

### Building a Successful Chime Program

#### Materials needed:

**Chimes-** Three-octaves is optimal for beginning an elementary chime ensemble. Handchimes are sold in sets by octaves. The sets expand in both directions as octaves are added.

2 octaves	G4-G6
3 octaves	C4-C7
4 octaves	G3-G7
5 octaves	C3-C8

The number next to the pitch name refers to the octave numbers, which are standard for the handbell community. C5 is middle C. A three-octave set of chimes will run from C4 (C on the second space in the bass clef,) to C7 (C on the second ledger line above the treble clef.)

**Foam for tables-** While chimes are not as fragile as their handbell counterparts, having foam on the table will allow the ringers to place the chimes on the table with out making a distracting clattering sound. One-inch foam maybe purchased at your local fabric store and is perfect for use with the chimes.

#### Establishing an ensemble:

Ringng ensembles are unique in the world of music ensembles. A set of handchimes is really treated as one instrument that is played by several musicians. Choosing members for an ensemble can be done in many ways. Finding the way that works best for your situation is important.

The Highlands Chimes, my school ensemble, is made up of 16 fourth and fifth grade students who are chosen by lottery. A letter explaining the expectations of the ensemble is sent home at the beginning of the year explaining to parents the need for consistent attendance at all rehearsals and performances. Sixteen names are drawn from the letters of interest that have been returned and those children are then invited to join the ensemble.

#### Setting up the rehearsal space:

Tables should be arranged in either a straight line or in a "U" shape. Arrange chimes on the table in chromatic order left to right from the ringers perspective with the bass chimes on the left and the treble chimes on the right. This allows a musical line to flow up and down the table evenly. Ringers are responsible for accidentals that are associated with their position (eg. the F4 ringer would also be responsible for the F#4.) When setting up the chimes, off set the accidentals like the keys on a piano.

#### Choosing Repertoire:

More and more music is being written for beginning handchime ensembles. The popularity of these instruments in elementary and middle school programs is pushing publishers to create original compositions and transcriptions of familiar folk tunes and classical selections. The American Guild of English Handbell Ringers has a graded "level" system that will help when selecting pieces that are appropriate for your young ringers. The level system is fully described in [Handbell and Handchime Notation](#) published by the American Guild of English Handbell Ringers, Inc. This inexpensive booklet provides a complete listing of commonly used notation marks that are unique to ringing instruments and explains the "level" system.

For the most part, elementary choirs might be best with level 1, 1+ or level 2 music. Regardless of what music is chosen, encourage your ringers to ring musically and artfully. A level 1 piece played musically is far more satisfying than a sloppy performance of a level 2 piece.

The Jeffers Handbell Supply website offers a "music selection assistant" search option that allows you to select specific parameters for your search and will bring up all of the selections in their database that meet your requirements. This is the most comprehensive handbell database currently on the web and it is a free service that can be found at <http://jhsbell.com/music/MSA.cfm>.

### Assigning Chimes:

While I often give children in my general music class only one chime, in my chime ensemble every ringer is responsible for two chimes and the accidentals that coordinate with their position. Typical assignments would look as follows:

Position	2 octaves	3 octaves	4 octaves
G3A3B3	X	X	0 (this maybe divided between two ringers.)
C4 D4	X	1	1
E4 F4	X	2	2
G4 A4	3	3	3
B4 C5	4	4	4
D5 E5	5	5	5
F5 G5	6	6	6
A5 B5	7	7	7
C6 D6	8	8	8
E6 F6	9	9	9
G6 A6	10 (This position will only have the G6 because the A6 is part of the third octave.)	10	10
B6 C7	X	11	12
D7-G7	X	X	assign as needed

When the chimes are assigned as above, all "space note" chimes will be in the left hand and all "line note" chimes will be in the right hand. You may need to remind children of this. Playing a scale as part of a warm-up activity can help children understand the orientation of the ensemble.

### Basic Ringing Technique:

Teaching the ringer to use a proper ringing technique is important because having an ensemble of ringers that understand good technique will improve their potential to play musically.

#### Step 1 How to hold the chime:

The chime should be held just below the letter plate on the chime. The letter plate must face the ringer. Each ringer should find the balance point of the chime that feels most comfortable. This position will depend on the size of the chime and the size of the ringer's hand. The chime should be gripped firmly but with out tension in the ringer's hand. The ringer should hold the chime vertically, so the clapper is able to fall back towards the ringer's body. The ringer's thumb should be resting on the side of the chime pointing forward. Elbows should be relaxed and aligned under the ringer's shoulders.

#### Step 2 The Ring:

Chimes should rest closely to the ringer's body when not being rung. This "ready position" allows the ringer to glide into the fluid circular motion needed for ringing musically. The circular motion can be taught by asking the children to imagine they are peddling a bicycle backwards. As the chime extends up from the bottom of the circle a small, gentle bounce or flick from the wrist will initiate the ring. Warning!!! Be careful that ringers to not over extend their wrists as they are initiating the sound. This can be fixed by asking the children to imagine that their chimes are an ice cream cone and as they ring the chime, they need to make sure they do not tip the chime forward and drop their favorite flavor of ice cream, (nothing worse then coffee oreo ice cream that has gone to waste!)

#### Step 3 The Damp:

Chimes should be damped after the note value of that chime has expired. If the chime is playing several notes in succession, then the chime should damp after the value of the final note. To damp smaller chimes, bring the open top of the chime up to the upper chest area and gently touch the chime to the body. Larger chimes will be to awkward to do this, so gently turning the elbows and wrists to allow the side of the chime to touch the upper part of the chest may offer a more comfortable way for the ringer to damp the chime. The key is making sure your ringers understand the importance of damping. Demonstrate the effects of the damper pedal on the piano so the students can gain an understanding why it is important not to allow the chimes to blend into each other.

### Teaching a chime piece:

#### 1. Provide an aural experience for the ensemble.

With beginning ensembles teaching a piece that they are unfamiliar with can be challenging. If there is a prominent melody line, make sure the ringers are familiar with that line. I often play the melody on either the recorder or piano. For more chordal pieces

or songs with a less prominent melody, I will ask the students to follow along with their scores as I play the song on the piano. You can ask them to look for different musical elements and provide several chances for them to hear the piece.

**2. Ask "The important questions."**

Have the children locate the key signature and explain what that means for the chimes that they will use. Have them find the time signature, repeat signs and dynamic markings. You can also have them identify any specific ringing techniques that might occur in the piece and how you would like those played. Some of these important questions maybe asked while having the children listen during the aural experience stage.

**3. Isolate repeated rhythmic patterns as part of a warm-up.**

Often beginning handchime music will be based on a rhythmic motive that can be taught before the selection is started. After the children have warmed-up with the pattern, ask the children to find that pattern in the song.

**4. Isolate melody and accompaniment parts.**

Chime music is often notated in a way that the melody chimes are separated from the accompaniment chimes. Most often the melody will have the stems up and the accompaniment will have the stems down. Also, rhythmic differences maybe easy for children to see. When the melody crosses between the treble and bass staves, the use of voice leading lines should help the ringers identify the melody. When the melody line is very close to the accompaniment parts, be sure that the melody line is stronger than the accompaniment.

**5. Putting it together.**

When rehearsing parts of the music together as an ensemble, give the children specific musical goals to think about. If children are asked to play a section over and over, because they need the repetition, they may become bored and more importantly, you are missing an opportunity to work on dynamics or clean damping. Always challenge your young ringers to be as musical as possible. If your goal is to work on dynamics, ask the ringers to rate their performance after they play through a selection. I have found the use of Garage Band, a music-recording program by Mac, a helpful tool for self-assessment in the chime ensemble. Students enjoy hearing themselves and can really begin to listen to how the ensemble sounds and not just how their chimes are ringing.

**A note about special techniques:**

Handbell composers and ringers have created many special "stopped" techniques that give the handbell ensemble a variety of sound colors to play with. These stopped techniques include the use of mallets on the bells when the bell is lying on the table, plucking the clapper with the bell lying on a padded table and martellato which is defined by A.G.E.H.R. as "the handbell is rung by holding it by the handle and gently striking the full body of the handbell horizontally on a properly padded table." While these techniques are wonderful for handbells, they should not be applied to handchimes. Manufacturers suggest that handchimes not use any stopped techniques. The use of a ring touch, (ringing the chime and then quickly damping the sound,) can give a staccato sound without stressing the chimes.

You may find a few special techniques in chime music.

*Shake:* (Marked with an Sk. or a wavy horizontal line.) Shakes for chimes are most effective when several treble chimes are shaking at the same time. Because the clapper of a chime is external and will only sound when moving in one direction, the shake can sound thin and choppy if it is only performed with one chime. To perform a shake, just make sure that the wrist remains free of excess tension and keep the shake moving in the gentle circle.

*Vibrato:* (Marked with *vib.*) According to the A.G.E.H.R. notation guide, "To achieve the vib. effect with a handchime, ring the handchime and lightly touch the lowest portion of the handchime slot with the index finger."

**Building community through chimes.**

A handchime ensemble is unique. Every member of the ensemble is crucial, and each ringer must be responsible for performing his or her own part. I have always been amazed at how quickly the ringers come together and take responsibility for their ensemble. I rarely have to remind my ringers, or the parents of my ringers, that they need to be on time for rehearsals. The ringers work together to set up the rehearsal space and are eager to make sure everything is ready for rehearsals to start promptly at 7:30... yes 7:30 in the morning. They take pride in the work that they do, and they enjoy making music together. I have seen boys join the chime choir that would never think of singing in one of the vocal choirs that I offer. A handchime ensemble allows children to be a part of a musical ensemble that is a group effort and that builds community.

My elementary school sponsors an annual handbell festival that brings local community handbell choirs, church ensembles and my schools handchime ensemble together for an evening celebrating the art of handbell ringing. The event continues to grow every year, and the audience reaches out to include members of the community who are not directly affiliated with our

elementary school. This is a wonderful program to introduce the community to the work our young musicians are doing, and a great way to share the importance of a music program with the larger community.

If you are interested in starting a chime program, there are many resources available. A.G.E.H.R. Area I sponsors a Chime Loaner Program that places a three octave set of chimes, plus resources, into music classrooms through out New England for free for up to one full school year. This program is a great tool for advocating for the funds to purchase your own set of chimes. You also have the benefit of working with the chimes for a year to experiment with how the chimes can complement your existing music program. For more information on the chime loaner program, visit the Area I website at <http://www.agehrarea1.org/Pages/ChimeLoaner.html>.

In addition Back Bay Ringers donates a two-octave set of Choirchimes to a Boston area school as part of their annual Boston Handbell Festival. More information about the chime donation program maybe found at [www.backbayringers.org](http://www.backbayringers.org).