

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PIECES

17 Ways to Deal With Those Pesky Mistakes

by Kevin McChesney

Mistakes are bound to happen. We'll look at 17 ways to deal with mistakes positively so that all that anyone remembers is the beautiful music.

I've never heard a perfect performance. In college, I went to a recital by the legendary flutist Jean Pierre Rampal, and I have to say that's about as close to a perfect concert as I've ever heard. But even he had to mask a mistake or two (not more than that – he's Jean Pierre Rampal :)). If music was perfect, it would be terribly uninteresting. That's one of the magical qualities of music – that it is intimately and immediately expressive of human elements that can't be expressed any other way than through music. If performances are never perfect, that means there are always mistakes. And if there are always going to be mistakes, we should have some tools in our toolbox for dealing with mistakes, covering them or recovering from them in ways that leave the listener with nothing but the heart and message of the music.

In handbells, the old joke is:

Q: "What do you do when you make a mistake?"

A: "Frown at your neighbor."

Well, there may be something to that. :) But since handbells is a team effort, let's see if we can deal with mistakes in ways other than just shifting the blame. Actually, mistakes have nothing whatsoever to do with blame. Remember, they are inevitable, so there's no sense pointing fingers or assigning blame. There's nothing wrong with owning up to mistakes, but the main focus needs to be on how to function positively when those inevitable mistakes happen.

In this article, you will learn 17 ways to deal with those pesky mistakes in positive ways that serve the music and help you to focus on communicating what the music has to say.

- 1) **Keep going.** I put this first because it is so fundamental. Obviously, the worst thing you can do if you've made a mistake is to stop playing! If you stop playing, now you are making a whole lot more mistakes – leaving notes out is a mistake, too.

To be fair, some ringers find that making a mistake is a debilitating experience and there are ringers who freeze or who get it in their heads that they are messing things up so badly that they have nothing to contribute. You'll learn some ways to deal with this stressful feeling in this article, but in relation to this first principle the important thing is to at least TRY to keep going. This isn't as easy for some ringers as it is for others, and directors need to approach this subject with compassion. For some ringers, learning the art of continuing on after making a mistake is a process and will take time to learn. As I say, the important thing is to keep trying. (From Finding Nemo – "Just keep swimming, just keep swimming." :))

- 2) **Check your bags at the door.** Everyone – and I mean EVERYONE – has baggage that they carry around with them. For some it is as simple as someone cutting them off in traffic on the way to rehearsal or a comment from a co-worker today that upset them. For others the baggage is fuller and more complex – personal struggles that have gone on for months and years, family matters that create challenges in life, lifelong insecurities, and so on.

When we come to rehearsal or worship or performance and pick up those bells, what we are doing now is RINGING, NOT focusing on all those other things that have created difficulties or ill feelings in our lives. In fact, one of the great joys of ringing is that it is such an absorbing activity mentally, physically, and emotionally that most ringers find it therapeutic to immerse themselves in their ringing and get the other difficulties of life or troubles of the day out of their minds for a while.

It's best to “check your bags at the door” when you come in to the handbell rehearsal room or worship space or concert hall. From X time until Y time, what we do is ring – enjoy the feel of ringing, the physicality of it, enjoy the music, enjoy each other. The bags we carry with us are left at the door so that we can focus on handbells during this special time.

All of which is great help in reducing the number of mistakes and in dealing with mistakes when they happen. Clearly a more focused, relaxed mind is going to make fewer musical and technical mistakes than a mind that is somewhere else.

- 3) **Spend some time getting the minds and hearts focused.** If you are in a worship situation, this is as simple as starting the rehearsal or warm up before playing in worship with a word of prayer or a brief meditation. If you are in a non-church situation, this can be a short time of announcements and setting the goals for this rehearsal or performance, or for sharing a few thoughts on the music you are playing that day. This does not have to take a long time – the clock is the enemy in rehearsals. But it is important time, time that is similar to meditation in the sense of shutting out some of the chatter and clutter in the mind and getting the minds and hearts of the ringers focused on this fun and fulfilling activity of ringing and sharing music with each other and our listeners.
- 4) **Allow, allow, allow.** One of the amazing paradoxes of artistic as well as sports endeavors is the more you let yourself make mistakes, the fewer mistakes you will make. This seems backwards when considered in and of itself, but in practice let me testify that – IT WORKS!!! If you simply get the mindset that mistakes happen and they are part of the flow of learning and performing and just let them happen when they happen, you will find yourself making fewer mistakes! It takes some conscious effort to internalize this principle, but I promise IT WORKS!

- 5) **Catch and release.** This is a term taken from fishing. When you are fishing for sport or catch a fish that is too small, you “catch and release” – catch the fish and then let it go.

Pikes Peak Ringers began using this term in their rehearsals and performances and it has done so much good that I’ve begun to use it in working with other groups, festivals, and workshops. The idea is that you “catch” the mistake – you do notice that you made the mistake and acknowledge it. Then you IMMEDIATELY “release” it – you let that slip into the past because that mistake is over and done with now.

There is nothing to be gained from hanging onto it and even less to be gained from spending mental energy beating yourself up over it. Besides, if you spend THIS moment cursing THAT mistake in the past, you are likely to make more mistakes NOW because you aren’t paying attention to the music you are playing NOW.

So catch the mistake – know that you made it and hope that you can learn something from it later when there is time to do so. But for now, RELEASE it – it’s gone and done with and we are playing THIS part of the music now.

- 6) **Be in the present moment.** This is related to “catch and release.” There is no past and no future, there is this present moment. That’s one of the primary ministries and purposes of performing music – you suspend not only yourselves but also those listening in a way of experiencing time that is different from how we experience it in everyday life.

You and your listeners are immersed in the **PRESENT MOMENT**, the here and now. If there were mistakes in what came before this – in the near past – let them go, catch and release. Yes, mistakes may happen later in the piece – in the near future – but there’s no sense spoiling the present moment worrying about that now. In fact, if you don’t use the present moment to kick yourself about previous mistakes or to be anxious about the possibility of future mistakes, it is likely that you will make a lot less mistakes!

Ringin’ is a joy – PRESENT tense, right now!

- 7) **You are part of something bigger than yourself.** This is part of why you went into bells in the first place, to be part of this team of wonderful fellow ringers and to create something wonderful and exciting together, something that is greater than the sum of your parts.

When we ring, the music is greater than all of us – greater than the baggage that we checked at the door, greater than the mistake we just made, something intangible and yet very real that is both outside ourselves and part of something deep inside us.

When you remember, as it has been said, that “it’s all in tune when it reaches God’s ears,” that is, when you remember that the worship service, the feeling that concert goers take with them, the music itself is bigger than all of us, this allows you to focus on the music rather than the mistakes. And of course this leads to making fewer mistakes, or when they do happen helps to put them aside in favor of something much more important.

- 8) **Ring with confidence.** If you're going to make a mistake, make it a whopper! Play "loud and proud, strong and wrong!" :)

Well, this isn't a great way to "mask" mistakes in performance, but it IS a terrific tool for learning to get past mistakes in rehearsals. If you simply ring confidently whether you feel confident about this particular piece or not, you are taking an action that soon turns into a natural feeling of confidence every time you play this piece. This is the opposite of "you'll believe it when you see it" – this is "you'll see it when you BELIEVE it!"

Playing with a confident attitude and with confident physical actions reinforces what is going right. True, it does lead to some pretty loud mistakes sometimes, but the benefits are so great that it's worth the occasional "clunker" – and these will be fewer when you ring confidently anyway.

In worship or performance, it is especially important to get psyched up to play with confidence and conviction. When a mistake happens, you are already in a mental and physical state that will pull you, your fellow ringers, and your listeners well past that mistake in a big hurry.

- 9) **Make a smooth move.** When a mistake happens, keep your ringing and presentation movements relaxed and flowing.

For one thing, this makes it virtually impossible for the listener to know where the mistake came from, so he/she won't be focused on the mistake and won't be concerned about it because it's clear that you aren't concerned about it.

Also, your making relaxed moves helps you to return to confident, smooth motor memory, and of course that means less mistakes.

So if you picked up a wrong bell and rang it (with confidence!), simply stick a thumb on that bell unobtrusively to damp it out, complete your ringing circle, gently damp it on the table, pick up the right bell in a relaxed manner, and go on.

To be sure, it takes some presence of mind to identify and react to mistakes that quickly, but an overall intention to play in a smooth, relaxed way helps you to adapt to the situation and you'll get better at it the more you practice it in rehearsal and performance.

- 10) **Presentation counts.** When mistakes happen, returning to making it all look beautiful and communicate visually counts for a lot. It puts your focus somewhere other than on the mistake, and it preserves your part of the group's overall visual communication of the music's message. It also returns you immediately to automatic muscle memory which is a huge part of conquering the technical aspects of ringing. Finally, it visually masks your mistake so that those watching won't even know it happened.

11) Change your focus. There's an episode of the hit comedy series Frasier where he's learning to ride a bike, something he never learned as a child. On each attempt he wobbles a few yards and then keeps running into the same huge, very avoidable tree. The reason he keeps hitting it is that he can't get his mind off of it. He's so afraid of hitting that tree that his mind is utterly fixated on it, and sure enough, he hits the tree over and over. :)

Remember that for every wrong note played there are literally thousands of right ones. When a mistake happens, does it really make sense to focus entirely on the one withering flower in a beautiful meadow of flowers or on the one dim bulb in a shining marquis filled with brilliant bulbs?

A LOT is going right here! And if you focus on the wonder and magic of everything that is going right rather than on the mistake, there will be a lot more going right! :)

Some ringers seem bound and determined to focus on their mistakes and shortcomings even before they pick up a bell to play. We perform what we practice, so naturally if you practice EXPECTING to make a lot of mistakes, that's how you'll perform as well. And generally we all rise to the level of our expectations, so sure enough, a lot of mistakes get made with this attitude.

Like several of the principles in this lesson, it's not an easy thing to change this dynamic. It involves changing one's thinking about oneself, which is likely to be a part of one or two of those bags that you checked at the door. :) Easy or not, it's important to learn to focus on what is going well.

As directors, we can be of tremendous help with this. True, it is part of the director's job to point out what is not going well or up to standard. Unfortunately, many directors stop there and just point out what's wrong without offering any instruction on how to improve it. Even assuming the director does know to instruct the ringers on how to make improvements, it's important to go one step FURTHER and INSPIRE them to make it better! This means letting them know what's going RIGHT as well as what's going wrong. I figure it's a matter of being honest – when things aren't going well, tell the ringers and let them know how to improve it, and when things are going well, tell them THAT and be specific about what they did well. This helps take the focus away from mistakes and shortcomings and puts it on the JOYS of ringing.

12) **It's a big club.** We are surrounded by and inundated with media that would lead us to the mistaken notion that movie-making and acting and music-making can be perfect. We have to remember that movies and recordings are manufactured to be as near-perfect as possible, with lots of editing and multiple takes and so on. There's nothing wrong with any of that. Movies and television shows and recordings of music are designed to stand up to multiple viewings and listenings. But playing in worship or concert is a one-shot deal. **And remember, there's no such thing as a perfect performance.** Perfect music would lose the human element and there would be no aspect of achievement and we'd all soon lose interest, which obviously would NOT make the world a better place. :)

So the world is a better place WITH one-shot, one-time performances of music in it. And that means it's a better place with performances that come complete with mistakes and notes left out and things that didn't go according to the original plan. How wonderful!

It helps reduce the number of mistakes and certainly takes the stress away from ringing to know that we belong to a BIG club, a HUGE club – the club is ALL handbell choirs and ALL singers, instrumentalists, pop stars, and on down the line. EVERYONE in the club makes mistakes and it's part of what connects us as artists, as people striving to improve and grow, and as human beings.

What's more, EVERY person in our audiences and congregations has made mistakes, too. Maybe not in musical endeavors, but everyone understand what it is to strive to achieve and to make mistakes along the way. So from that point of view, EVERYONE is in the "I make mistakes" club. And we can know that when we ring, mistakes and all, we are playing for people who understand us and are cheering us on and genuinely appreciate all that we do.

13) **Correct them.** This is probably the most obvious way to deal with mistakes. :) Clearly if a mistake has happened a few times in rehearsal it's time to correct it. Or if mistakes happen in performance, it pays to review the performance and see if there were ways to avoid them. There won't be any specific way to have avoided the common, natural human errors. But if there were considerations of set-up, equipment, logistics, overall schedule that wore people out, etc., these kinds of things can be looked at next time and avoided in the future.

Pikes Peak Ringers had some things "go south" on them on one tour. While the tour had some definite highlights and some terrific things happened on that trip, we had an honest and compassionate discussion about everything that we could take some control over and do better next time around. If you're like me, you get a little tired of these "learning experiences" as you get older. :) Still, it's all a process and some situations that create mistakes can be corrected by simply looking at the situation and taking control of the elements you *do* have control over. The flipside of that is to acknowledge the things you *don't* have control over and that some mistakes are inevitable; just re-dedicate yourselves to ringing with confidence, strong visual presentation, and musical polish.

- 14) **Do some homework.** Homework is something that some ringers resist, and given the increasingly frantic pace of modern life it's no wonder.

Still, even a few moments looking over a difficult passage outside of rehearsal can go miles and miles toward avoiding mistakes, and avoiding problems that trip up other ringers as well.

Even just 10 minutes two or three times during the week may well be enough. Or 15 minutes before a rehearsal. Or popping a practice CD in the car player and tapping along at a stop light (not recommended for when you're in motion, though :)).

We often forget that most mistakes or problem passages can be boiled down to three or four notes. I know of a quartet ringer who never really accomplished her part in an admittedly very difficult quartet because she never got past *one* particular bar and always stopped there as if she were crashing into a wall. If she would have focused on the three or four notes that were tripping her up, she could have gone on to learn the last three pages much better than she ever did.

All of which is not to be critical but to encourage you to understand that the "problem" is likely smaller than you think and spending just a few minutes going over those few notes outside of rehearsal is often the simple and very do-able answer. True, your schedule is a whirlwind every day with work and kids and church and family and errands and so on. You can find 10 minutes to work out these three or four notes this week. Yes you can! :)

- 15) **Be open to cooperation.** It is NOT cheating and does NOT make you less of a ringer to give away a bell, have a neighbor lend a willing free hand, or use a duplicate bell. *In fact, these make you a BETTER and more reliable ringer because it shows you have an understanding of what is attainable in a musical and relaxed manner.*

"Bell hogs" will be always be with us and their kind are, to a degree, indestructible. :) Still, nature gave you two hands and there are physical limits on what those two hands can ring in a musical, relaxed way. The best ringers in the world aren't the ones who play the most bells, have the hardest parts, or can play the most intricate and fast passages. *The best ringers in the world are the ones who have a deep understanding of the limitations on what one ringer can play and of the cooperative nature of the bell choir.*

Remember I Need (This) Gang (acronym: RING). You NEED your fellow ringers and they need you – that's what is so wonderful about the handbell choir as an instrument. The bells aren't an instrument, the PEOPLE are. So if there is a passage that is a constant nemesis as far as mistakes, consider having a fellow ringer help you out. You'd do the same for them. :)

16) Listeners usually don't know when a mistake has happened. This adage is true but is often misquoted as "Listeners NEVER know when you've made a mistake." I don't think it's true that they NEVER know. Some listeners are more musically literate than others, but even less musically-adept listeners can hear some wrong notes, know when the bell choir isn't together, can hear when half the group got messed up and dropped out :), and so on.

Still, this doesn't discount the fact that listeners USUALLY don't know when mistakes have happened. I attribute this to two things. 1) They don't know every note of the written music and honestly don't know if that note was wrong or was left out. 2) When played with confidence and polish, the performance of music is about communicating the MESSAGE and HEART of the music, NOT the individual notes. **If the central purpose of the music is communicated in a way that reaches those listening and moves them and excites them, then the performance is successful, regardless of some mistakes. And THAT is what the listeners take home with them, not the individual mistakes.**

Like many ringers and directors, I have been amazed at the overwhelmingly positive comments gushing forth after what I knew to be a pretty second-rate or even fairly disastrous performance. Be that as it may, it's a disservice to our congregations and audiences not to credit them with some musical intelligence and a great deal of receptivity to the feelings and messages we are trying to communicate when we play.

I've known directors who take the misquoted adage that the listeners never know when you've made mistakes and use it as an excuse to be lazy about musical and presentational standards. **A piece is NOT ready for a concert or worship when the group can play it from beginning to end for the first time – that's when the rehearsing and polishing STARTS!**

So keep raising the bar. Keep the dedication to polish, refining musical details, and ringing confidently in the present moment alive and foremost in your minds. Taking that attitude, it IS encouraging to know that people genuinely appreciate your hard work and usually don't know when a mistake has happened, or maybe just aren't interested in focusing on the mistakes that they did hear. When you are a listener, do YOU attend a performance or worship service intending to pick out every little mistake? Some people do, sad to say, but there's a happier way of life out there than that :). Most handbell people are delightful and positive people and know this. Well, the same is true for your listeners, so don't sweat the small stuff – in this case, the mistakes – and enjoy sharing the love you have for this music.

17) A positive attitude goes a long way. This final principle on this list is certainly the most important. A negative mindset breeds mistakes; a positive mindset prevents them – it's as simple as that!

I remember one ringer who had a particularly negative way of speaking, a gloomy outlook on life, and a terrible self-image (well, we all have bags, these just didn't usually get checked at the door). She'd chastise herself unmercifully for making a mistake or forgetting to do something that she'd worked out in a previous rehearsal. So, sure enough, she would make even more mistakes. And the spiral went down and down...

Why did you go into bells in the first place? There are many answers to this, but most of them would boil down to – it looked like FUN!!! And it IS fun!!! **There's a reason it's called PLAYING music – because we get to PLAY!!!**

To be sure, there is great joy to be derived from working hard, diligently polishing, and having that attitude of always seeking to improve. But hard work doesn't have to be a negative, and in fact it should be a positive!

Listen to the great music that we are a part of! And look at the terrific people we get to ring with and get to know!

The list of joys in handbell ringing is a long, long list! So it would almost take more work to be a negative person in bells than it would to just go with it and be positive and enjoy the process! :)

Fred Astaire used to say that the secret to his formidable success was that he ALWAYS took the work seriously and NEVER took himself seriously! That is SO important and SO huge that there is probably a future Sonology Music article in it somewhere. :) But for now, I'll just let you read that again and let its tremendous importance sink in.

We can't all feel positive and happy every moment of our lives. But we CAN help each other to see the positive in the given situation. I've worked with groups, the Atlanta Concert Ringers in particular, that seem to have an endless capacity for this – for seeing the good in all situations and all people and lifting members up when they are down. And I suspect that your group has these qualities as well.

So helping each other to stay positive, keeping a sense of humor, and reiterating that there is something bigger than ourselves that we are part of go a long, long, long way toward eliminating mistakes and problems.

There you have it! 17 ways to deal with those pesky mistakes (beyond just glaring at your neighbor :)). These are time-tested, proven ways to take care of those situations where “bad things happen to good pieces” and to bring the focus of the director, ringers, and listeners back to the joy of making music together!