rule is “two tacos high.” If ringers start from halfway up their bodies or their shoulders, being of different heights, it's no wonder this technique is so seldom together. If all ringers start from just a few inches off the pad, regardless of the size of the bell, martellatos will be together. It doesn't take a lot of force to play a martellato. It's a very loud sound, so it's not like there's a danger it won't be heard. Play in a light, rhythmically precise style.

These are the most common stopped techniques.

For others that pop up in the music, refer to the Notation Booklet offered by AGEHR or other notation and technique resources.

- 6) **Malleting on suspended bells.** This should really be called malleting on *upright* bells. I've seen ringers go to extraordinary lengths to make sure the bells are hanging down; there's nothing else we do in bells that requires the bells to be hanging upside down, so that shouldn't be true for this technique either. I believe this is actually quite a difficult technique because it takes both hands to play just one bell. So pay careful attention to the assigning in these passages, making sure that no one has to clutch more than two bells. This may require the use of duplicate bells. After striking the bell, move it in a ringing-circle fashion – there is no reason to keep these bells still. This will sound and look better. If you are finding this technique too cumbersome, I generally feel it is ok to simply ring these passages.

7) **Visual style.** This is much too broad a subject to go into detail here, but pay careful attention to the look of your group. Some general ideas:

- a) I like to have ringers stand with one foot behind the other, shifting their weight from back foot to front foot when they ring.
- b) When playing martellatos, mallets with bells on the table, and other techniques where the bells are on or near the table, bend 8 to 12 inches at the waist; the sound doesn't change, but this posture affords more rhythmic accuracy and frankly looks better.
- c) LV passages are generally quite free and flowing in their overall look.
- d) Match ringing circles both up and down and back to front; when neighboring ringers' circles match, the look is expressive and exciting.
- e) Play repeated notes in "ladders;" that is, play the first note low near the pad or music stand, the next a bit higher up, the next a bit further still along the ringing circle, the final note nearer your shoulder.
- f) Shakes don't stand still; they move in the same circle as a regular ring.

For more information and, in fact, a thorough course, on visual style in handbell ringing, refer to the DVD "Music in Motion" created by myself and the Pikes Peak Ringers. It is available from <http://www.pikespeakringers.com>.

Other symbols and techniques not discussed here can be found in the Handbell Musicians of America's (formerly AGEHR) Notation Booklet.





## Know your musical considerations

This is an extensive subject and much of our time at the festival is spent on these considerations. But here are a few to get you started:

- 1) **Crescendo.** “Cresc.” usually means get *softer* — that’s right, get softer here so that you have some musical “room” to get louder.
- 2) **Dynamics.** The dynamic range of bells is quite small compared with, say, a piano or violin. Make large contrasts in dynamics, even when “small” differences like *mp* to *mf* are indicated. It’s a good idea to identify dynamic levels with certain sizes of ringing circles. A note that is *mf* is what might be called a “normal” ringing circle; for *mp*, make the circle smaller in all directions by about three inches; for *p*, three inches smaller still; for *pp*, three inches smaller yet. Then for *f* make it three inches larger than *mf*, for *ff* three inches larger still (*ff* is everything you’ve got). Now, the actual sizes of these circles are not what’s important, because at various tempos it won’t be possible to be this “measured.” But the feel, the force of these strokes is an important physical association to learn for each dynamic level.
- 3) **Bring out the melody.** First, it is not a waste of time to go through a passage and point out which notes are the melody. For one thing, not all ringers may be familiar with the melody, and for another it is not uncommon for a given ringer’s part to be melody-accompaniment-accompaniment-melody-melody-accompaniment and so on. Second, learn not only to play the melody notes louder but also to play the non-melody notes softer, particularly in the upper registers.
- 4) **Overall feel of a passage or of an entire piece.** What does this passage feel like, physically, to ring? What mood and especially look are you trying to communicate? Can you translate that into specific motions?
- 5) **Legato.** If you are going to hit the car in front of you, the best-case scenario is that the cars will hit while both are moving in the same direction. This cushions the impact. The worst-case scenario is if you strike the car in front of you after it stops. This creates an abrupt impact. For legato ringing, the casting is already in motion forward as the clapper strikes it. For marcato ringing, the casting is stopped, with the ringing circle taking place after the strike.
- 6) **Musical style.** A fast spiritual has a certain style connected to singing and emphasizing syncopations. A jazz piece swings. A flowing, gentle piece has a certain look and a legato style. A majestic piece has a different look and style. Think these things through. In the mass ringing situation, we’ll probably change a few things here and there, but it’s good to go into the festival having practiced considerations of style.
- 7) **Visual style.** As referenced above earlier in the article, the look of your playing influences the sound and what is communicated to the listeners. Specifically, the notes given previously on repeated notes and shakes are important auditory as well as visual considerations.
- 8) **Be confident in musical transitions.** Changes of tempo, technique, style, dynamics, and so on must be isolated and mastered in rehearsals.

## Assignments and Repertoire

This is a very extensive subject, but I give a few general considerations here.

- 1) **Assignments are based on ringing the notes musically. If even a single note cannot be rung musically and in a confident manner, it must be reassigned.**
- 2) **Playing more bells for the sake of being busy or more challenge is not a method for playing the notes musically.** When I hear comments like “We have one ringer who plays the whole bottom or top octave,” or “We play five octaves but with only 7 or 8 players,” it’s all I can do to keep from saying, “Well, you don’t do it very well.” There are limits to what two hands can play. Assign music according to the number of *players* you have, not according to the number of octaves you own. If you own five octaves but only have 11 players, there’s no shame in assigning as a three octave group – and if you have four-in-hand players, you can add the upper octaves, and no doubt there are places where some of the bass notes can be added comfortably and musically. Grabbing more bells just for the sake of grabbing more bells is no way to represent handbells as a single group, and there’s certainly no need for it in mass ringing where others are covering the bells in question.
- 3) **Changing positions.** If you have ringers move from one position to another between pieces, that’s fine. Please let me know at the event so I am aware that there is the need for a bit of time for this during the concert.
- 4) **Assigning handchimes.** Remember that changing from a bell to a chime, even if they are the same note like D5, is a bell change and is a difficult technique. While there is nothing wrong with assigning the D5 chime to the D5/E5 ringer as long as it can be done confidently and musically, it is often a good idea to assign chimes to other ringers whose hands are freer to avoid fumbling and scrambling.
- 5) **Assigning bass bells.** It is tempting, because it is mentally so simple, to assign bass bells diatonically – for instance, one ringer plays C3-F3 and the other G3-B3. I have seen almost no pieces where this was a good idea. Directors (or experienced bass ringers) should go through *each* piece, assigning bass bells according to these guidelines:
  - a) Very often, the bass ringers have to share a bell or several bells during the course of a piece. Indicate clearly what bells are shared so the bass ringers can set up properly with the shared bells within easy reach of each of them.
  - b) Bass bells are heavy. Even big, burly bass ringers need some time to heft a bell and get it into ringing position. At rapid tempos, it is usually safe to assume that one ringer will not be able to ring three bass bells in a row – two, yes – three, almost never.
  - c) The Back-and-Forth Principle – Two bass ringers will play smoothest when they alternate notes. Obviously, this isn’t possible for many passages, but it’s a good idea to look at the most difficult section and work out to what degree the ringers can alternate notes. This can often be used as a basis for assigning the rest of the piece.
  - d) Don’t be shy about assigning one of the C3-B3 notes to another ringer besides the bass ringers. I often deliberately find one note that can easily be rung by (as an example) the E4F4 ringer FIRST, then work out the logistics for the bass ringers for the remainder of the bass bells. This gives me one less bass bell to deal with in making assignments.

- e) It is NOT cheating to go through and mark the bass ringers' notes. In fact, it is HIGHLY recommended. This is not to say that there aren't ringers who are capable of reading the lowest notes fluently. The markings are necessary because the assignments vary from piece to piece.
- f) It is not a good idea to have someone mallet bass parts that are written to be rung. This "solution" is used when the group is short-handed or when there is a lack of ringers who can lift and manipulate such large bells. But it is not true to the music, and even in a mass ringing situation, it is very distracting. If the part is written to be rung, ring what you can do musically with the ringers you have. If this means leaving out the fifth and even the fourth octave in a 3-5 octave piece, so be it.
- 6) Trouble bells.** Even one bell that is awkward to play is a problem that needs a solution.
- Share the bell with a neighbor if he/she has a hand free.
  - Reassign the bell. If the bell is used infrequently, give it to anyone at the table who has a hand free to play it.
  - Use a duplicate bell. This is NOT cheating! In fact, it is a terrific solution that solves a huge number of trouble-bell problems.
- 7) Do less and do it well.** There is no shame in not playing all the selections on the festival repertoire list. If the list is too ambitious for your group or you have no use for one or two of the pieces, sit out. The experience will be more positive not only for the director and ringers but also for the clinician and the mass ring participants if you play only what you can handle confidently.
- 8) Mass ringing is an opportunity for growth.** Having said the above about ringing only what you can handle confidently, do take this opportunity to stretch the choir if you have a comfortable amount of time to learn something new or harder than you are used to playing. The mass ringing situation is a wonderful place to go a step or two beyond your usual bounds since there are many other ringers who will cover for mistakes and problems.

**SUMMARY:** This article is more extensive than most "Director's Notes" for festivals, which is ironic. :) However, my hope is that this constitutes a set of guidelines that will help you not only to have a wonderful mass ringing experience, but also in all of the work involved in your handbell program.